

### **Rosh Hashanah 2024: Carrying Judaism Forward**

The atmosphere was choked with thick, dark smoke. Fires raged out of control, consuming everything in their paths. The scent of charred flesh permeated the air. Blood stains marked the walls of the narrow streets. Among the confusion, the chaos, the death, he summoned his nephew, an estranged, hot-headed type whom he had vowed to never speak to again after a huge argument several years prior. He asked him, what should I do? The nephew responded with a crazy idea, something that would change Judaism forever.

Nearly 2000 years ago, it seemed like the Jewish people were on the precipice of extinction. In the year 70 CE, the Romans, the greatest power in the world at that time, destroyed our holy Temple in Jerusalem, along with much of the city. Thousands were slaughtered. Others were sold into slavery, sent as captives to the far provinces and colonies of the empire. The lucky ones were simply exiled. The triumph of the Romans was subduing and taking this people away from its center, its homeland, the place where God dwelled among them. Indeed, if you travel to Rome today you can walk through the arch of Titus, crowned with a triumphant fresco of the Romans stealing the menorah, the symbol of light and God's presence in the world, and bringing it back with them along with the other spoils of war. The Jewish people could have easily faded from the scene, defeated, humiliated, and lost to the winds of history like so many others.

But that did not happen, because Abba Sikra, the nephew of Yochanan ben Zakai, came up with a stunningly audacious plan.<sup>1</sup> Yochanan, one of our people's leaders at the time, a pharisee, a teacher who was already railing against what he perceived as corruption in the Temple, understood the peril. He knew that Judaism as it existed, a cult based on the laws of sacrifices centered on the Temple, could not survive the destruction of that particular system. He knew that Jerusalem was lost. And so he understood that he had to escape. But how? The Romans were everywhere and they were not in the business of letting Jews simply leave after they had been taunting, teasing, and in some cases attacking their roman overseers for years. So Abba Sikra told his uncle to fake his death and to lie down next to something putrid like a dead animal so that the Romans would smell and believe he was indeed dead. Yochanan's collaborators, Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua were in on the ruse. They helped place Yochanan into a coffin and then carried it out in the city, presumably for burial. So, Yochanan, Eliezer, and Yehoshua escaped the inferno of Jerusalem through ingenuity, grit, and a lot of *chutzpah*.

After the heroic escape, some time passed, and we learn that the Caesar in Rome died, and Vespasian took over. Lucky for him, Yochanan Ben Zakai had a preexisting relationship with Vespasian from his time as the chief roman general overseeing the siege of Jerusalem. And so, Yochanan ben Zakai went to him and demanded four things. Yochanan Ben Zakai said to Vespasian, "Give me Yavneh and her sages and the dynasty of Rabban Gamliel and doctors to

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<sup>1</sup> BT Gittin 56a-56b

heal Rabbi Tsadok.”<sup>2</sup> Vespasian agreed, and Judaism began its rebirth, a new faith which has survived until the present.

Those moments, depicted so hauntingly in the Babylonian Talmud, are both difficult and easy for us to imagine. There is no smoke in the air, no blood in the streets. Many of us are here in the middle of the week, having taken a day off of school, or work. Some of us will probably go to a nice lunch after the service, some of us may go back to work, maybe we’ll watch our newest binge worthy series on Netflix this evening. But the events in our world, the massacre of October 7<sup>th</sup> and ensuing war, the growing threats of dangerous regimes around the world including in our own country, the dramatic rise in antisemitism, we are once again living in dangerous, uncharted times. It is too early to discover whether these years will mark a paradigm shift in Judaism as occurred in 70 CE. But we know for sure that as the world continues to rapidly change, it behooves us, as we begin this new year of 5785, to make a plan, perhaps a radical one as Abba Sikra suggested to his uncle. As we begin a new year, putting an incredibly difficult one behind us, we need to be asking how will Judaism continue to survive? As we move out of the destruction of October 7<sup>th</sup>, as we continue to move through incredibly challenging obstacles in our society, how do we sustain our faith and our people? What is our plan?

Let’s look a little more closely at what Yochanan ben Zakai demanded of Vespasian to see if that helps us frame how we want to carry Judaism forward. Remember, he made four distinct demands: Yavneh, sages, the dynasty of Rabban Gamliel, and doctors to heal Rabbi Tsadok. So, let’s take these one at a time. First, Yavneh. Why Yavneh? It’s a small city, located between the southern suburbs of Tel Aviv and Ashdod on the coast. My only associations with it are the Talmud, the place where my grandmother’s cousin Chanele lived, and the name of the day school where Shalom worked for several years in Los Gatos, California. Other than that, the place seems rather unremarkable. It is mentioned a little in the bible, but not as a holy place or a place where anything significant really happened. But that is exactly why Yochanan ben Zakai demanded it. Jerusalem was too fraught, too holy, too corrupt, too destroyed. Yavneh provided an opportunity for a fresh start. If you are going to study Torah, the central act of being Jewish, you need a place to do it. And really, any place will do. So Yochanan ben Zakai picked a place he knew would not be upsetting to the Romans, a place that did not have assets like natural resources or strategic importance that would be coveted by others. And so Yavneh became the new center of Jewish life in the land of Israel.

Yochanan Ben Zakai's second demand was for the sages. Why them? Let’s remind ourselves that, up until this point, they had not been so central to Judaism. The most important people in the faith were the Priests and the Levites, the ones who ran and assisted in the offering of sacrifices, for that is how one practiced Judaism and communicated with God. The law was set- there was not really a need to interpret Judaism- you just picked up the book (or at that time, the scroll) of Leviticus and it served as an instruction manual for what kind of sacrifice to bring to the priest based on what sort of act or deed you had committed. But Yochanan knew we were entering new territory, a Judaism that was unformed, open to new ideas and

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<sup>2</sup> BT Gitin 56b

interpretations. So he wanted the chachamim, the smarties, the nerds, the ones who could analyze Torah and the systems that had existed and find ways to reinterpret and reimagine their central messages. There had already been a tradition of prophetic Judaism, of folks unafraid to point out the sacrificial cult as being insufficient for addressing personal or societal woes. Yochanan ben Zakai knew that in order for Judaism to survive, he would need to surround himself with a cadre of wise men who would study the ancient texts and, using them as a foundation, build a new, reimagined faith together.

The third ask Yochanan made was for the dynasty of Rabban Gamliel. Why specifically him? We know that Gamliel was a descendant of King David. Judaism also teaches us that the messiah will also be a descendant of King David, and therefore Rabban Gamliel as well. So he is perceived as a sort of Jewish royalty. This dynasty was also materially wealthy. We have an expression in Judaism that goes *ein kemach, ein torah*, literally without bread or flour or substance, there is no Torah<sup>3</sup>. That is often interpreted to mean for Judaism or any faith to survive, we need people who can give their time, talent, and treasure. Yochanan knew he would need to create a capital campaign to keep Judaism alive. He relied on the wealthy class to fund his new projects and ideas. He understood how essential it was to be able to raise and spend money when so much had been taken from them by the Romans. But beyond the very practical applications of this ask, there is also an undeniable strain of hope. For if Rabban Gamliel represented that continuity of Judaism since King David, approximately 1000 years prior, and tradition taught the line would continue until the appearance of the messiah, then Yochanan ben Zakai was also betting on a Judaism that would continue far into the foreseeable future until the time when the world would be perfected with the arrival of the messiah.

Finally, Yochanan ben Zakai asked Vespasian for doctors to heal Rabbi Tzadok. There are a few interpretations to this ask. One is that Tzadok is not a person here, but rather an allusion to the priestly class. We know there was animosity between different sects of Judaism during this time, especially between the Sadducees which supported the priests and the Pharisees of which Yochanan ben Zakai was one, who were not enamored with them. So, this request could be seen as a request to have the means to heal the divisions that existed among the people. The other way to interpret this ask is to take it more literally that it did point to Rabbi Tzadok, who reacted to the Roman siege of Jerusalem by fasting, hoping that would provoke God to end the Roman occupation. The purpose of the doctors then, would be to not only heal Rabbi Tzadok, but help him regain his strength and perhaps overcome any doubt, embarrassment, or humiliation he may have suffered because his act of fasting was not heeded by God.

All of these, the place, the wise men, the dynastic support, and the healing, were what allowed Judaism to survive its darkest hour. That Judaism, more or less led by rabbis, decentralized. The center of power in Jerusalem shifted to synagogues and community centers and organizations throughout the diaspora. This rabbinic Judaism is more or less the same Judaism which still exists to this day. But I fear we may be entering a time as troubled and trying as the year 70 CE. Yes, we have returned to our homeland, but its existence is fraught

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<sup>3</sup> Pirkei Avot 3:17

and threatened by internal and external forces. Jewish communities around the world are struggling and even here in the United States where many of us enjoy immense protections and freedoms, many are turning away. Synagogue membership throughout the liberal movements of Judaism is down, the number of folks entering the rabbinate or cantorate in the liberal movements is significantly down, and the institutions which guided us throughout the past two millennia and perhaps had their strongest moments during the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in many ways seem ill prepared and inadequate to face our greatest challenges. So, if I were Yochanan ben Zakai, here's what I might ask for today.

First, more places for us to gather and congregate. Not just one place like Yavneh, but many places. As you well know, I believe in the importance and centrality of the modern State of Israel. But I do not think we should advocate for every Jew making Aliyah. The religion that Yochanan ben Zakai developed was supposed to be one that could be practiced in every corner of the world as long as there was a community. So, I think we should be encouraging people to find their Jewish home wherever they may be living. Last month, I traveled to South Africa as part of the Nahum Goldmann Fellowship, an annual gathering of emerging Jewish leaders from around the world who get together to, in their motto, link, learn, and lead. I was perhaps most fascinated by the linking part. I met a young Jewish leader from Helsinki Finland, who is doing remarkable work to sustain her small but mighty community in Scandinavia. Likewise I schmoozed with a Jew from Panama City, who shared about the multiple kosher supermarkets and different community institutions in town. There was a delegation from Australia, who taught us that their communities in Brisbane, Melbourne, and Sydney are in many ways thriving with day schools and many different synagogues. Yes, there are arguments to be made that the smaller communities are dying out, and I think at some point it's ok to let some of them go. But we have always been richer as a people when we can support the local Jewish communities that exist across the globe. And technology allows us to stay in touch and keep up with others that our ancient letter writing ancestors could only imagine. One month after the fellowship, my whatsapp group, consisting of phone numbers with about 20 different country codes, is pretty much continually buzzing with photos, memes, teachings, and information sharing among us. It may be more of a challenge for the Jewish people to be spread across the globe, but we also have opportunities to stick together that 21<sup>st</sup> century technology has thankfully provided. In my youth group days, we used to sing a song that goes "Wherever you go, there's always someone Jewish." I hope that remains true and that we can continue to support all the places where Jews live.

Second, we still need the sages. We need to have good people, smart people who can think through our problems and inspire us. That is why I support the work of institutions like the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture which sponsors and runs the Nahum Goldmann Fellowship. Or the Shalom Hartman Institute which is based in Jerusalem. These are centers of *torah lishma*, Torah for the sake of learning. They are also centers of learning for the sake of how we can not just survive but thrive. I know Temple Emanuel has always placed a high value on education, and that is why we are striving to bring in smart and interesting folks to lift us up and inspire us. Just this past month we welcomed roots, an Israeli and Palestinian peace building initiative where we learned deeply from Rabbi Hanan Schlesinger and Noor Awad. They inspired us with how they are working to create bridges between two very different and in

many ways separate societies. That's why we invited Anastasios Karababas who has done incredible research on the history of the Jews of Greece. That's why next month we will hear from Allison Korman who has done brave, awesome work by founding the Red Tent Fund to support abortion access through Jewish values. And we will hear from our member, Dr. Ellen Schafer Salins, on what she has done to support the deaf and hard of hearing community and about microaggressions that they and many of us face. If Judaism is to continue to survive, we need the best minds of our times to continue to inspire us, dream with us, and lead us forward.

We still need the dynasties, the Schustermans, the Grinspoons, the Charles E Smith family, the folks who have their names on everything. But more than that, we need YOU. It is so wonderful to see so many members of our community and guests here this morning. And it's not enough. Commitment to the Jewish community should be more than a twice a year occasion. I'm not suggesting you need to come to every program and service we offer; I can't even do that. But I do think we need to get beyond this model that has become commonplace in America called fee for service. Yes, you are paying fees and you are receiving services, but commitment to Judaism requires more than that. We cannot survive without your dues-remember, *ein kemach, ein torah*, but we also cannot survive without your commitment. The synagogue should be a place where you come to gather, to learn, to connect, to wrestle with the important questions of life. It should be a place where you feel love and support, and where you can make a difference by offering your love and support. We pride ourselves on being a community that has always had a strong and committed core of lay leaders who partner with our staff to make amazing things happen. The pandemic disrupted so much of this, but it is time to recommit not just to this place, but to Jewish institutions in general. And by institution, I do not just mean federation although I like federation very much and believe in its mission. I mean, support the local Jewish food co-op, or the person writing a cookbook with Sephardic recipes, the organizations working to support young Jewish artists, the quirky local museums like the museum of American Jewish military history. There are so many great Jewish things out there, so find some and get involved and report back to me.

I would be remiss, and my retired emergency room doctor father would be upset if I did not say that we still need doctors. We need doctors because, at these perilous and scary moments, we need protection, we need help, and most of all, we need healing. October 7<sup>th</sup> and the increasing amount of polarization in American politics has exposed rifts between Jews and our neighbors, and between each other. There is so much anger and rage, and again the pandemic exacerbated the mental health crisis in our country. So we do not just need medical doctors, but we need all who have dedicated themselves to healing; therapists, special education teachers, PT's and OT's and social workers and clinicians, along with those who seek to build bridges among people. We need people who are not afraid of conflict or obstacles. People with serious skills to heal our broken world, to bring us back together. We need healers inside of our Jewish institutions to bring us back to health and to keep us strong that we can continue to survive.

There is one more point I want to make this morning. We often overlook the source of the suggestion to Yochanan ben Zakai that he play dead and get smuggled out of Jerusalem. It comes from his nephew, Abba Sikra, who the Talmud deems, "The head of the

thugs of Jerusalem.” Abba Sikra was ostracized by the mainstream. He was perceived as an outsider, as dangerous, as someone who should’ve been cast out, rejected, shunned. And yet it is he who thought outside the box, who came up with the winning idea, who saved not just Yochanan ben Zakai but the Jewish people. We have not done a great job as a people listening to those outside the mainstream. And we would do well to keep striving to open our tent as wide as possible, to welcome those with opinions and ideas different from our own. I’m not saying every idea or opinion is valuable, but this fast paced and challenging era demands that we leave no stone unturned in our quest to keep moving forward. If we want Judaism to survive, we need to be listening to folks like Abba Sikra. We need to remind ourselves that our faith has always been countercultural and we need to heed the words of the psalmist, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.”<sup>4</sup>

Judaism survived after our center was destroyed. We have survived Pharaohs and rebellions, pogroms, the Shoah, and the latest atrocities of 2023. I am confident we will continue to survive long into the future. But during these fraught and challenging days, let us all have the courage of Yochanan ben Zakai to speak up, to make our demands, to look to our past to help shape our present and our future. I pray this is a good year for you, your loved ones, and the Jewish people. Let us not be deterred by the obstacles in front of us but rather, let us move forward, not in coffins, but in song, with praise, with confidence, and with hope. We will continue to hold on, to survive and thrive, as we have done before, because Judaism is worth it, and as we carry it forward, it carries us forward as well.

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<sup>4</sup> Psalm 118:22