

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [27]

Jerusalem Was Destroyed on Account of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza

(A Play in Five Acts)

(Insights into Babylonian Talmud Gittin 55b – 56b)

Act 5



The Story up to this Point...

Background to Our Story

Abba Sikkara



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Gittin. Koren publishers Jerusalem (Page 315)

Apparently Abba Sikkara was not his actual name but rather a nickname, *sikkara* being the Aramaic form of the word *sicarius* or murderer. In *midrashim* he is called ben Batiaĥ, similar to ben Avatiaĥ, meaning son of a watermelon, as he is called in tractate *Kelim* (17:12). These appear to be nicknames given to him due to his great size. The present passage identifies him as one of the leaders of the Great Revolt.

The Year that Vespasian Became Emperor



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Gittin. Koren publishers Jerusalem (Page 316)

During the year that Vespasian became emperor, known as the year of the four Caesars, a revolt erupted in the empire in the course of which the emperor Nero was killed and a dispute commenced over the issue of who was to succeed him. The legions stationed in the Balkans, Syria, and Judea chose Vespasian as emperor and the Egyptian governor gave him his immediate support. After a period of time Vespasian was informed from Rome that his followers in the Roman army had killed the reigning emperor Vitalius, and he was then recognized by all as the ruler of the empire.

Yavne



Yavne is an ancient city mentioned in the Bible. Apparently, it is Yavne'el, located in the tribal territory of Judah. It was a Philistine city for many years, and it is listed as one of the places whose walls were breached by King Uzziah of Judea. Yavne is located slightly more than a kilometer from the Mediterranean coast, due west of Jerusalem. It was conquered by Vespasian during the campaign to quash the Great Revolt, which culminated in the destruction of the Second Temple. It seems that several Sages who did not support the revolt settled there. When Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai joined them, Yavne became the spiritual center of Eretz Yisrael and the seat of the Sanhedrin for many years, apparently until the bar Kokheva rebellion. The main yeshiva there was called the vineyard in Yavne, as the students would sit in rows, evoking the rows of grapevines in a vineyard.

The Dynasty of Rabban Gamliel



Although the *Nesi'im* from the house of Hillel were moderate in their political views, they still joined the Great Revolt. Since Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel was considered the leader of the people and as such was responsible for what happened in Eretz Yisrael, he was sentenced to death. Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai made a unique request, that despite Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel's execution, his family should not be held responsible and killed or exiled.

Lebanon as a Nickname to the Beit Hamikdash



It was understood that Moses wished to see the Temple Mount, referred to as "that good mountain," and the Temple itself. The Temple is referred to as "Lebanon" because it achieves atonement for and thereby whitens [*malbin*] Israel's sins, which are depicted in the Bible as being scarlet red. In addition, the Temple was built from the cedars of Lebanon, as is mentioned in the book of Kings.

Yochanan ben Zakai

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yohanan_ben_Zakkai

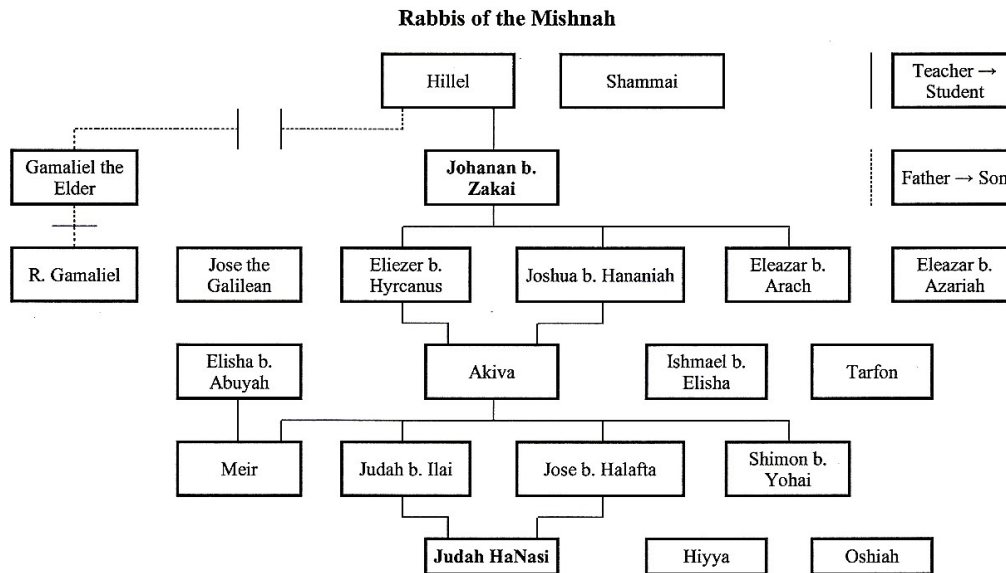
Johanan ben Zakai (Hebrew: יוחנן בן זכאי) was one of the tannaim (תנאים), an important Jewish sage in the era of the Second Temple, and a primary contributor to the core text of rabbinic Judaism, the Mishnah.

During the siege of Jerusalem in the Great Jewish Revolt he snuck out of the city in a coffin to negotiate with Vespasian, whom he predicted would become Emperor. He was granted three wishes and through one he re-established the Sanhedrin and founded a new center of Jewish law in Jamnia (Yavneh/Jabneh) after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. It is said that before his escape from Jerusalem, he prayed in a place which later on became known as the Rabban Johanan ben Zakai Synagogue.

After the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem and its sacrificial altars he led the Council of Yavne (70-90 CE), from which Rabbinic Judaism emerged. Under his leadership the council replaced animal sacrifice (in Hebrew called קרבן *korban*) with prayer, a practice that continues in today's worship services.

The Mishnah offers no information on his birth or family. He was the youngest pupil of Hillel. Later in life he spent time in the Galilee. He is recorded as living until the age of 120 years, of which the first third were spent as a businessman, the second third in study, and the final third in teaching and leadership. He rests in the city of *T'veria* near the very place where the Rambam would be buried 11 centuries later.

He is quoted in the Midrash Avot D'Rabbi Nathan 31b as saying "If you are holding a sapling in your hand and someone tells you, 'Come quickly, the messiah is here!', first finish planting the tree and then go greet the Messiah."



Burying Outside the City

Many ancient people recognized the burial ground's potential for spreading disease and placed their cemeteries outside their cities or took other precautions. The early Jewish cemeteries were located - like other cemeteries after the Middle Ages - outside of the city.

Vespasian

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vespasian>



Titus Flavius Sabinus Vespasianus, commonly known as Vespasian (November 17, 9 – June 23, 79), was a Roman Emperor who reigned from 69 until his death in 79. Vespasian was the founder of the short-lived Flavian dynasty, which ruled the Roman Empire between 69 and 96. He was succeeded by his sons Titus (79–81) and Domitian (81–96).

Vespasian descended from a family of equestrians which rose into the senatorial rank under the emperors of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. Although he attained the standard succession of public offices, holding the consulship in 51, Vespasian became more reputed as a successful military commander, partaking in the Roman invasion of Britain in 43, and subjugating the Judaea province during the Jewish rebellion of 66. While preparing to besiege the city of Jerusalem during the latter campaign, emperor Nero committed suicide, plunging the Roman Empire into a year of civil war known as the Year of the Four Emperors. After Galba and Otho perished in quick succession, Vitellius became emperor in mid 69. In response, the armies in Egypt and Judaea themselves declared Vespasian emperor on July 1. In his bid for imperial power, Vespasian joined forces with Gaius Licinius Mucianus, the governor of Syria, who led the Flavian forces against Vitellius, while Vespasian himself gained control over

Egypt. On December 20, Vitellius was defeated, and the following day, Vespasian was declared emperor by the Roman Senate.

Little factual information survives about Vespasian's government during the ten years he was emperor. His reign is best known for financial reforms following the demise of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, the successful campaign against Judaea, and several ambitious construction projects such as the Colosseum. Upon his death on June 23, 79, he was succeeded by his eldest son Titus.

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Gittin 55b – 56b

אבא סקרא ריש בריוני דירושלים בר אחתיה דרבן יוחנן בן זכאי הוה, שלח ליה: תא בציינעא לגבאי. אמת, אמר ליה: עד אימת עבדיתו הכי, וקטליתו ליה לעלמא בכפנא? אמר ליה: מאי אינעביד, דאי אמינא להו מידי קטלו לי! אמר ליה: קזי לי תקנתא לדידי דאיפוק, אפשר דהוי הצלה פורתא. אמר ליה: גקוט נפשך בקצירי, וליתי כולי עלמא ולישילו בך, ואיתי מידי סרנא ואגבי גבך, ולימרו דנח נפשך, וליעילו בך תלמידך ולא ליעול בך איניש אחרנא, דלא לרגשן בך דקליל את, דאינהו נדעי דחניא קליל ממיתא. עביד הכי, נכנס בו רבי אליעזר מצד אחד ורבי יהושע מצד אחר, כי מטו לפיתחא בעו למדקריה, אמר להו: יאמרו "רבן דקרו"! בעו למדקפיה, אמר להו: יאמרו "רבן דחפו"! פתחו ליה בבא, נפק כי מטא להתם, אמר: שלמא עלך מלפא, שלמא עלך מלפא! אמר ליה: מיחייבת תרי קטלא, חדא, דלאו מלפא אנא וקא קרית לי מלפא! ותו, אי מלפא אנא, עד האינא אמאי לא אתית לגבאי? אמר ליה: דקאמרת לאו מלפא אנא, איברא מלפא את, דאי לאו מלפא את לא מימסרא וירושלים בינך, דכתיב: "והלבנון באדיר ופול", ואין "אדיר" אלא מלך, דכתיב: "והיה אדירו ממנו" וגו', ואין "לבנון" אלא בית המקדש, שנאמר: "ההר הטוב הזה והלבנון"; ודקאמרת אי מלפא אנא אמאי לא קאתית לגבאי עד האינא – בריוני דאית בן לא שבקינן. אמר ליה: אילו חבית של דבש ודרקון פרוה עליה, לא היו שוברין את החבית בשביל דרקון? אישתי ק קרי עליה רב יוסף, ואיתימא רבי עקיבא: "משיב חכמים אחור ודעתם יספל", איבעי ליה למימר ליה: שקלינן צבתא ושקלינן ליה לדרקון וקטלינן ליה, וחביתא שבקינן לה. אדהכי אתי פריסתקא עליה מרומי, אמר ליה: קום, דמית ליה קיסר, ואמרי הנהו חשיבי דרומי לאותיבך ברישא. הוה סניס חד מסאני, בעא למסימא לאחרנא לא עייל, בעא למשלפא לאידך לא נפק, אמר: מאי האי? אמר ליה: לא תצטער, שמועה טובה אתנא לך, דכתיב: "שמועה טובה תדשן עצם". אלא מאי תקנתיה? ליתי איניש דלא מיחבא דעתך מיניה ולחליף קמך, דכתיב: "ורוח נכאה תיבש גרם", עבד הכי, עייל. אמר ליה: ומאחר דתכמיתו כולי האי, עד האינא אמאי לא אתית לגבאי? אמר ליה: ולא אמרי לך? אמר ליה: אנא נמי אמרי לך! אמר ליה: מיזל אזילנא ואיניש אחרנא משדרנא, אלא בעי מינאי מידי דאתן לך. אמר ליה: תן לי יבנה וחקמיה, ושושילתא דרבנן גמליאל, ואסוותא דמסנין ליה לרבי צדו. ק קרי עליה רב יוסף, ואיתימא רבי עקיבא: "משיב חכמים אחור ודעתם יספל", איבעי למימר ליה לשבקינהו הדא זימנא. והוא סבר, דלמא כולי האי לא עביד, והצלה פורתא נמי לא הוי. אסוותא דמסנין ליה לרבי צדוק מאי היא? יומא קמא אשקויה מיא דפארי, למחר מיא דסיפוקא, למחר מיא דקימחא, עד דרוח מיעיה פורתא פורתא

Abba Sikkara was the leader of the zealots [biryonei] of Jerusalem and the son of the sister of Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai.

Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai sent a message to him: Come to me in secret.

He came, and Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai said to him: Until when will you do this and kill everyone through starvation?

Abba Sikkara said to him: What can I do, for if I say something to them they will kill me.

Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai said to him: Show me a method that I will leave the city, and it is possible that there will be some small salvation.

Abba Sikkara said to him: Pretend to be sick, and have everyone come and ask about your welfare, so that word will spread about your ailing condition. Afterward bring something putrid and place it near you, so that people will say that you have died and are decomposing. And then, have your students enter to bring you to burial, and let no one else come in so that the zealots not notice that you are light. As the zealots know that a living person is lighter than a dead person.

Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai did this. Rabbi Eliezer entered from one side and Rabbi Yehoshua from the other side to take him out. When they arrived at the entrance of the city on the inside, the guards, who were of the faction of the zealots, wanted to pierce him with their swords in order to ascertain that he was actually dead. Abba Sikkara said to them: The Romans will say that they pierce their teacher. The guards wanted to push him to see whether he was still alive. Abba Sikkara said to them: They will say they push their teacher. The guards then opened the gate and he was taken out.

When Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai reached there, i.e., the Roman camp, he said: Greetings to you, the king; greetings to you, the king.

Vespasian said to him: You are liable for two death penalties, one because I am not a king and you call me king, and furthermore, if I am a king, why didn't you come to me until now?

Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai said to him: As for what you said about yourself: I am not a king, in truth, you are a king, as if you are not a king, Jerusalem will not be handed over into your hand, as it is written: "And the Lebanon shall fall by a mighty one" (Isaiah 10:34). And "mighty one" means only a king, as it is written: "And their mighty one shall be of themselves, and their ruler shall proceed from the midst of them" (Jeremiah 30:21), indicating that "mighty one" parallels "ruler." And "Lebanon" means only the Temple, as it is stated: "That good mountain and the Lebanon" (Deuteronomy 3:25). And as for what you said: If I am a king why didn't

you come to me until now, there are zealots among us who did not allow us to do this.

Vespasian said to him: If there is a barrel of honey and a snake [derakon] is wrapped around it, wouldn't they break the barrel in order to kill the snake? In similar fashion, you should have destroyed the walls of the city, so that the zealots could be driven out.

Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai was silent and did not answer.

In light of this, Rav Yosef later read the following verse about him, and some say that it was Rabbi Akiva who applied the verse to Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai: "I am the Lord...Who turns wise men backward and makes their knowledge foolish" (Isaiah 44:25). As Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai should have said the following to Vespasian in response: In such a case, we take tongs, remove the snake, and kill it, and in this way we leave the barrel intact. So too, you should kill the rebels and leave the city as it is.

In the meantime, a messenger arrived from Rome, and said to him [to Vespasian]: Rise, for the emperor has died, and the noblemen of Rome plan to appoint you as their leader. At that time Vespasian was wearing only one shoe, and when he tried to put on the other one, it would not go on his foot. He then tried to remove the other shoe that he was already wearing, but it would not come off. He said: What is this?

Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai said to him: Be not distressed or troubled, for good tidings have reached you, as it is written: "Good tidings make the bone fat" (Proverbs 15:30).

Vespasian said to him: But what is the remedy?

Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai said to him: Have someone with whom you are displeased come and pass before you, as it is written: "A broken spirit dries the bones" (Proverbs 17:22). He did this, and his shoe went on his foot. Vespasian said to him: Since you are so wise, why didn't you come to see me until now?

Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai said to him: But didn't I already tell you?

Vespasian said to him: I also told you what I had to say. Vespasian then said to Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai: I will be going to Rome and I will send

someone else in my place. But before I leave, ask something of me that I can give you.

Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai said to him: Give me Yavne and its Sages and do not destroy it, and spare the dynasty of Rabban Gamliel, and give me doctors to heal Rabbi Tzadok.

Rav Yosef read the following verse about him, and some say that it was Rabbi Akiva who applied the verse to Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai: "I am the Lord...Who turns wise men backward and makes their knowledge foolish" (Isaiah 44:25), as he should have said to him to leave the Jews alone this time.

And he [Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai] maintained that Vespasian might not do that much for him, and there would not be even a small amount of salvation.

The doctors who haled Rabbi Tzadok, what was the treatment? The first day they gave him water to drink that contained bran. The next day they gave him water containing flour mixed with bran. The following day they gave him water containing flour, allowing his stomach to broaden little by little.



Explaining the Story What's going on in our story? (The sequence of events)

Comprehension Questions

? What is the relationship between Abba Sikra and Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai?

? Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai admonished his nephew Abba Sikra: "How long are you going to carry on in this way and kill all the people with starvation?" Does Abba Sikra accept the admonition?

? How is the relationship between Abba Sikra, the head of the zealots [biryonei] of Jerusalem, and his "followers"?

? Why can't Abba Sikra convince his followers to accept the position of Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai?

? Why is Vespasian unable to put on his shoe after he was told the good news that he became the new emperor?

Analysis Questions

? What can we learn about zealotry from the exchange between Abba Sikra and Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai?

? Why does Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai bring proof to Vespasian from the Torah?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

? Why is Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai able to foretell the future from his insights into the Torah?

? Why do you think Vespasian granted a wish to Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai even though he was not completely satisfied with his answer?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Even if Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai's decision to ask from Vespasian a more attainable request was a wise one, it wasn't a popular one. Why?

? What can we learn from a leader who, when needed, is able to make unpopular decisions?

? Rabbi Akiva, who lived in the generation after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, criticized Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai for not making a bolder move. Do you agree with his criticism?

? How is the physicians' approach to heal Rabbi Zadok similar to Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai' approach to make decisions?

? Below is a text from *Avot D'Rabbi Natan*. How is Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai's reply to his disciple Rabbi Yehoshua in consonance with his philosophy, the way it is reflected in our story?

Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai *once was walking with his disciple Rabbi Joshua near Jerusalem after the destruction of the Temple. Rabbi Joshua*

looked at the Temple ruins and said: "Alas for us! The place which atoned for the sins of the people Israel through the ritual of animal sacrifice lies in ruins!" Then Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai spoke to him these words of comfort: "Be not grieved, my son. There is another way of gaining atonement even though the Temple is destroyed. We must now gain atonement through deeds of lovingkindness." For it is written, "Lovingkindness I desire, riot sacrifice" (Hosea 6:6). Avot D'Rabbi Natan 11a

"The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from the Text

- ! Zealotry begets zealotry!
- ! When you burn bridges you always limit your future possibilities!
- ! In every decision we make there will always be a "road not taken."
- ! The way we make decisions and take risks (Rabbi Akiva's style versus Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai's style) is pretty much a matter of personality and family history, but it is also tied to the particular moment in our lives in which we are at the moment of making the decision (pretty much the way we manage our investments).
- ! Many times the variables involved in a decision making process are not in our control, but there is still a possibility to choose the way we approach the inevitable!
- ! Can you live, and thrive and even attain happiness in a situation that is less than ideal, less than perfect?



Our story within a story focuses on the transition between a glorious past and an unknown future, between a choking burning city and a journey of endless possibilities. The story's hero, perhaps the most important architect of Judaism the way we know it today, is Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai, one of

the most important religious and political leaders of the rabbinic faction of the second half of the first century of the common era.

With no time to mourn the imminent destruction of his beloved Jerusalem, Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai is thinking ahead. In blatant contrast with Rabbi Zechariah ben Abkulas of the Kamtza and bar Kamtza story, Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai makes difficult and unpopular decisions and stands by them. Criticized equally by friends and foes, Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai makes demanding compromises, saves what can be salvaged, and reminds all of us that leadership is about having a vision, making decisions, and taking responsibility.