

Lessons From 70: Building a Temple of the Mind
Tikkun Leil Shavuot 5780
Rabbi Adam Roffman

Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 56a-b

There were certain zealots among the people of Jerusalem. The Sages said to them: Let us go out and make peace with the Romans. But the zealots did not allow them to do this. The zealots said to the Sages: Let us go out and engage in battle against the Romans. But the Sages said to them: You will not be successful. It would be better for you to wait until the siege is broken. In order to force the residents of the city to engage in battle, the zealots arose and burned down these storehouses of wheat and barley, and there was a general famine.

Abba Sikkara was the leader of the zealots of Jerusalem and the son of the sister of Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai. Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai sent a message to him: Come to me in secret. Abba Sikkara came, and Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai said to him: Until when will you do this and kill everyone through starvation? Abba Sikkara said to him: What can I do, for if I say something to them they will kill me.

Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai said to him: Show me a method so that I will be able to leave the city, and it is possible that through this there will be some small salvation.

Abba Sikkara said to him: This is what you should do: Pretend to be sick, and have everyone come and ask about your welfare, so that word will spread about your ailing condition. Afterward bring something putrid and place it near you, so that people will say that you have died and are decomposing. And then, have your students enter to bring you to burial, and let no one else come in so that the zealots not notice that you are still light. As the zealots know that a living person is lighter than a dead person.

Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai did this. Rabbi Eliezer entered from one side and Rabbi Yehoshua from the other side to take him out. When they arrived at the entrance of the city on the inside, the guards, who were of the faction of the zealots, wanted to pierce him with their swords in order to ascertain that he was actually dead, as was the common practice. Abba Sikkara said to them: The Romans will say that they pierce even their teacher...The guards then opened the gate and he was taken out.

When Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai reached there, i.e., the Roman camp, he said: Greetings to you, the king; greetings to you, the king. Vespasian said to him: You are liable for two death penalties, one because I am not a king and yet you call me king, and furthermore, if I am a king, why didn't you come to me until now?

Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai said to him: As for what you said about yourself: I am not a king, in truth, you are a king, if not now, then in the future. As if you are not a king, Jerusalem will not be handed over into your hand, as it is written: "And the Lebanon shall fall by a mighty one" ([Isaiah 10:34](#)). And "mighty one" means only a king, as it is written: "And their mighty one shall be of themselves, and their ruler shall proceed from the midst of them" ([Jeremiah 30:21](#)), indicating that "mighty one" parallels "ruler." And "Lebanon" means



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only the Temple, as it is stated: “That good mountain and the Lebanon” ([Deuteronomy 3:25](#)).

And as for what you said with your second comment: If I am a king why didn't you come to me until now, there are zealots among us who did not allow us to do this.

Understanding that Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai was prepared to ask him not to destroy the Temple, **Vespasian said to him: If there is a barrel of honey and a snake is wrapped around it, wouldn't they break the barrel in order to kill the snake?...**

In the meantime, as they were talking, a messenger arrived from Rome, and said to him: Rise, for the emperor has died, and the noblemen of Rome plan to appoint you as their leader and make you the next emperor. At that time Vespasian was wearing only one shoe, and when he tried to put on the other one, it would not go on his foot. He then tried to remove the other shoe that he was already wearing, but it would not come off. He said: What is this?

Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai **said to him: Be not distressed or troubled, for good tidings have reached you, as it is written: “Good tidings make the bone fat” ([Proverbs 15:30](#))**, and your feet have grown fatter out of joy and satisfaction.

Vespasian said to him: **But what is the remedy?** What must I do in order to put on my shoe? Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai **said to him: Have someone with whom you are displeased come and pass before you, as it is written: “A broken spirit dries the bones” ([Proverbs 17:22](#))**. He did this, and his shoe went on his foot.

Vespasian then **said to Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai: I will be going to Rome to accept my new position, and I will send someone else in my place to continue besieging the city and waging war against it. But before I leave, ask something of me that I can give you.**

Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai **said to him: Give me Yavne and its Sages** and do not destroy it, and spare the dynasty of Rabban Gamliel and do not kill them as if they were rebels...

Avot D'Rabbi Natan, Chapter 4

Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai was once leaving Jerusalem. Rabbi Yehoshua was walking behind him and saw the Temple in ruins. Rabbi Yehoshua said: Woe unto us for the destruction of the Temple, the place of atonement for the sins of Israel. He said to him: My son, do not worry—we have another form of atonement like it. What is it? Acts of loving kindness. As it is written: For I desire acts of loving kindness and not sacrifice (Hosea 6:6).