

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [309]

The Horn Has Already Been Heard in Yavne Insights into Babylonian Talmud Rosh Hashanah 29b



Background to Our Story

Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Berakhot. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 186

Nasi of the Sanhedrin following the destruction of the Temple, Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai was among the greatest leaders of Israel of any generation. A priest, Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai was one of the youngest students of Hillel the Elder. He led Israel for many years of his long life. Prior to the destruction of the Temple he lived in Beror Ĥayil, afterwards he moved to the city of Arev.

Yochanan ben Zakai



<http://www.wikipedia.org/>

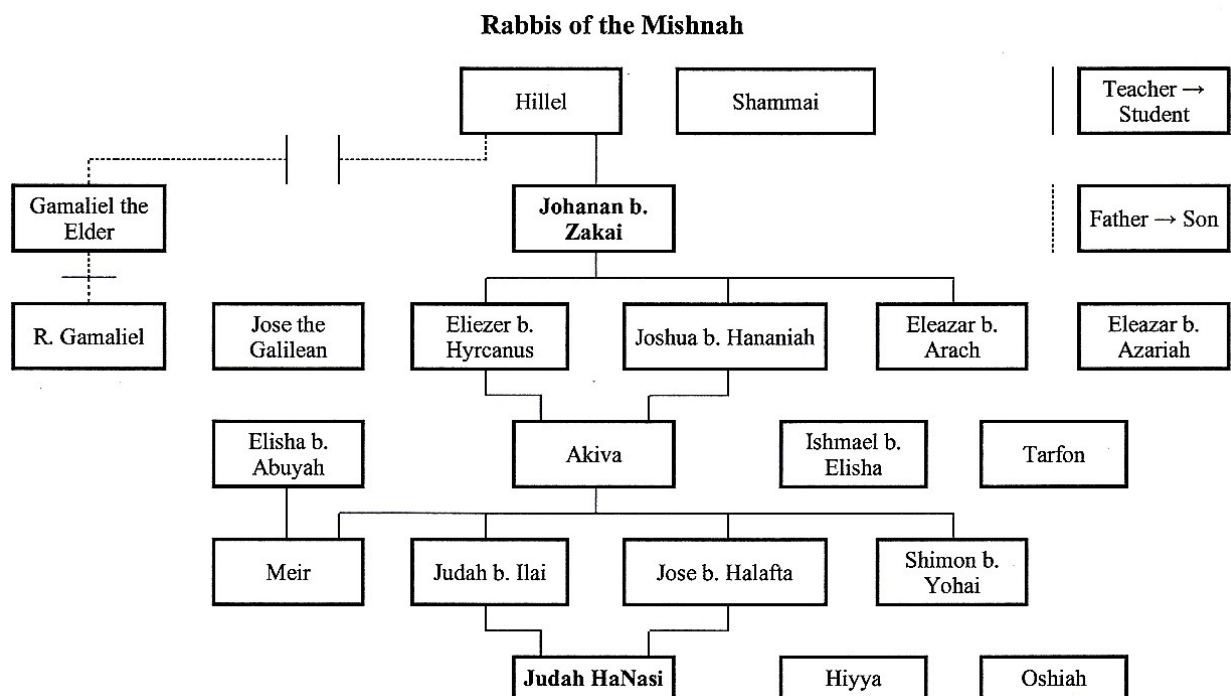
Johanan ben Zakai was one of the tannaim, an important Jewish sage in the era of the Second Temple, and a primary contributor to the core text of rabbinic Judaism, the Mishnah. During the siege of Jerusalem in the Great Jewish Revolt he snuck out of the city in a coffin to negotiate with Vespasian, whom 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 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."



Enactments of Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Rosh Hashanah. Koren publishers Jerusalem.

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While the Temple stood, much of Jewish life revolved around the Temple. After the destruction of the Temple, some mitzvot that were dependent on the Temple had to be adapted to the new circumstances so that they could still be fulfilled, while others required reinforcement so that they would not be forgotten and could be reinstated later when the Temple was rebuilt. Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai instituted nine reforms in an attempt to strike this balance of adapting to new circumstances while maintaining the collective memory of Temple practice.

These reforms can be divided into three categories.

The first category includes those mitzvot that were adapted to new circumstances. For example, now it was permitted for witnesses to desecrate Shabbat to come and testify about the New Moon only for the months of Nisan and Tishrei. Similarly, the testimony about the New Moon would be accepted all day.

In addition, several reforms established Yavne as the replacement for the Temple in certain circumstances. Those included the sounding of the shofar on Shabbat in Yavne, and the halakha that witnesses to the New Moon should go to the local place of meeting rather than to the Great Sanhedrin.

The second category includes mitzvot that were observed in the usual manner, so that when the Temple will be rebuilt people will not accidentally transgress, e.g., the prohibition against eating new grain on the entire day of waving the omer offering.

The third category is comprised of mitzvot designed to strengthen the memory of the Temple. For example, the lulav must be taken all seven days of Sukkot, and it was not permitted for priests to recite the Priestly Blessing wearing sandals.

? What do you think were the greatest challenges facing the Jewish leadership after the destruction of the Second Temple?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

The Sons of Beteira



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The sons of Beteira were a family of Sages that for many years held an important position of leadership for the Jewish people. Apparently the family originated from Babylonia. However, the Sages of this family served as leaders of the Jewish people in Eretz Yisrael after Shemaya and Avtalyon, at the beginning of the Herodian period. They relinquished this position for Hillel the Elder when he was appointed the head of the Great Sanhedrin. After the destruction of the Temple the sons of Beteira maintained great influence, although they did not hold any official position. The well-known members of this family are the first Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteira, who lived in Netzivin in Babylonia; the second Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteira; and the pair Rabbi Yehoshua ben Beteira and Rabbi Shimon ben Beteira, who are perhaps the sons of the Beteira mentioned here.

Yavne



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Yavne is an ancient city that is mentioned even in the Bible, where it is called Yavne'el, in the region of the tribal lands of Judah. Over the course of time it became a Philistine city, and it is mentioned as one of the cities whose walls King Uzzia breached (II Chronicles 26:6). The city of Yavne is located a little over a kilometer from the coast, almost due west of Jerusalem. It was conquered by Vespasian during his campaign against the Great Revolt, and various 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 location of the Great Sanhedrin for many years, until the bar Kokheva revolt. The central yeshiva in

Yavne was called the vineyard in Yavne, because when it was in session the Sages themselves, along with their students, would sit in rows, like the rows of a vineyard (Jerusalem Talmud).

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Rosh Hashanah 29b

מתני' יום טוב של ראש השנה שחל להיות בשבת, במקדש היו תוקעין, אבל לא במדינה. משחרב בית המקדש התקין רבן יוחנן בן זפאי שיהו תוקעין בכל מקום שיש בו בית דין. אמר רבי אלעזר: לא התקין רבן יוחנן בן זפאי אלא ביבנה בלבד. אמרו לו: אהד יבנה ואהד כל מקום שיש בו בית דין.

....

" תנו רבנן: פעם אחת חל ראש השנה להיות בשבת, והיו כל הערים מתפנסין. אמר להם רבן יוחנן בן זפאי לבני בתירה: נתקע. אמרו לו: נדון.

אמר להם: נתקע ואחר כך נדון. לאחר שתקעו אמרו לו: נדון! אמר להם: כבר נשמעה קרו ביבנה, ואין משיבין לאחר מעשה:

Mishna - With regard to the Festival day of Rosh HaShana that occurs on Shabbat, in the Temple they would sound the *shofar* as usual. However, they would not sound it in the rest of the country outside the Temple.

After the Temple was destroyed, Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai instituted that the people should sound the *shofar* on Shabbat in every place where there is a court of twenty-three judges. Rabbi Elazar said: Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai instituted this practice only in Yavne, where the Great Sanhedrin of seventy-one judges resided in his time, but nowhere else. They [the Sages] said to him: He instituted the practice both in Yavne and in any place where there is a court.

...

The Sages taught: Once Rosh HaShana occurred on Shabbat, and all the cities gathered at the Great Sanhedrin in Yavne for the Festival prayers.

Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai said to the sons of Beteira, who were the leading halakhic authorities of the generation: Let us sound the *shofar* in Yavne!

They [the sons of Beteira] said to him: Let us discuss whether or not this is permitted.

He [Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai] said to them: First let us sound it, and afterward, let us discuss the matter. After they sounded the *shofar*, the sons of Beteira said to Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai: Let us now discuss the issue.

He [Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai] said to them: The horn has already been heard in Yavne, and one does not refute a ruling after action has already been taken.



Explaining the Story - What is going on in our story? (Explain the sequence of events)

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Why would they (the leadership of the Jewish people) sound the *shofar* as usual on Shabbat when the Temple was in existence? **?** Why wouldn't they sound it outside the Temple?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

? What do you think was the purpose of Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai's enactment to sound the shofar in every place there was a court?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

? Why do you think Rabbi Elazar wanted to limit Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai's enactment only to Yavne?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

? Why did everybody go to Yavne for Rosh Hashanah?

Bonus ? Why did Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai say to the sons of Beteira while in Yavne: Let us sound the *shofar*!

Bonus ? Why were the sons of Beteira hesitant to sound the shofar in Yavne?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Extra Bonus ? Why didn't Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai wish to discuss the permissibility of sounding the shofar in Yavne?

Extra Bonus ? Why wasn't it necessary for Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai to discuss the permissibility of sounding the *shofar on Shabbat outside the Temple once the shofar was sounded*?

One More Analysis Question

Bonus ? What do you think would have happened had Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai discussed the permissibility of sounding the shofar on Shabbat in Yavne, and had his enactment been rejected?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

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

! It's better to ask forgiveness than permission – What Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai might have taught Rear Admiral Grace Hopper.

It's better to ask forgiveness than permission. The phrase is attributed to Grace Murray Hopper ([née](#) Murray; December 9, 1906 – January 1, 1992), a famous computer scientist. She was a pioneer in her practice and was the first person to coin the computer term "bug." She used the phrase in 1984 when talking about her work on computer programs. Hopper was a formidable computer scientist, and many people respected her for what she did. However, she also had a lot of resistance in her field, and that's most of the reason why she coined the phrase, "it's better to ask for forgiveness than permission."

She made sure to work on tasks that she knew would benefit the advancement of computer technology. Rather than waiting on her superiors to tell her otherwise, she simply worked with what she knew would work and would ask for forgiveness if they disagreed later.



Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai is a leader at a crossroad. With the Temple destroyed and the Romans occupying the land of Israel, he believes he needs to elevate the centrality of Yavne as the new center of the Jewish people, while maintaining alive

the memory of the Temple. While Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai has the vision of what needs to be done to secure the survival of the Jewish people, he knows the steps he is about to take won't be popular. Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai senses the paralysis of the people, of his colleagues. Everyone is in a state of shock and unable to act. Because he knows his crowd, Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai realizes that by bringing his reforms to the consideration of a committee, he will be, de facto killing them and acts decisively, understanding that when the stakes are high, it is better to ask forgiveness than permission.