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## Stories with a Twist [51]

### May it Be His will That The Fear of Heaven Shall Be Upon You Like the Fear of Flesh and Blood!

Insights into the Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 28b

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### Background to Our Story

#### Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Berachot. Koren publishers Jerusalem.

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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/>

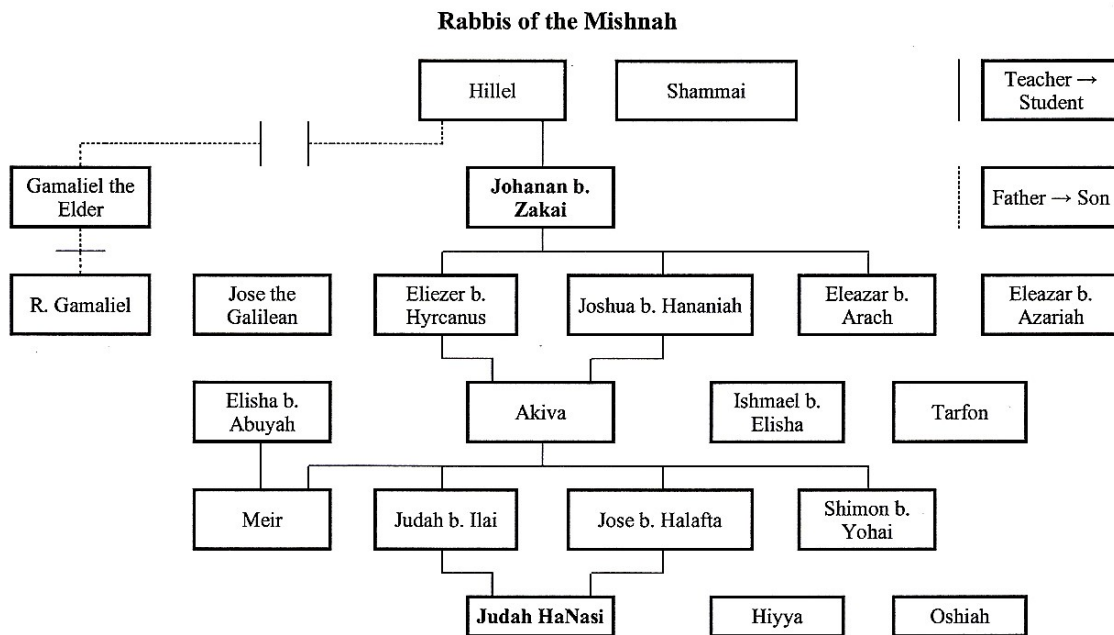
**Johanen ben Zakai** was one of the tannaim, an important Jewish sage in the era of the Second Temple, and a primary contributor to the core text of rabbinic Judaism, the Mishnah.

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 Johanen ben Zakai Synagogue.

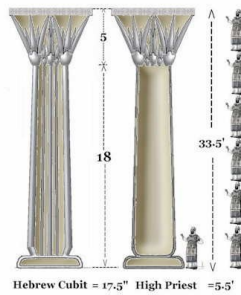
After the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem and its sacrificial altars he led the Council of Yavne (70-90 CE), from which Rabbinic Judaism emerged. Under his leadership the council replaced animal sacrifice (in Hebrew called קרבן *korban*) with prayer, a practice that continues in today's worship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



**Rightmost Pillar**



*"And he set up the pillars in the vestibule of the temple; and he set up the right pillar, and called its name Jachin; and he set up the left pillar, and called its name Boaz." (I Kings 7:21)*

**Gehinom**



**Gehenna, gehenom, or gehinom** ([Hebrew](#)) are words used in Jewish and Christian writings for the place where evil people go in the [afterlife](#) (see [Hell](#)). The name is derived from a geographical site in [Jerusalem](#) known as the **Valley of Hinnom**, one of the two principal valleys surrounding the [Old City](#). In Jewish tradition this valley was associated with the idea of [Hell](#). The reasons for this association are uncertain. Some believe that it relates to the role of the valley in the disposing and burning of rubbish and unclean animals. However, Jewish tradition suggests the valley had a 'gate' which led down to a molten lake of fire. (Possibly *The furnace of the Lord in Zion* to which Isaiah refers 31:9, 30:33). It is unknown whether this 'gate' was an actual geophysical feature within the valley that provided the focus for cultic activity (2 Kings 23:10) or simply a metaphorical identification with the entrance to the [underworld](#) that had come to be associated with the valley.

Gehenna is cited in the [New Testament](#) and in early Christian writing to represent the place where evil people will be punished or destroyed. It lends its name to Islam's hell, [Jahannam](#). In both Rabbinical Jewish and Christian writing, Gehenna as a destination of the wicked is different from [Sheol](#) or [Hades](#), the abode of the dead.

In the Hebrew Bible, Gai Ben-Hinnom does not refer to hell but rather to a real valley in Jerusalem (Joshua 15:8, Joshua 18:16, 2nd Kings 23:10, 2 Chronicles 28:3, 2nd Chronicles 33:6, Nehemiah 11:30, Jeremiah 7:31~32, Jeremiah 19:2, Jeremiah 19:6, Jeremiah 32:35). Garbage from the walled city was burned there.

### The Text: Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 28b

ובשחלה רבי יוחנן בן זכאי, נכנסו תלמידיו לבקרו.

כיון שראה אותם התחיל לבכות.

אמרו לו תלמידיו: גר ישראל, עמוד הימיני, פטיש התוק, מפני מה אתה בוכה?

אמר להם: אילו לפני מלך בשר ודם היו מוליכין אותי, שהיום פאן ומחר בקבר, שאם פועס עלי – אין פועסו פועס עולם, ואם אוסרני – אין איסורו איסור עולם, ואם ממיתני – אין מיתתו מיתת עולם, ואני יכול לפייסו בדברים ולשחדו בממון – אף על פי כן הייתי בוכה; ועכשיו שמוליכים אותי לפני מלך המלכים הקדוש ברוך הוא, שהוא חי וקיים לעולם ולעולמי עולמים, שאם פועס עלי – פועסו פועס עולם, ואם אוסרני – איסורו איסור עולם, ואם ממיתני – מיתתו מיתת עולם, ואיני יכול לפייסו בדברים ולא לשחדו בממון; ולא עוד, אלא שיש לפני שני דרכים, אחת של גן עדן ואחת של גיהנם, ואני יודע באיזו מוליכים אותי – ולא אבכה!?

אמרו לו: רבינו, ברכנו!

אמר להם: יהי רצון שמהא מורא שמים עליכם פמורא בשר ודם.

אמרו לו תלמידיו: עד פאן?! –

אמר להם: ולוא! תדעו, פשאדם עובר עבירה אומר: "שלא יראני אדם."

When Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai fell ill his students entered to visit him. When he saw them, he began to cry.

His students said to him: Lamp of Israel, the right pillar, the mighty hammer, for what reason are you crying?

He [Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai] said to them: If they were leading me before a flesh and blood king whose life is temporal, who is here today and in the grave tomorrow; if he is angry with me, his anger is not eternal and, consequently, his punishment is not eternal; if he incarcerates me, his incarceration is not an eternal incarceration, as I might maintain my hope that I would ultimately be freed. If he kills me, his killing is not for eternity. Moreover, I am able to appease him with words and even bribe him with money, and even so I would cry when standing before royal judgment. Now that they are leading me before the supreme King of Kings, the Holy One, Blessed be He, Who lives and endures forever and all time; if He is angry with me, His anger is eternal; if He incarcerates me, His incarceration is an eternal incarceration; and if He kills me, His killing is for eternity. I am unable to appease Him with words and bribe him with money. Moreover, but I have two paths before me, one of the Garden of Eden and one of Gehenna, and I do not know on which they are leading me; and will I not cry?

[His students] said to him: Our teacher, bless us.

He [Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai] said to them: May it be His will that the fear of Heaven shall be upon you like the fear of flesh and blood.

His students were puzzled and said: To that point and not beyond? Shouldn't one fear God more?

He [Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai] said to them: Would that a person achieve that level of fear. Know that when one commits a transgression, he says to himself: I hope that no man will see me. If one was as concerned about avoiding shame before God as he is before man, he would never sin.



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

### **Comprehension and Analysis Questions**

**?** Why did Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai's students go to visit him when he fell ill?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 4 \_\_\_\_\_

**Bonus ?** Why do you think Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai began to weep as soon as he saw his students coming?

**Bonus ?** What do you think the disciples had in mind when they told their master: "Light of Israel, the right pillar, the mighty hammer, for what reason are you crying?"

**Bonus ?** Why did the students ask for a blessing from Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai after he told them that he was afraid he wasn't worthy of the Garden of Eden?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 4 \_\_\_\_\_

**?** Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai blessed his students: "May it be His will that the fear of Heaven shall be upon you like the fear of flesh and blood." Why were the students astonished by their master's blessing?

**Extra Bonus ?** What is the revolutionary approach of Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai to Yirat Shamaim (fear of Heaven) and religiosity in general?

### **"The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from These Texts**

But first... "[Jesus is watching you!](#)"



[Jesus is watching you!](#)

A burglar broke into a house one night. He shined his flashlight around, looking for valuables, and when he picked up a CD player to place in his pack, a strange, disembodied voice echoed from the dark saying, "Jesus is watching you."

He nearly jumped out of his skin, clicked his flashlight out, and froze. When he heard nothing more after a bit, he shook his head, promised himself a vacation after the next big score, then clicked the light on and began searching for more valuables. Just as he pulled the stereo out so he could disconnect the wires, clear as a bell he heard, "Jesus is watching you."

Freaked out, he shone his light around frantically, looking for the source of the voice. Finally, in the corner of the room, his flashlight beam came to rest on a parrot. "Did you say that?" he hissed at the parrot.

"Yep," the parrot confessed, then squawked, "I'm just trying to warn you."

The burglar relaxed. "Warn me, huh? Who in the world are you?"

"Moses," replied the bird.

"Moses?" the burglar laughed. "What kind of people would name a bird Moses?"

"The kind of people that would name a Doberman Jesus"

! The fear of the Doberman! When the presence of "the other" is stronger than the presence of God!

! Redefining the "Homo Religious" - When being aware of the "other" is more than enough!

! Before you stand in the presence of God, you need to be ready to stand in the presence of other human beings!



In our story, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai astoundingly redefines the highest character trait of fear of Heaven as fear of other human beings. An expert in human psychology, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai understands that what guides our daily behavior is not God's almighty presence, but the approval and disapproval of other human beings like us.

By lowering the bar, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai actually raises it, allowing us to become more attuned to God's presence by becoming better human beings.

Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai reminds us that being mindful of other human beings around us is not only a prerequisite to being a religious person, but the essence of a religious life.