

The Myth/Legend of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai

(source sheet by Evan Susman)

אבא סקרא ריש בריוני דירושלים בר אחתיה דרבן יוחנן בן זכאי הוה שלח ליה
תא בצניעא 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

§ The Gemara relates: **Abba Sikkara was the leader of the zealots [biryone] 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.**

אמר ליה נקוט נפשך בקצירי וליתו כולי עלמא ולישטילו בך ואיתי מידי סריא
ואגני גבך ולימרו דנח נפשך וליעילו בך תלמידך ולא ליעול בך איניש אחרינא
דלא לרגשון בך דקליל את דאינהו ידעי דחייא קליל ממיתא

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.

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 גבא נפק

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**.

כִּי מָטָא לְהַתָּם אָמַר שְׁלֵמָא עֲלֵךְ מַלְכָא שְׁלֵמָא עֲלֵךְ מַלְכָא אָמַר לִיה מִיחֵיבַת תְּרִי
(קְטֹלָא) [קְטֹלִי] חָדָא דְלָאוּ מַלְכָא אָנָּא וְקָא קְרִית לִי מַלְכָא וְתוּ אִי מַלְכָא אָנָּא עַד
הָאִידְנָא אֲמַאי לֹא אֲתִית לְגַבַּאי אָמַר לִיה דְקָאֲמַרְתָּ לָאוּ מַלְכָא אָנָּא

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,**

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אִיבְרָא מַלְכָא אֲתָ דְאִי לָאוּ מַלְכָא אֲתָ לֹא מִימְסָרָא יְרוּשָׁלַיִם בְּיַדְךָ דְכָתִיב וְהִלְבֵּנוּן בְּאֲדִיר
יְפוּל וְאִין אֲדִיר אֲלֵא מְלָךְ דְכָתִיב וְהָיָה אֲדִירוּ מִמֶּנּוּ וְגו' וְאִין לְבָנוּן אֲלֵא בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ
שְׁנֶאֱמַר הָהָר הַטּוֹב הַזֶּה וְהִלְבֵּנוּן וְדְקָאֲמַרְתָּ אִי מַלְכָא אָנָּא אֲמַאי לֹא קָאֲתִית לְגַבַּאי עַד
הָאִידְנָא בְּרִיוֹנֵי דְאִית בֵּן לֹא שְׁבָקִין

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 **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.**

אָמַר לִיה אִילוּ חֲבִית שֶׁל דְּבִשׁ וְדַרְקוֹן כְּרוּךְ עָלֶיהָ לֹא הָיוּ שׁוֹבְרִין אֶת הַחֲבִית בְּשָׁבִיל
דְּרַקוֹן אִישְׁתִּיק קְרִי עָלֶיהָ רַב יוֹסֵף וְאִיתִימָא רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא מְשִׁיב חַכְמִים אַחוֹר וְדַעְתָּם
יִסְכַּל אִיבְעֵי לִיה לְמִימַר לִיה שְׁקֵלִין צְבָתָא וְשְׁקֵלִין לִיה לְדַרְקוֹן וְקֹטְלִין לִיה וְחֲבִיתָא
שְׁבָקִין לָהּ

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.

אֲדַהְכִי אֶתָּא פְּרִיסְתָּקָא עֲלֵיהּ מְרוֹמֵי אֲמַר לֵיהּ קוּם דְּמִית לֵיהּ קִיסָר וְאֲמַרֵי הִנְהוּ חֲשִׁיבֵי
דְּרוּמֵי לְאוֹתֵיבְךָ בְּרִישָׁא הֵוָּה סִיִּים חַד (מסאני) [מְסַאנִיָּה] בְּעָא לְמַסְיִימָה לְאַחְרִינָא לָא
עֵיל בְּעָא לְמִשְׁלָפִיָּה לְאִידָךְ לָא נְפַק אֲמַר מֵאֵי הָאֵי

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?**

אֲמַר לֵיהּ לָא תַצְטַעַר שְׁמוּעָה טוֹבָה אֶתִּיא לָךְ דְּכְתִיב שְׁמוּעָה טוֹבָה תִּדְשֵׁן עַצְם אֶלָּא
מֵאֵי תִקְנִתִּיהּ לִיתִי אִינִישׁ דְּלֵא מִיתְבָּא דְּעֵתְךָ מִינִיָּה וְלַחְלִיף קַמָּךְ דְּכְתִיב וְרוּחַ נְכֹאָה
תִּיבֵשׁ גְּרָם עֲבַד הֵכִי עֵיל אֲמַר לֵיהּ וּמֵאַחַר דְּחֻכְמִיתוּ כּוּלֵי הָאֵי עַד הָאִידָנָא אֲמַאי לָא
אֶתִּיתוּ לְגַבְאֵי אֲמַר לֵיהּ וְלֵא אֲמַרֵי לָךְ אֲמַר לֵיהּ אֲנָא נְמִי אֲמַרֵי לָךְ

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.**

אמר ליה מיזל אזילנא ואינש אחרינא משדרנא אלא בעי מינאי מידי דאתן לך אמר ליה
תן לי יבנה וחכמיה ושושילתא דרבן גמליאל ואסוותא דמסין ליה לרבי צדוק קרי עליה
רב יוסף ואיתימא רבי עקיבא משיב חכמים אחור ודעתם יסכל איבעי למימר ליה
לשבקינהו הדא זימנא

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**.

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

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.