



Yavneh or Usha: Building Out of the Ruins
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אבא סקרא ריש בריוני דירושלים בר אַחתייה דרבן יוחנן בן זכאי הוה שלח ליה תא בצנינעא לגבאי אתא אמר ליה עד אימת עבדיתו הכי וקטליתו ליה לעלמא בכפנא אמר ליה מאי איעביד דאי אמינא להו מידי קטלו לי אמר ליה חזי לי תקנתא לדידי דאיפוק אפשר דהוי הצלה פורתא אמר ליה נקוט נפשך בקצירי וליתו כולי עלמא ולישיילו בך ואייתי מידי סריא ואגני גבך ולימרו דנח נפשך וליעיילו בך תלמידך ולא ליעול בך איניש אחרינא דלא לרגשון בך דקליל את דאינהו ידעי דחייא קליל ממיתא עביד הכי נכנס בו רבי אליעזר מצד אחד ורבי יהושע מצד אחר כי מטו לפיתחא בעו למדקריה אמר להו יאמרו רבן דקרו בעו למדחפיה אמר להו יאמרו רבן דחפו פתחו ליה בבא נפק כי מטא להתם אמר שלמא עלך מלכא שלמא עלך מלכא אמר ליה מיחייבת תרי (קטלא) [קטלי] חדא דלאו מלכא אנא וקא קרית לי מלכא ותו אי מלכא אנא עד האינדנא אמאי לא אתית לגבאי אמר ליה דקאמרת לאו מלכא אנא איברא מלכא את דאי לאו מלכא את לא מימסרא ירושלים בידך דכתיב והלבנון באדיר יפול ואין אדיר אלא מלך דכתיב והיה אדירו ממנו וגו' ואין לבנון אלא בית המקדש שנאמר החר הטוב הזה והלבנון ודקאמרת אי מלכא אנא אמאי לא קאתית לגבאי עד האינדנא בריוני דאית בן לא שבקינן אמר ליה אילו חבית של דבש ודרקון פרוף עליה לא היו שוברין את החבית בשביל דרקון אישתיק קרי עליה רב יוסף ואיתימא רבי עקיבא משיב חכמים אחר ודעתם יסכל איבעי ליה למימר ליה שקלינן צבתא ושקלינן ליה לדרקון וקטלינן ליה וחביתא שבקינן לה אדהכי אתא פריסתקא עליה מרומי אמר ליה קום דמית ליה קיסר ואמרי הנהו חשיבי דרומי לאותיבך ברישא הנה סיים חד (מסאני) [מסאניה] בעא למסיימה לאחרינא לא עייל בעא למישלפיה לאידך לא נפק אמר מאי האי אמר ליה לא תצטער שמועה טובה אתיא לך דכתיב שמועה טובה תדשן עצם אלא מאי תקנתיה לייתי איניש דלא מיתבא דעתך מיניה ולחליף קמך דכתיב ורוח נכאה תיבש גרם עבד הכי עייל אמר ליה ומאחר דחכמיתו כולי האי עד האינדנא אמאי לא אתיתו לגבאי אמר ליה ולא אמרי לך אמר ליה אנא נמי אמרי לך אמר ליה מיזל אוזילנא ואינש אחרינא משדרנא אלא בעי מינאי מידי דאתן לך אמר ליה תן לי יבנה וחכמיה ושושילתא דרבן גמליאל ואסוותא דמסיין ליה לרבי צדוק קרי עליה רב יוסף ואיתימא רבי עקיבא משיב חכמים אחר ודעתם יסכל איבעי למימר ליה לשבקינהו הדא זימנא והוא סבר דלמא כולי האי לא עביד והצלה פורתא נמי לא הוי

The Gemara relates: Abba Sikkara was the leader of the zealots [biryonei] 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. He 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 wanted at least to push him to see whether he was still alive, in which case he would cry out on account of the pushing. Abba Sikkara said to them: They will say that they push 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 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 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 [derakon] is wrapped around it, wouldn't they break the barrel in order to kill the snake? In similar fashion, I am forced to destroy the city of Jerusalem in order to kill the zealots barricaded within it. Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai was silent and did not answer. In light

of this, Rav Yosef later read the following verse about him, and some say that it was Rabbi Akiva who applied the verse to Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai: "I am the Lord... Who turns wise men backward and makes their knowledge foolish" (Isaiah 44:25). As Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai should have said the following to Vespasian in response: In such a case, we take tongs, remove the snake, and kill it, and in this way we leave the barrel intact. So too, you should kill the rebels and leave the city as it is.

In the meantime, as they were talking, a messenger [feristaka] 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 said to him: Since you are so wise, why didn't you come to see me until now? Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai said to him: But didn't I already tell you? Vespasian said to him: I also told you what I had to say.

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, and lastly give me doctors to heal Rabbi Tzadok. Rav Yosef read the following verse about him, and some say that it was Rabbi Akiva who applied the verse to Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai: "I am the Lord... Who turns wise men backward and makes their knowledge foolish" (Isaiah 44:25), as he should have said to him to leave the Jews alone this time.

And why didn't Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai make this request? He maintained that Vespasian might not do that much for him, and there would not be even a small amount of salvation. Therefore, he made only a modest request, in the hope that he would receive at least that much.

B. Talmud, Gittin 56a-56b

בְּשִׁלְפֵי הַשְּׂמֵד נִתְּכַנְּסוּ רַבּוֹתֵינוּ לְאוֹשָׁא, וְאֵלּוּ הֵן: רַבֵּי יְהוּדָה וְרַבֵּי נְחֵמְיָה, רַבֵּי מֵאִיר וְרַבֵּי יוֹסֵי וְרַבֵּי שְׁמַעוֹן בֶּן יוֹחָאִי וְרַבֵּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר בֶּן שֵׁל רַבֵּי יוֹסֵי הַגָּלִילִי וְרַבֵּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר בֶּן יַעֲקֹב, שְׁלַחוּ אֶצֶל זְקֵנֵי הַגָּלִיל וְאָמְרוּ כָּל מִי שֶׁהוּא לָמַד יָבֹא וְלָמַד, וְכֹל מִי שֶׁאִינוֹ לָמַד יָבֹא וְיִלְמוּד.
נִתְּכַנְּסוּ וְלָמְדוּ וְעָשׂוּ כָּל צְרֻכֵיהֶוֹן, כִּיּוֹן שֶׁהִגִּיעַ זְמַנָּם לְהַפְטָרָה, אָמְרוּ מְקוֹם שֶׁנִּתְּקַבְּלָנוּ בְּתוֹכוֹ אָנוּ מְנַיְחִים אוֹתוֹ רִיקָם, חָלְקוּ כְּבוֹד לְרַבֵּי יְהוּדָה שֶׁהָיָה בֶּן עִיר, וְלֹא שֶׁהָיָה גְדוֹל מֵהֶם בְּתוֹרָה. אֶלְאִי מְקוֹמוֹ שֶׁל אָדָם הוּא מְכַבְּדוֹ.

At the end of the persecution, after the death of Hadrian, emperor of Rome, who had outlawed Torah study and made other repressive decrees, and who had crushed the Bar Kokhva revolt. our Rabbis assembled in Usha; they were: Rabbi Yehuda, Rabbi Nehemya, Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yosei, Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai, Rabbi Eliezer son of Rabbi Yosei HaGelili, and Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov. They sent to the elders of the Galilee and said: 'Anyone who is learned, let him come and teach, and anyone who is not learned, let him come and study.' They assembled, studied, and did everything that they needed to do. When the time arrived to take their leave, they said: 'Are we to leave empty the place in which we were received?' Will we leave without honoring and expressing our appreciation for the residents of the host city? They accorded honor to Rabbi Yehuda, who was a resident of the city; not that he was greater than they were in Torah, but rather because a person's place entitles him to honor.

Shir HaShirim Rabbah 2:5