

# **HaMered HaGadol**

The Great Jewish Revolt

OSUMUN 2024

Crisis Director: Yossi Berkowitz

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## Letter from your Crisis Director

Hello, delegates!

Welcome to OSUMUN 2024! My name is Yossi Berkowitz, and I am excited to run this committee for you this year. I have wanted to run a committee centered around ancient Judea for a while, and I can't wait to see what ideas you all come up with.

This committee is a historical crisis committee, but don't feel hemmed in by the true course of history. I would much prefer you succeed in rebelling against the Roman Empire and regaining sovereignty over the Land of Israel than fall to infighting and capitulate.

I have two notes about the relevant history which you should know for the committee. First, I generally use original Hebrew names instead of colonial Latin names, though for clarity I have included those where necessary. Second, I highly recommend your preparation include watching Sam Aronow's videos on the revolt; they are quite helpful and easily digestible. Some of his other videos may be helpful as well, but these specific ones pertaining to the committee's setting are more essential.

There are a few tips I have for your participation in committee. In your front room, you shouldn't be afraid to work with people who may be outside your character's political affiliation, especially since no one group will have the majority. Crisis committees are far less interesting when directive writing stalls due to lack of cooperation. In your back room, we ask you to be precise and concise. This helps us to respond more accurately and more rapidly, both of which will help you progress your arcs. With that in mind, feel free to leave summaries or explanations accompanying your crisis notes.

Please also keep in mind OSUMUN's Code of Conduct, and be respectful to your fellow delegates. This is especially important in our committee, which deals with themes of colonization, war, and ethnic and religious violence. As a note, the ongoing Israel-Hamas war and the wider Arab-Israeli conflict are sensitive matters, but they occur nearly 2,000 years after this committee and are thus irrelevant and anachronistic. Please see the committee-specific guidelines included in this background guide for more information.

If you have any questions or concerns about this committee, please don't hesitate to reach out. My email is [berkowitz.116@osu.edu](mailto:berkowitz.116@osu.edu).

Good luck,  
Yossi Berkowitz

## Committee Policies

### Preface

The Jewish-Roman wars did not adhere to today's morality and included horrible acts which we today would not hesitate to call war crimes or ethnic cleansing. The wars, fought against a vast and violent empire, marked the end of Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel for nearly 2000 years. The Revolt's aftermath and its reverberating effects were and are tragic. Those who survived the wars and occupation and who did not flee or become forcibly displaced would continue to be subjugated under various empires; exiled survivors became part of the Diaspora, which even today makes up a majority of world Jewry.

### Basic Guidelines

#### **No collaboration with the Roman Empire to quash Jewish autonomy**

Your goal is to regain Jewish sovereignty; the Roman Empire's goal is to suppress the revolt. While many delegates' strategies in crisis committees include becoming an antagonist, you are not permitted to work with colonizers to subdue the indigenous Jewish population.

#### **No historical negationism**

This is a historical crisis committee, and while the storyline will be driven by your arcs and therefore a work of historical fiction, you may not deny the context nor the history of the land or the region. If you need clarification after reading this guide, please reach out to me.

#### **No breakaway religions**

This conflict is both ethnic and religious, given that Judaism is the ethnic religion of Jews and that Roman attitudes toward Jewishness were based on Jews being an ethnic and religious "other." While Christianity had started by this point in history, it had not yet fully split from mainstream Judaism, and as such was not a separate religion. Additionally, while in other committees a legitimate arc is to form a cult or a religion, I ask that you abstain from doing so in this committee out of concerns for both sensitivity and productivity.

### Possible Consequences

Violations of either the OSUMUN Code of Conduct or the policies specific to this committee will be handled on a case-by-case basis by those staffing this committee and by members of the conference secretariat. Potential sanctions may include disqualification from awards and removal from the committee. Please stay respectful and professional to avoid these.

## **Background**

### Prelude

#### **Jewish Sovereignty Pre-Revolt**

Jews are a Canaanite group, closely related to the Samaritans. They had gradually shifted away from Canaanite polytheism toward monolatry and subsequently the monotheism for which the group is known today. The group generally did not engage in mass conversions, nor did it proselytize, which maintained it as an ethnoreligious group.

Much of these changes happened after the destruction of the First Temple by the Neo-Babylonian Empire and the return to Zion under Cyrus the Great of the Achaemenid Empire (Persia). Under Cyrus' tolerance, Jews in the Land of Israel had their own government and exercised self-determination. Under Seleucid (Greek) occupation, Jews rebelled, establishing the Hasmonean dynasty. Internal tensions and political changes led to many rounds of infighting between political parties, and amid an oscillating relationship between Judea and Rome, the Roman Empire annexed parts of Judea. Judea was largely reunited under Agrippa prior to the revolt, but Rome took control after his death.

#### **Roman Control of Judea**

The Romans allowed the Jews to maintain a kingdom while still holding suzerainty over the province. They also devolved tax collection authority to the Sanhedrin, an organized Jewish governing body. The Judean economy was built on trade, so the Romans levied income taxes instead of standard wealth taxes. These were some of the ways in which Judea was a somewhat unique vassal, with certain privileges not enjoyed by other conquered lands.

Perhaps the most notable exemption granted to Judea was the continued allowance of Jewish monotheism. Roman religion was polytheistic and exalted the emperor, and while other subjugated peoples were made to syncretize their indigenous practices with those of Rome's religion, Jews were still permitted to practice their belief in their own god without having to add in elements of Roman theology.

These remaining semblances of Jewish control drew the ire of other groups within the empire, and notably led to tensions within Judea. In particular, Caesarean Greeks defiled a local synagogue outside the auspices of Roman law, but imperial forces watched idly. Jews paid for Gessius Florus, the procurator (governor), to hear arbitration, but he took the money and ran. He further seized more than twice the sum of money he was paid from the Temple treasury, for a total of at least \$6 million in today's money. The Jewish population was incensed and began to mock him.



highest Jewish court, established the Provisional Government. The Great Sanhedrin, under the leadership of Shimon ben Gamliel, continued to serve as an important organ of the government, with Yosef ben Gurion as the executive and Hanan ben Hanan (Ananus ben Ananus) as the Kohen Gadol.

### **Judea Under the Provisional Government**

Outside of Judea, Jewish communities were massacred and ethnically cleansed, though some Jews, specifically those in Egypt, managed to fend off their attackers. Inside Judea, most Jews united behind Yosef ben Gurion's leadership, though Ashkelon remained outside the fray. During this time, the Romans regrouped: Vespasian and his son Titus mustered armies to the north and south of Judea, respectively. Yosef ben Matityahu (Josephus) was tapped to lead the defense in the Galilee, but he faced difficulty in rallying the northern cities behind his leadership because he was from Jerusalem. Yochanan ben Levi (John of Gischala) engaged in force, extortion, and political manipulation to gain power, and eventually became co-commanders with Josephus. Tzipori (Sepphoris), an important northern city, joined the Romans, and Vespasian took more of the Galilee. At Yodfat, Josephus came under siege by the united force of Vespasian and Titus, who massacred the entire city. They then took Josephus prisoner. Vespasian went on to conquer the Galilee and pushed into Yafo (Jaffa) as well. He drove the rebels into central Judea, where they regrouped in Jerusalem.

The Galileans did not align with Jerusalemites, largely supporting the Zealots. They saw the Provisional Government surrender in the north, further sealing the divide. Zealots attacked the aristocracy and stole from them, which they argued was justified because they thought the Provisional Government would surrender to Rome. The Kohen Gadol tried to calm the Zealots, but was the victim of a *coup d'état* in which the Zealots installed Pinchas ben Shmuel in Ananus ben Ananus' stead. The Provisional Government surrounded the Zealots at the Temple, but the Zealots had told the Idumaeans that the Provisional Government had plans to surrender to Vespasian. The Idumaeans came in to break the siege, and in the fighting, they killed both Yosef ben Gurion and Ananus ben Ananus.

### **Jerusalem after the Zealot Temple Siege**

The remainders of the Provisional Government worried that the Zealots would bring about the end of Jerusalem, Judea, and Judaism. Yochanan ben Zakkai went to meet Vespasian, telling him that the Temple would fall, and asked for a few relatively meager concessions, which were agreed to. Vespasian opted to wait for the Jews to collapse into infighting rather than to attack Jerusalem.

In better news, Shimon bar Giora took southern Judea and also recaptured Yafo. He formed a naval blockade in an attempt to starve out the Italian peninsula and force Rome to deal with a domestic crisis in the hopes it would pull them out of Judea. Thanks to unrelated political chaos

within the European portion of the empire, and also because of the blockade's partial success, Vespasian held off from attacking Jerusalem, hoping that he would eventually be chosen as the new emperor.

With the eventual defeat of the Jewish navy, Shimon bar Giora returned to the land campaign. He proceeded to Jerusalem, where he surrounded the Zealots. They agreed to acknowledge him as the new leader of Judea, while remaining an independent military force. Vespasian, who had been waiting for infighting to weaken the Jerusalem-based holdouts, had seen his plan backfire — Jerusalem was now united. However, Vespasian took the land surrounding the city proper, further isolating the rebels. With the military of most of the empire now in his corner, he returned to Italy as Emperor. Titus took command of the operation in Judea.

### **The Destruction of Jerusalem and the Second Temple**

Titus began a siege of Jerusalem. The Zealots attempted to depose Yochanan ben Levi, but they failed. However, the fight destroyed the Temple's foodstuffs. The walls of Jerusalem were so expansive that Titus' siege was not a total one, and the defenders were able to bring in some food from the southern gap. They also engaged in counterattacks beyond the outer walls, winning multiple underdog victories. As Titus and his army broke through the first wall, they faced even stronger resistance, and even though they reached the inner Antonia Fortress, they were forced to retreat.

Now that the Romans had squeezed the rebels into the inner walls, they were able to siege the entire population. Those who tried to flee were brutally murdered, and those who stayed starved. Pressing inward, Titus reached the Temple on Tisha b'Av (9th of Av). His army set it alight, and they pillaged the treasury, looted its relics, and desecrated the altar. Titus reneged on his promise to preserve the Temple and had it razed. The survivors fought on, hoping to somehow escape. They could not.

### **The Fall of Masada and the End of the War**

In 70 CE, the Romans celebrated the end of the war and redeployed most of the military away from Judea. But the war was not quite done yet. The small remaining Roman forces in Judea still had to defeat some rebels who had escaped. By 72 CE, the Sicarii, who were never a part of the Judean army, made their last stand at Masada. Though the Romans needed time to build a ramp up the cliffs, they easily overran the final resistance. This marked the end of the Great Jewish Revolt.

### Aftermath



## **Diaspora**

Captured Jews were enslaved, and many were forced to build the Colosseum or fight as gladiators. In the Roman celebratory parade, some captured rebels were made to march as prisoners before being publicly executed. Josephus survived, having been adopted by Vespasian. In part for this reason, but also because he knew he would face political violence from Jews still in Judea for betraying them and becoming Roman, he lived out the rest of his life in Rome.

There were some Jews already outside the Roman Empire. They were less supportive of the Great Jewish Revolt than those who were in Judea. However, the Roman attitude toward these communities were not positive, and in one example of such revenge against non-rebellious groups, they destroyed the temple in Leontopolis, used by Egyptian Jews.

Vespasian later fought two wars with Gaul, and he gave the land conquered in these wars to Roman soldiers who fought in Judea as a reward for helping to reconquer the province. They brought their Jewish slaves with them. This newly acquired land, called *Ashkenaz* in Hebrew, is where the Ashkenazi Jewish subculture comes from. Many freed Jewish slaves would make their way to Pompeii, but they died in the eruption of Mount Vesuvius.

In later Roman history, Jews continued to face persecution. While the empire initially discriminated against Christians, who were originally a sect of Judaism, they later adopted Christianity as the official state religion. This marked a shift in Jewish life under Rome as they began to face Christian antisemitism.

## **Religious Changes**

The destruction of the Temple and the relocation of Beit Hillel to Yavneh (Jamnia) brought about a host of religious shifts. The Great Sanhedrin, which had been both a religious and political body, became a solely religious institution. Judaism went through many changes in the absence of a central temple. Christianity, which had still been more or less a part of Judaism despite some big theological differences, finally split off with the destruction of the Temple. It would go on to become a universal religion and the largest in the world by population, in stark contrast to Judaism's continued ethnic character and resulting small population. The idea of the Jewish messiah also changed drastically, with the post-Temple belief now being that they would rebuild the Temple.

## Later Jewish-Roman Wars



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*Second Revolt, "Jerusalem," sela,  
Year 1 = 132/133 CE (H-1373).*

### The Kitos War

Rome went to war with Parthia over Armenia, which was a proto-condominium. Seeing an opportunity to attack Rome, a few Jews took charge of their own armies, and scored victories against Rome both militarily and geographically. These armies wrested control of vast swaths of land in Cyprus and Egypt, but Rome ultimately defeated these rebels, who had fled to Judea. Hadrian ethnically cleansed Jews from the Roman Empire back into Judea, unique among acts of large-scale ethnic cleansing for driving the victims back to their homeland. This war, the second between the Jews and the Romans, is also called the Rebellion of the Diaspora or the Rebellion of the Exile in Hebrew.

### The Bar-Kokhba Revolt

The Bar-Kokhba Revolt, like the Kitos War, lacked a contemporary historian to record the rebellion and its events. Much of this history is known from later sources and from archeological findings. However, it is better known than the Kitos War, and it had a far greater effect on Jewish and Roman histories.

Hadrian originally planned to rebuild Jerusalem, as well as the Third Temple. He hoped that this would pacify the Jews in Judea, both those born there and those sent there after the Kitos War just years earlier. However, he did not, and he gave in to Roman pressure to resist the Jews. Jerusalem was renamed *Aelia Capitolina*, after Hadrian's family and after the god Jupiter. Instead of the Jewish Temple, he built a Roman shrine to Jupiter atop the Temple Mount. He memorialized the Roman victory in the Great Revolt, and he further antagonized the Christian community, which by then had become a distinct religion. This course of actions, in 132 CE, sparked this third Jewish-Roman war.

Shimon bar Kokhba led a guerilla campaign against the Romans in Judea, hoping to win an asymmetric war and reestablish Jewish sovereignty. He led the Jewish population within Judea as well as Jews from outside in rising up against the empire. Other groups joined in the fighting as well, including Samaritans, another Israelite group. This collective encircled the Roman forces in *Aelia Capitolina* and drove them out, bringing hope that they would redeem the capital. At the beginning of the war, the rebels were relatively successful. Shimon bar Kokhba established a state, and he may even have declared Hebrew to be its official language, as evinced by his letters.

However, the tides began to turn as the much larger imperial legions began to converge. They pushed the rebels back, while taking heavy casualties. The surviving rebels, who were far outnumbered, retreated to Beitar and lost their control over the breakaway state. Once again, the Romans massacred the final Jewish holdouts, nearly exterminating the city's population. They then went on a rampage, burning cities and murdering communities throughout Judea. The war and the following genocide claimed the lives of approximately 600,000 Jews in Judea.

With the end of the revolt, Hadrian sought to punish Judea and ensure that Rome would never face another rebellion of the same scale. He renamed the province *Syria Palestina*, seeking to blot out once and for all the idea of Jewish nationalism. He also went after Jewish leadership and banned Jews from entering *Aelia Capitolina*. Finally, he prohibited Jewish religious practices. After Hadrian's death, Antoninus Pius became the emperor. He was more amiable to the Jews in the empire, but he still did not allow Jews to return to Jerusalem and allowed them to suffer continued abuse at the hands of Romans in *Syria Palestina*.

At this point, the Jews are far worse off than before the Great Revolt, when Judea had certain privileges not given to other provinces — Rome had crushed this newest uprising. Later revolts were far less successful and have much more modest legacies. The Bar-Kokhba Revolt was the final real semblance of Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel up until the 20th century.

#### The Jewish Revolt Against Gallus and the Jewish Revolt Against Heraclius

These revolts happened far later in Jewish history than the aforementioned rebellions, and were less successful and less notable. Additionally, they occurred after the province was no longer called Judea, and they clearly did not restore Jewish control. You are free to and encouraged to read more about these events on your own, but they are largely irrelevant to the topics we discuss in committee. You will not need this research to debate.

## Committee

### Timeline

Above, you can read the background for the committee. However, this information is about the entirety of the Great Revolt, from the tensions at its outset to the sacking of Judea at its end. Our committee will start after Florus robbed the Temple treasury and the priests ceased their sacrifices on behalf of the Emperor. Time progressions will be driven by crisis arcs and directives, with backroom intervention as needed. Time increments between update cycles will not necessarily be uniform (i.e.: each update  $\neq$  one year).

### Character List

#### **House of Hillel**

*What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow*

##### Avraham ben Moshe:

Avraham is a rabbi who is influential within the Hillelite faction. He hails from Tzippori, and his family made its money through agriculture. From an early age, he showed great wisdom and intelligence, and his family saved up throughout the years to afford his education. Outside of the Sanhedrin, he tours Judea and offers agricultural advice.

##### Nesher Eitan ben Ya'akov:

Nesher Eitan was previously an architect, and helped Herod renovate the Temple. He no longer works in architecture but still gives guided tours of the Temple to pilgrims and foreign delegations. Though he lives in Jerusalem, he is more focused on these duties than on the Sanhedrin.

##### David bar Avigdor:

David is from Caesarea, where he speaks at the local synagogue. He attempted to mediate the dispute with the Greek community there but was unable to calm tensions. He harbors ill will toward Florus for breaking his contract to hear the case, and hopes to appeal this inaction using his sharp legal mind.

##### Chaim ben Yosef:

Chaim's family made money through maritime trade under Jewish sovereignty, but he always leaned more liberal than the rest of his family. He lives in Ashkelon and tries to make each pilgrimage but often ends up making a donation in lieu of a sacrifice, as he does not farm much.

#### **House of Shammai**

*Speak little, but do much, and greet all pleasantly*

### Shlomo Baruch:

Shlomo had been in prison under King Herod for declaring that he was ineligible to be king because he was not Jewish. After Herod's death, he was released to great acclaim from more religiously conservative groups. His supporters see him as the vanguard of religious tradition, and like the rest of his party, he hopes to increase the influence of the Sanhedrin.

### Aharon ben Moshe:

Aharon served as the head of the Sanhedrin's court a decade ago but has seen his influence wane as his Jerusalemite followers began sympathizing more with the House of Hillel. He has even seen his brother break with him and join the Hillelites, so he has been the most moderate member of the House of Shammai.

### Sha'ul bar Binyamin:

Shaul had grown up in a Hellenized family in Cyprus, but after visiting Jerusalem on behalf of his family became determined to become a rabbi. Instead of returning, he sold his passage back to Cyprus in order to pay for school, and he rose through the ranks to become the most important returnee in the Sanhedrin.

### Ovadia bar Yosef:

Ovadia's family was influential in the exiled community during the Babylonian captivity, but they returned to Judea with the Achaemenid-authorized Return. He was born in the Galilee, but because of his family's experience, he has become an informal envoy to diaspora Jewry. Regarding his study, he takes a legalist approach rather than a moralistic interpretation, which transfers somewhat more easily between distant assimilated communities.

## **Zealots**

*Joyous be the one who repays you as you have mistreated us*

### Moshe ben Me'ir:

Moshe, from Tiberias, saw his grandfather executed by a Roman soldier after refusing to give him the silver shekels he had been saving to donate to the Temple. He stalked the soldier with his second cousin, Mordechai bar Avraham, and stabbed him to death as he slept. He hopes to free Judea from Roman control and to try their soldiers before the Sanhedrin.

### Mordechai bar Avraham:

Mordechai learned ironworking from his father, but his stores of metal have been nearly exhausted thanks to bandits stealing from his suppliers heading inland from Yafo. His children were exiled to Spain after he helped his second cousin, Moshe ben Me'ir, track down and take revenge on a Roman soldier, and he hopes to see them again one day.

### Chana bat Lev:

Chana has gone throughout Judea to raise support for the Judean cause. When she was placed on house arrest by the Romans, she continued writing letters and promoting resistance against the empire's occupation. For this, they broke her right hand — her dominant hand — in the hopes that she would no longer be able to write. She is currently looking for new ways to spread her ideology.

### Or bar Be'eri:

Or is generally recognized as an unsavory character. He made his money (and his bones) by robbing trading caravans and pilgrims as they passed through central Judea. He supports the Zealot cause mostly because it promises the best chance of him keeping his ill-gotten gains, and also because no other group would accept him because of these past crimes.

### **Sadducees**

*May God show favor to you and grant you peace*

### Avigail bat Metzger:

Avigail lives in Jerusalem, where she gives guidance to pilgrims who ask for advice. While she is not a religious authority, she is known for having strong ethical and moral rules, and is recognized as providing clear rules of etiquette and procedure. She started this business after seeing the success Esther bat Avraham had with it, but her immediate influence grew faster.

### Esther bat Avraham:

Esther also lives in Jerusalem, and while she used to provide advice to anyone who would listen, it seems that now her audience mostly consists of widows and older residents. She has a rivalry with Avigail bat Metzger, viewing her as a usurper, but this is a fairly one-sided relationship as Avigail doesn't think about Esther much.

### Itamar ben Eliezer:

Itamar works as a freelance translator, adept in Hebrew, Latin, Aramaic, and Greek. He is often consulted by Jewish and Roman officials alike, having built a decades-long career based on his perceived credibility. He worries that working too much for one client may tarnish his reputation for unbiased work.

### Eliyahu ben Shlomo HaKohen:

Eliyahu is descended from the priestly line, and he views his party with cautious closeness. He feels it best represents him, as he believes in the rules of the Kohanim, but is more ambivalent toward their other goals and simply wants a restoration of religious law and hierarchy.

## **Essenes**

*And you shall love your neighbor as you love yourself*

### Chen bar Sha'ul:

Chen is an author, and his books have seen limited success in Judea but have received wider acclaim outside. Though he started with the hopes that his audience would be diaspora Jews, he has seen more circulation within imperial courts who can afford to buy his books. He usually writes about relations between polities.

### Noam bar Ze'ev:

Noam is an ascetic who believes that he will ultimately be able to read minds if he practices enough. He moved to a small hut near the Dead Sea to be far away from more urban communities, but he still maintains some local support among less-educated Jews who see him as their guide, as well as some from Ein Gedi who see him as one of them.

### Ariel ben Naphtali:

Ariel largely derives his support from non-Jewish citizens of Judea, particularly Idumaeans and Nabateans who had fought for the state. He is a compulsive note-taker and became the party's secretary largely because he demanded to be. He believes in mysticism and has also started to study Zoroastrian influence on Judaism during Persian rule.

### Noaz bar Eliyahu:

Noaz is the most public-facing Essene. He happened upon the unofficial title of spokesperson for the group because his Galilean accent and Tzfat pride made him appealing in the north, while his ability to relate to just about any audience endeared him to the center and the south.

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### Recommended Research:

#### **What to do**

I highly recommend watching the Sam Aronow videos about the First Jewish-Roman War. They can be found as the first four videos in his playlist about the Jewish-Roman Wars. If you watch them at double speed, as well as read the background guide, you should be able to prepare for the



conference without spending too much time. This will be especially helpful when understanding the stances of each political party.

**What not to do**

It would be rather unproductive to read all of Josephus' work leading up to the conference. While you may learn a lot, it would be quite time-consuming, and your time could be used more efficiently. This is especially so because he included deliberate inaccuracies in his earlier work, only later revising it to ensure the true history was recorded. For this reason, you really would have to read all of his writing to understand what he says. Further, the translation you find may not be accurate, as some were edited for political and religious agendas following his death, with the original texts lost to time.

Researching your characters may be tempting as well. However, you are unlikely to find accurate information about them, so please rely on the information included in this background guide.