



WWW.PROJECTZUG.ORG

Talmudic Personalities

Get to Know the Rabbis

Rabbi Tali Adler

UNIT 1 Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai
SESSION 1 The Death and Resurrection of Judaism

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...

◇ **Source #1**

From “Agada Unbound: Inter-Agadic Characterization of Sages in the Bavli and Implications for Reading Agada,” by Devora Steinmetz, from *Creation and Composition: The Contribution of the Bavli Redactors (Stammaim) to the Aggada* ed. Jeffrey Rubenstein

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 or 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.

◆ **The Talmud**

The Babylonian Talmud or Talmud Bavli is the monolithic masterpiece of ancient Babylonian Jewry. It is built upon the Mishnah (but frequently digresses) and is mostly finished in the 6th century CE. See next note for more details about its layers!

◆ **Tannaim and Amoraim**

Some vocabulary! The Talmud is made up of three layers: (1) Tannaim, sages who lived from roughly 1st-3rd centuries CE, responsible for the Mishnah; (2) Amoraim, sages who lived from roughly 4th-6th centuries CE, who comment and expand upon the earlier material; (3) Stam, the anonymous voice that weaves the sources together and turns them into a literary and logical flow. The main subject of our course are thus four of the earliest Tannaim (late 1st-early 2nd centuries), but we only know about them through the lens of the later layers.

◆ **Rabban**

For reasons that are not totally clear, some rabbis around this period (late 1st-early 2nd centuries) are generally referred to with the title “Rabban,” literally “our rabbi.” It may represent some level of their importance, or it may be a little random. Traditionally, it signifies that they are the *nasi*, the head of the court, but there are some people who are *nesi'im* who do not have this title (e.g. Hillel) and some who do not appear to have been *nesi'im* who do (e.g. Yohanan ben Zakkai!). But calling him “Rabbi” is okay too!

◆ **Babylonian Talmud Gittin**

This is excerpted from a larger story structure about the destruction of the Temple, cut down so we can focus on Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai. But you should read the rest when you get a chance!

◆ **Sikra**

“Sikra” is from the Latin “sicarius” = assassin.

◆ **This**

In the context of the wider story, this is referring to the fact that the thugs burnt down the storehouses to force the Jews to fight the Romans and not make peace, which Abba Sikra now seems to regret.

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  ← click icon to find source on sefaria.com!

<p>תלמוד בבלי גיטין דף נו עמוד א-ב</p> <p>1. אבא סקרא ריש בריוני דירושלים בר אחתיה דרבן יוחנן בן זכאי הוה</p> <p>2. שלח ליה תא בצינעא לגבא</p> <p>3. אתא</p> <p>4. א"ל עד אימת עבדיתו הכי וקטליתו ליה לעלמא בכפנא</p> <p>5. א"ל מאי איעביד דאי אמינא להו מידי קטלו לי</p>	<p>Babylonian Talmud Gittin 56a-56b◆</p> <p>1. Abba Sikra,◆ the head of the thugs of Jerusalem, was the son of Rabban Yohanan Ben Zakkai’s sister.</p> <p>2. [Rabban Yohanan] sent him [a message], “Come privately to me.”</p> <p>3. He came.</p> <p>4. [Rabban Yohanan] said to him, “Until when will you do this◆ and kill the world with famine?”</p> <p>5. He said to him, “What should I do? Since, if I say anything to them, they will kill me.”</p>
---	---

♦ **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. א"ל חזי לי תקנתא לדידי דאיפוק אפשר דהוי הצלה פורתא
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. א"ל נקוט נפשך בקצירי וליתי כולי עלמא ולישיילו בך ואייתי מידי סריא ואגני גבך ולימרו דנה נפשך וליעיילו בך תלמידך ולא ליעול בך איניש אחרינא דלא לרגשן בך דקליל את דאינהו ידעי דחייא קליל ממיתא
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. עביד הכי
8. He did this.
9. נכנס בו רבי אליעזר מצד אחד ורבי יהושע מצד אחר
9. Rabbi Eliezer went in on one side and Rabbi Yehoshua went in on the other side.
10. כי מטו לפיתחא בעו למדקריה
10. When they came to the opening, [the thug gate keepers] wanted to stab him.
11. אמר להו יאמרו רבן דקרו
11. They said to them, "They will say, 'they stabbed their rabbi!'"
12. בעו למדחפיה
12. And [then] they wanted to jostle him.
13. אמר להו יאמרו רבן דחפו
13. They said to them, "They will say, 'they jostled their rabbi!'"
14. פתחו ליה בבא
14. They opened the gate.
15. נפק
15. He went out.
16. כי מטא להתם אמר שלמא עלך מלכא שלמא עלך מלכא
16. He got there [and] said, "Peace to you, O king, peace to you, O king."
17. א"ל מיחייבת תרי קטלא חדא דלאו מלכא אנא וקא קרית לי מלכא ותו אי מלכא אנא עד האידנא אמאי לא אתית לגבאי
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. א"ל דקאמרת לאו מלכא
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.

אנא איברא מלכא את דאי לאו
מלכא את לא מימסרא ירושלים
בידך דכתיב (ישעיהו י, לד)
והלבנון באדיר יפול ואין אדיר
אלא מלך דכתיב (ירמיהו ל,
כא) והיה אדירו ממנו וגו' ואין
לבנון אלא ביהמ"ק שנאמר
(דברים ג, כה) ההר הטוב הזה
והלבנון

19. ודקאמרת אי מלכא אנא
אמאי לא קאתית לגבאי עד
האיזנא בריוני דאית בן לא
שבקינן

20. אמר ליה אילו חבית של
דבש ודרקון כרוך עליה לא
היו שוברין את החבית בשביל
דרקון

21. אישתיק

22. קרי עליה רב יוסף
ואיתימא רבי עקיבא (ישעיהו
מד, כה) משיב חכמים אחר
ודעתם יסכל איבעי ליה למימר
ליה שקלינן צבתא ושקלינן ליה
לדרקון וקטלינן ליה וחביתא
שבקינן לה

23. אדהכי אתי פריסתקא עליה
מרומי אמר ליה קום דמית ליה
קיסר ואמרי הנהו חשיבי דרומי
לאותיבך ברישא

24. הוה סיים חד מסאני בעא
למסימא לאחרינא לא עייל
בעא למשלפא לאידך לא נפק

25. אמר מאי האי

not a king,' you will be a king; since were you not a king, Jerusalem would not be delivered into your hand, as it is written (Isaiah 10:34 [ס]), 'and the Lebanon will fall by a mighty one.' And 'mighty' can only be a king, as it is written (Jeremiah 30:21 [ס]), 'And his mighty one shall be from him.' And Lebanon can only be the Temple, as it is stated (Deuteronomy 3:25 [ס]), 'this goodly mountain and the Lebanon.'

19. And that which you said, 'If I am a king, why did you not come to me until now;' the thugs that we have with us did not allow us."

20. He said to him, "If there was a barrel of honey with a serpent wrapped over it, would one not break the barrel for the sake of [getting rid] of the serpent?"

21. He was silent.

22. Rav Yosef—and some say, Rabbi Akiva—would read [this verse to be] about this (Isaiah 44:25 [ס]), "He turns back the wise and renders their knowledge foolish." He should have said to him, "We take tongs and we take the serpent and kill him and leave the barrel."

23. Meanwhile, a messenger came to him from Rome. He said to him, "Get up, the [reigning] Caesar has died, and those dignitaries of Rome have placed you at the helm."

24. He had put on one of his shoes, [and] wanted to put the other one on. It would not go on. He tried to remove the [first one and] it would not come off.

25. He said, "What is this?"

◇ ...fattens the bone

In other words, your feet are larger because you heard the good news of your ascension!

◇ Rabbu Tzadok

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

26. אמר ליה לא תצטער שמועה טובה אתיא לך דכתיב (משלי טו, ל) שמועה טובה תדשן עצם

27. אלא מאי תקנתיה?

28. ליתי איניש דלא מיתבא דעתך מיניה ולחליף קמך דכתיב (משלי יז, כב) ורוח נכאה תיבש

29. גרם עבד הכי עייל

30. אמר ליה ומאחר דחכמיתו כולי האי עד האידינא אמאי לא אתיתו לגבאי

31. אמר ליה ולא אמרי לך

32. אמר ליה אנא נמי אמרי לך

33. אמר ליה מיזל אזילנא ואינש אחרינא משדרנא אלא בעי מינאי מידי דאתן לך

34. אמר ליה תן לי יבנה וחכמיה ושושילתא דרבן גמליאל ואסוותא דמסיין ליה לרבי צדוק

35. קרי עליה רב יוסף ואיתימא רבי עקיבא (ישעיהו מד, כה) משיב חכמים אהור ודעתם יסכל איבעי למימר ליה לשבקינהו הדא זימנא

36. והוא סבר דלמא כולי האי לא עביד והצלה פורתא נמי לא הוי

26. 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 [כ]), ‘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 [כב]), ‘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. He said to [Vespasian], “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 [כה]), “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.

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?

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?*