WHEN THE TEMPLE WAS DESTROYED BY THE ROMANS AROUND 70 CE, HOW DID JUDAISM continue? How did it survive the transition from a Temple-focused religion to one centered around the synagogue and learning Torah?

IN RABBINIC LEGEND, THE ANSWER IS ONE MAN: RABBAN YOHANAN BEN ZAKKAI. WE’RE spending the next 3 sessions getting to know him and seeing how he responded to this huge challenge of his day, nothing less than the death and resurrection of Judaism.

Discuss with your havruta the following questions to help you get into Rabban Yohanan’s mindset:

1. There were all sorts of responses one might have to the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem. Perhaps someone would take this as a sign that:
   a. Judaism is not the right path, or
   b. God is angry with us for some reason and we need to ask for forgiveness, or
   c. we should be rebuilding a new Temple in Jerusalem, or
   d. we should start a totally new model.
   e. (Or some combination of these.)

Which do you think would have been your reaction? Why? Which approach seems hardest / easiest? Why?

questions continue on next page....
2. If someone had told you that he can save just the scholars and start an academy, would you have been impressed by this? Why or why not?

Framing our learning

Before we get into our first text, one word of framing. It is basically impossible to recover reliable historical information about our sages—there’s no independent archeological evidence for individuals like these, nor would we expect any. All we can do is learn from how our sages are presented in our sources. The stories that we will learn are primarily literary works designed to teach us about ourselves, as we will explore.

So we are not learning “history” in this course, we are learning something better and more powerful: legend (or aggadah in Hebrew), as filtered through our texts, primarily the Babylonian Talmud (or Talmud Bavli in Hebrew).

Talmud scholar Devora Steinmetz writes about the personalities of our sages that comes through from these literary tales:

**SOURCE #1**

Intuitively… students of rabbinic texts sense that they “know” certain sages, that there are sets of attributes that characterize certain prominent sages, whether these attributes are personality traits, beliefs of stances, practices of experiences, or kinds of interrelationships with others. Whether or not some or all of these have their basis in historical fact neither adds to nor detracts from the sense that, when one encounters one of these sages in an *agada*, one is meeting a familiar figure—and it is inevitable, and perhaps expected, that one will read the *agada* with what one “knows” about the figure from other passages in mind…

The Bavli assigns to certain sages specific tendencies which are constructed and conveyed through the interrelationship of a range of passages [i.e. stories]. The Bavli does not invent these elements of characterization whole-cloth, but neither does it simply reiterate earlier traditions about these sages. Rather, in the citation or omission of traditional material, in recasting or adding to traditional material, and, significantly, in contextualizing traditional material in contexts that highlight or disclose new significances, the Bavli focuses and sharpens traits and stances that it presents as characterizing certain sages.
Explanation from Rabbi Tali Adler

The Talmud is a great collector of material and puts it altogether into new and previously unknown forms, but it is fundamentally based on the earlier material of the Tannaim and Amoraim. We will put these collections in conversation with each other to explore the mindsets of our rabbis as told through our sources.

RABBAN YOHANAN BEN ZAKKAI ESCAPES JERUSALEM

This story is built up from many parts. The first thing to do is to read the story aloud with your havruta as one coherent plot. The Talmud is very terse and so you will have to do some reconstruction work yourself. At every stage, try to enter the characters’ heads (especially of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai) and ask: what is he thinking and feeling? What are the factors he is weighing? What do his actions show about his motivations?

Then, go to the questions below.

SOURCE #2

Babylonian Talmud Gittin

56a-56b

1. Abba Sikra, the head of the thugs of Jerusalem, was the son of Rabban Yohanan Ben Zakkai’s sister.

2. [Rabban Yohanan] sent him a message, “Come privately to me.”

3. He came.

4. [Rabban Yohanan] said to him, “Until when will you do this and kill the world with famine?”

5. He said to him, “What should I do? Since, if I say anything to them, they will kill me.”
A living person is lighter than a dead one.

A corpse does not actually have any more weight than a living body, but it feels heavier probably because of its stiffness and immobility.

Rabbi Eliezer went in...

We’re going to learn more about these characters in a future session!

They

Could be referring here to the Romans or the other Jews. What do you think makes more sense?

Vespasian

Who, according to before the quoted passage, was the Roman general sent to destroy Jerusalem.

6. He said to him, “Show me a solution for me, that I should get out; maybe there will be a small salvation [from it].”

7. He said to him, “Act as if you are sick, and have everyone come and ask about you; and [then] bring something putrid and have it lay with you and they will say that you have died. Have your students bring you out and no other men should bring you out, so that we don’t become aware that you are light, since they know that a living person is lighter than a dead one.”

8. He did this.

9. Rabbi Eliezer went in on one side and Rabbi Yehoshua went in on the other side.

10. When they came to the opening, [the thug gate keepers] wanted to stab him.

11. They said to them, “They will say, ‘they stabbed their rabbi!’”

12. And [then] they wanted to jostle him.

13. They said to them, “They will say, ‘they jostled their rabbi!’”

14. They opened the gate.

15. He went out.

16. He got there [and] said, “Peace to you, O king, peace to you, O king.”

17. [Vespasian] said to him, “You have made yourself guilty of two death penalties: first, since I am not a king and you have called me, ‘king;’ and also, if I am a king, why did you not come to me until now?”

18. He said to him, “That which you said, ‘I am
As it is written
If you like, take a look at the verses and see how Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai understood them vs. their contexts.

Serpent
In other words, I need to destroy Jerusalem (the barrel of honey) in order to get rid of the thugs (the snake).

Rav Yosef—and some say, Rabbi Akiva...
Rabbi Akiva is a Tanna close in period to Rabban Yohanan, as opposed to Rav Yosef who is an Amora in Babylon, centuries removed.

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6. **The Talmud**

He said to him, “Do not be troubled; it is a good tiding that has come to you, as it is written (Proverbs 15:30 [ט], ‘a good tiding fattens the bone.’”

27. [Vespasian said to him,] “But what is its remedy?”

28. [Rabban Yohanan responded,] “Bring someone you are displeased with and have him pass in front of you, as it is written (Proverbs 17:22 [ט]), ‘And a lowly spirit dries the bone.’”

29. He did this [and the other shoe] went on.

30. He said to him, “And since you are so wise, until now why did you not come to me?”

31. [Vespasian] said to him, “Didn’t I [already] tell you?”

32. [Vespasian] said to him, “I also [already] told you.”

33. [Vespasian] said to him, “I am leaving and I will send someone else, but ask something that I can give you.”

34. He said to him, “Give me Yavneh and her Sages and the line of Rabban Gamliel and a cure to heal Rabbi Tzadok.”

35. Rav Yosef—and some say, Rabbi Akiva—would read [this verse to be] about this (Isaiah 44:25 [ט]), “He turns back the wise and renders their knowledge foolish.” He should have said to him, “Leave us this time!”

36. And he thought that perhaps that much he would not do, and there would [then] not even be a small salvation.

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**Rabbi Tzadok**

Earlier in the passage, Rabbi Tzadok was fasting so much that he was in danger of death.

6. **Amar loh la ṣeṭṣorer šemot ha-tovah
tobot ḥayoth le-khatavim
(mesiliy, la) šemot ḥayoth
tidshon ḥeẓem**

27. **Ala ma taḵbatu**?

26. **Amar loh la ṣeṭṣorer šemot ha-tovah
tobot ḥayoth le-khatavim
(mesiliy, la) šemot ḥayoth
tidshon ḥeẓem**

6. **אמר ליה לא תצטער שמועה טובות איתה ל بتاريخ (משלי טו, ל) שמועה טובה תדשן עצם**

7. **אלא מאי תקנתיה**

8. **ליתי איניש דלא מיתבא דעתך מיניה ול רחבך דכתיב (משלי יז, כב) ורוח נכאה תיבש**

9. **גרם עבד הכי עייל**

30. **אמר ליה ואמר חכמה יש לך או האדר伝 אאמם לא אחית חלבא**

31. **אמר ליה לא אמרל לך**

32. **אמר ליה אנה נמי אמרל לך**

33. **אמר ליה מזייא אולני ואינו חזרה ממעדורא אליא בעי מוזיא מדית דאתן לך**

34. **אמר ליה תן יבנה חכמה וישמעת דרבן גמליאל ואסימת דמשעיי ליה לברד צדוק**

35. **קר ליה עליה בר תוסף ואיחיותא רב עקארא (עשוייהו מד, כב) משיב חכמה וה biçim ההימן יכלי ארבעה לمؤיר ליה לשבקינהו**

36. **והוא סבר דלמא כולי האי לא עביד והצלה פורתא נמי לא**
Questions from Rabbi Tali Adler

1. In line 1, the text goes out of its way to tell us the familial connection between Abba Sikra and Rabban Yohanan.
   
   *Why do you think it does this? How does it affect each of their motivations and actions here?*

2. In line 5, Abba Sikra feels trapped by his fellow thugs, but Rabban Yohanan thinks he can see a way out.
   
   *What character traits does Rabban Yohanan show in their exchanges?*

3. Rabban Yohanan pretends to be dead in line 8 and then springs to life before Vespasian in line 16, which seems to be a metaphor for Judaism in this moment—thought dead, but soon to spring new life.
   
   *What purpose do you think the thugs at the gate serve to the larger story? Why do they threaten to stab the “corpse”? And how do they persuade them not to?*

4. Rabban Yohanan makes an outlandish claim to Vespasian: that he is the emperor!
   
   *Do you read this as a moment of prophecy? A lucky and audacious guess? A savvy assessment of the direction of Roman politics? How do these different approaches change your reading of Rabban Yohanan in this moment?*

5. The conversation turns sharply in line 20 to Vespasian explaining why Jerusalem had to be destroyed.
   
   *Why do you think Vespasian suddenly starts talking about this? Why does Rabban Yohanan have no response? What do these two characters think of each other at this moment?*

6. In line 22, a secondary voice adds its own comment.
   
   *How does Rav Yosef / Rabbi Akiva assess Rabban Yohanan’s action? Why? What do you think: would their rejoinder have worked in the story’s context and power dynamics?*

7. Vespasian is named emperor and immediately he no longer fits into his shoes in lines 23-24.
   
   *What do you think is the meaning of this metaphor?*

8. Rabban Yohanan is able to explain the cause and solve Vespasian’s problem in lines 26-29.
   
   *How does this affect their relationship? How does it portray Rabban Yohanan?*

9. They have a terse exchange in lines 30-32 where they both reiterate that they have already discussed what needs to be discussed.
   
   *What do you make of this? What is each character thinking in this moment?*

10. *Why does Vespasian decide to give Rabban Yohanan a gift in line 33?*
11. *Why does Rabban Yohanan ask for the things he asks for in line 34—a place for the sages to go (Yavneh), the “line of Rabban Gamliel” (perhaps the house of the patriarch), and healing for Rabbi Tzadok?*

12. Rav Yosef / Rabbi Akiva’s response appears again in line 35.

   *What do they think of Rabban Yohanan’s actions? Do you think the criticism is fair? Why or why not? Is it any more or less fair than when it appeared above?*

13. The Talmud then responds in line 36 and justifies Rabban Yohanan’s actions.

   *Why do you think it does this here but not above?*

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**Take a Step Back**

Finally, ask yourselves the following summary questions:

   a. *What kind of a person is Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai?*
   
   b. *What does he care about?*
   
   c. *How does he interact with the other characters in the story?*
   
   d. *What does the Talmud think of his actions?*
   
   e. *What do you think? Was there anything else Rabban Yohanan could have done?*