1 SIMEON THE RIGHTEOUS WAS AMONG THE LAST OF THE MEN OF THE GREAT ASSEMBLY. HE USED TO SAY: ON THREE THINGS THE WORLD STANDS – ON THE TORAH, ON THE TEMPLE SERVICE, AND ON ACTS OF LOVINGKINDNESS. ON THE TORAH – How so? Lo, it says, For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings (Hos. 6: 6). Hence we see that the burnt offering is the most beloved of sacrifices, for the burnt offering is entirely consumed by the flames, as it is said, And the priest shall make the whole smoke on the altar (Lev. 1: 9), and elsewhere it says, And Samuel took a sucking lamb, and offered it for a whole burnt offering unto the Lord (I Sam. 7: 9). But the study of Torah is more beloved by God than burnt offerings. For if a man studies Torah he comes to know the will of God, as it is said, Then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord, and find the will of God (Prov. 2: 5). Hence, when a sage sits and expounds to the congregation, Scripture accounts it to him as though he had offered up fat and blood on the altar.

If two scholars sit and study Torah and before them passes a bridal procession or the bier of a dead man: if there are enough in the procession they ought not to neglect their study, but if not let them get up and cheer and hail the bride, or accompany the dead. Once Rabbi Tarfon sat teaching his disciples, and a bride passed before him. He called her and brought her into his home, and commanded his mother and wife: “Wash her, anoint her, adorn her, and dance before her until she leaves for her husband’s house.”

2 Once as Rabbi Judah bar Ilai sat teaching his disciples, a bride passed by. So he took myrtle twigs in his hand and cheered her until the bride passed out of his sight.
Another time as Rabbi Judah bar Ilai sat teaching his disciples, a bride passed by. "What was that?" he asked them. "A bride passing by," they replied. "My sons," he said to them, "get up and attend upon the bride. For thus we find concerning the Holy One, blessed be He, that he attended upon a bride, as it is said, And the Lord God built the rib (Gen. 2:22). If He attended upon a bride, how much more so we!" And where do we find that the Holy One, blessed be He, attended upon a bride? For it is said, And the Lord God built the rib. Now, in the sea towns they call plairting binyata. Hence we learn that the Holy One, blessed be He, fixed Eve’s hair and outfitted her as a bride and brought her to Adam, as it is said, And He brought her unto the man (ibid.). The first time the Holy One blessed be He, acted as best man for Adam; henceforth one must get a best man for himself. It is said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh (Gen. 2:23). The first time Eve was brought forth from Adam; henceforth one shall betroth his fellow’s daughter.

ON THE TEMPLE SERVICE – How so? So long as the Temple service is maintained, the world is a blessing to its inhabitants and the rains come down in season, as it is said, To love the Lord your God, and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul, that I will give the rain of your land in its season, the former rain and the latter rain . . . and I will give grass in thy fields for thy cattle (Deut. 11:13-15). But when the Temple service is not maintained, the world is not a blessing to its inhabitants and the rains do not come down in season, as it is said, Take heed to yourselves, lest your heart be deceived . . . and He shut up the heaven, so that there shall be no rain (Deut. 11:16-17).

And so, too, it says, I pray you, consider from this day and forward—before a stone was laid upon a stone in the temple of the Lord, through all that time, when one came to a heap of twenty measures, there were but ten; when one came to the wine vat to draw out fifty press—measures, there were but twenty (Hag. 2:15-16). Why is it not said of the wine vat, “Twenty measures, there were but ten,” as it is said of the wheat, Twenty measures (etc.)? Because the (yield of the) wine vat is a better sign (of the year’s fortune) than wheat. This is to teach thee that whenever wine suffers it is a bad sign for the remainder of the year.
Said Israel to the Holy One, blessed be He: "Master of the Universe, why didst Thou do this to us?" The Holy Spirit replied: "Ye looked for much, and, lo, it came to little . . . because of My house that lieth waste, while ye run every man for his own house (Hag. 1:9). But if you will busy yourselves with the service of the Temple, I shall bless you as in the beginning; as it is said, Consider, I pray you . . . from the four and twentieth day of the ninth month, even from the day that the foundation of the Lord's temple was laid . . . Is the seed yet in the barn? Yea, the vine, and the fig tree, and the pomegranate, and the olive tree hath not brought forth from this day will I bless you" (Hag. 2: 18-19). Thus thou dost learn that there is no service more beloved of the Holy One, blessed be He, than the Temple service.

ON ACTS OF LOVING-KINDNESS – how so? Lo, it says, For I desire mercy and not sacrifice (Hos. 6: 6). From the very first the world was created only with mercy, as it is said, For I have said, The world is built with mercy; in the very heavens Thou dost establish Thy faithfulness (Ps. 89: 3). Once as Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai was coming forth from Jerusalem, Rabbi Joshua followed after him and beheld the Temple in ruins. "Woe unto us!" Rabbi Joshua cried, "that this, the place where the iniquities of Israel were atoned for, is laid waste!" "My son," Rabban Johanan said to him, "be not grieved; we have another atonement as effective as this. And what is it? It is acts of loving-kindness, as it is said, For I desire mercy and not sacrifice” (Hos. 6:6). For thus we find concerning Daniel, that greatly beloved man, that he was engaged in acts of loving-kindness all his days. For it is said of him, Thy God whom thou servest continually, He will deliver thee (Dan. 6: 17). Now, what were the acts of loving-kindness in which Daniel was engaged? Canst thou say that he offered burnt offerings and sacrifices in Babylon? Verily it had been said, Take heed to thyself that thou offer not thy burnt offerings in every place that thou seest; but in the place which the Lord shall choose in one of thy tribes, there shalt thou offer thy burnt offerings (Deut. 12: 13-14). What then were the acts of loving—kindness in which he was engaged? He used to outfit the bride and make her rejoice, accompany the dead, give a perutah to the poor, and pray three times a day—and his prayer was received with favor; as it is said, And when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house—now his windows were open in his upper chamber toward Jerusalem—and he knelled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime (Dan. 6: 11).
Now, when Vespasian came to destroy Jerusalem he said to the inhabitants: "Fools, why do you seek to destroy this city and why do you seek to burn the Temple? For what do I ask of you but that you send me one bow or one arrow, and I shall go off from you?" They said to him: "Even as we went forth against the first two who were here before thee and slew them, so shall we go forth against thee and slay thee." When Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai heard this, he sent for the men of Jerusalem and said to them: "My children, why do you destroy this city and why do you seek to burn the Temple? For what is it that he asks of you? Verily he asks naught of you save one bow or one arrow, and he will go off from you." They said to him: "Even as we went forth against the two before him and slew them, so shall we go forth against him and slay him."

Vespasian had men stationed inside the walls of Jerusalem. Every word which they overheard they would write down, attach (the message) to an arrow, and shoot it over the wall, saying that Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai was one of the Emperor's friends. Now, after Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai had spoken to them one day, two and three days, and they still would not attend to him, he sent for his disciples, for Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua. "My sons," he said to them, "arise and take me out of here. Make a coffin for me that I might lie in it." Rabbi Eliezer took hold of the head end of it, Rabbi Joshua took hold of the foot; and they began carrying him as the sun set, until they reached the gates of Jerusalem. "Who is this?" the gatekeepers demanded. "It's a dead man," they replied. "Do you not know that the dead may not be held overnight in Jerusalem?" "If it's a dead man," the gatekeepers said to them, "take him out." So they took him out and continued carrying him until they reached Vespasian.

They opened the coffin and Rabban Johanan stood up before him. "Art thou Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai?" Vespasian inquired; "tell me, what may I give thee?" "I ask naught of thee," Rabban Johanan replied, "save Jabneh, where I might go and teach my disciples and there establish a prayer [house] and perform all the commandments?" "Go," Vespasian said to him, "and whatever thou wishest to do, do."
Said Rabban Johanan to him: "By thy leave, may I say some thing to thee?" "Speak," Vespasian said to him. Said Rabban Iohanan to him: "Lo, thou art about to be appointed king." "How dost thou know this?" Vespasian asked. Rabban Johanan replied: "This has been handed down to us, that the Temple will not be surrendered to a commoner, but to a king; as it is said, And he shall cut down the thic kets of the forest with iron, and Lebanon shall fall by a mighty one" (Isa. 10: 34). It was said: No more than a day, or two or three days, passed before messengers reached him from his city (announcing) that the emperor was dead and that he had been elected to succeed as king."

A catapult was brought to him, drawn up against the wall of Jerusalem. Boards of cedar were brought to him which he set into the catapult, and with these he struck against the wall until he made a breach in it. A swine’s head was brought and set into the catapult, and this he hurled toward the (sacrificial) limbs which were on the altar. It was then that Jerusalem was captured. Meanwhile Rabban Johanan ben Zakkaï sat and waited trembling, the way Eli had sat and waited; as it is said, Lo, Eli sat upon his seat by the wayside watching; for his heart trembled for the ark of God (I Sam. 4: 13). When Rabban Johanan ben Zakkaï heard that Jerusalem was destroyed and the Temple was up in flames, he tore his clothing, and his disciples tore their clothing, and they wept, crying aloud and mourning. It says, Open thy doors, O Lebanon, that the fire may devour thy cedars (Zech. 11: 1). This refers to the high priests who were in the Temple, who took their keys in their hands and threw them up to the sky, saying to the Holy One, blessed be He: "Master of the Universe, here are Thy keys which Thou didst hand over to us, for we have not been trustworthy custodians to do the King’s work and to eat of the King’s table. Now the keys are returned to you and they leapt into the flames."

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the twelve tribes wept, crying aloud and mourning. And it says, Wail, O cypress tree, for the cedar is fallen, because the glorious ones are spoiled (Zech. 11:2). Wail, O cypress tree, refers to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the twelve tribes. For the cedar is fallen refers to the Temple. Because the glorious ones are spoiled refers to Israel. Wail, O ye oaks of Bashan refers to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. For the strong forest has come down refers to the Holy of Holies. Hark, the wailing of the shepherds, for their glory is spoiled (Zech. 11:3.) refers to David and Solomon, his son. Hark, the roaring of young lions, for the thickets of the Jordan are spoiled (ibid.) refers to Elijah and Elisha.
In three things did the Holy One, blessed be He, distinguish men from each other, to wit, in voice, in taste, and in appearance. In voice: what is that? This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, distinguished men’s voices from each other. For if the Holy One, blessed be He, had not distinguished men’s voices from each other, there would have been much unchastity in the world — when a man would go out of his house, another would come and seize his wife in his own home. Therefore the Holy One, blessed be He, distinguished men’s voices from each other: the voice of one is not like the voice of another.

In taste: what is that? This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, distinguished men’s tastes from each other. For if the Holy One, blessed be He, had not distinguished men’s tastes from each other, they would have envied one another. Therefore the Holy One, blessed be He, distinguished men’s tastes from each other: the taste of one is not like another’s, and the other’s taste is not like the first’s.

In appearance: what is that? This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, distinguished men’s appearances from each other. For if the Holy One, blessed be He, had not distinguished appearances from each other, the women of Israel could not recognize their husbands and men could not recognize their wives. Therefore the Holy One, blessed be He, distinguished appearances from each other.