

Rabbi Yohanan Ben Zakkai: From Bet Mikdash to Bet Midrash

Timeline

66 - 70 Great Revolt

70 Destruction of the Temple

73 Fall of Masada

Yavne and Rabban Yohanan Ben Zakkai's innovations

115 – 117 Trajan Revolt in the Diaspora

132-135 Bar Kokhba Revolt

Jewish Life Moves North, Jerusalem off limits to Jews

Sanhedrin moves north: Usha, Shfaram, Bet Shearim, Zippori, Tiberias

200 Redaction of the Mishnah by Rabbi Judah the Prince

Generations of the Tannaim

(Dates are approximate)

Generation #1 40 -80 CE Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel I

Generation #2 80 -110 Rabban Gamliel II, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananiah, Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus ("HaGadol")

Generation #3 110 -135 Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Yishmael, Rabbi Yehuda ben Bava, Rabbi Yosi HaGalili, Elisha ben Abuya

Generation #4 135 -170 Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai, Rabbi Yehudah bar Ilai

Generation #5 170-200 Rabbi Judah the Prince (HaNasi, Rebbe), Rabbi Shimon ben Halafta, Sumkhos

Sanhedrin Stations:

Jerusalem, Yavneh, Usha, Shfaram, Bet Shearim, Zippori, Tiberias

Where did the Rabbis live?

The Sages taught: The verse states: "Justice, justice, shall you follow." This teaches that one should follow the Sages to the academy where they are found. For example, follow after Rabbi Eliezer to Lod, after Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai to Beror Ḥayil, after Rabbi Yehoshua to Peki'in, after Rabban Gamliel to Yavne, after Rabbi Akiva to Bnei Brak, after Rabbi Matya to Rome [*Romi*], after Rabbi Ḥananya ben Teradyon to Sikhnei, after Rabbi Yosei to Tzippori, after Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteira to Netzivin, after Rabbi Yehoshua to the exile [*gola*], i.e., Babylonia, after Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi to Beit She'arim, and after the Sages in the time of the Temple to the Chamber of Hewn Stone. (Sanhedrin 32)

Rabban Yohanan Ben Zakkai: Jerusalem and Yavneh

The Sages said about Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai, the teacher of Rabbi Eliezer: In all his days he never engaged in idle conversation; and he never walked four cubits without engaging in Torah study and without donning phylacteries; and no person ever preceded him into the study hall. . .and he never said anything that he did not hear from his teacher; and he never said to his students that the time has arrived to arise and leave the study hall except on Passover eves, Yom Kippur eves (Sukkah 28)

They said about Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai that he would sit in the street adjacent to the Temple Mount in the shade of the Sanctuary and expound to a large number of people all day long. (Pesachim 26)

שמונים זוג של תלמידים היה לו להלל הזקן גדול שבהן יונתן בן עוזיאל והקטן שבהן רבן יוחנן בן זכאי פעם אחת חלה ונכנסו כולן לבקרו עמד לו רבן יוחנן בן זכאי בחצר אמר להן היכן הוא הקטן שבכם שהוא אב לחכמה ואב לדורות (ירושלמי נדרים פרק ה הלכה ו)

Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai had five disciples and they were these: Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah, Rabbi Yose, the priest, Rabbi Shimon ben Nethaneel and Rabbi Eleazar ben Arach. He [Rabbi Johanan] used to list their outstanding virtues: Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus is a plastered cistern which loses not a drop; Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah happy is the woman that gave birth to him; Rabbi Yose, the priest, is a pious man; Rabbi Simeon ben Nethaneel is one that fears sin, And Rabbi Eleazar ben Arach is like a spring that [ever] gathers force. (Pirkei Avot 2:8)

When they all left, Elazar said: I am going to Damasit, a beautiful place with good, sweet water. They said: We will go to Yavneh, a place where there is an abundance of scholars who love the Torah. So he went to Damasit, the beautiful place with good, sweet water, and his reputation in Torah study diminished. And they went to Yavneh, the place where there was an abundance of scholars who

all loved the Torah, and their reputations in Torah study grew. (Avot deRabbi Natan 14)

Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh happened to come there, to Deyomset, and he was drawn after them, and his Torah learning was forgotten. When he returned, he stood to read from a Torah scroll and was supposed to read the verse: "This month shall be for you [*haḥodesh hazeh lakhem*]" (Exodus 12:2), Have their hearts become deaf [*haḥeresh haya libbam*], interchanging the similar letters *reish* for *dalet*, *yod* for *zayin*, and *beit* for *khaf*. The Sages prayed and asked for God to have mercy on him, and his learning was restored. (Shabbat 147)

The Importance of the Temple and Jerusalem: Aliya LaRegel

ת"ר אבן טוען היתה בירושלים כל מי שאבדה לו אבידה נפנה לשם וכל מי שמוצא אבידה נפנה לשם זה עומד ומכריז וזה עומד ונותן סימנין ונוטלה וזו היא ששנינו צאו וראו אם נמחת אבן הטוען:

The Sages taught in a *baraita*: There was a Claimant's Stone in Jerusalem, and anyone who lost an item would be directed there and anyone who found a lost item would be directed there. This finder would stand and proclaim his find and that owner would stand and provide its distinguishing marks and take the item. And that is the place about which we learned in a mishna (*Ta'anit* 19a): Go and see if the Claimant's Stone has been obscured by the rising water. Bava Metzia 28b)

Winds of War

The Roman authorities then sent Vespasian Caesar against the Jews. He came and laid siege to Jerusalem for three years. There were at that time in Jerusalem these three wealthy people: Nakdimon ben Guryon, ben Kalba Savua, and ben Tzitzit HaKesat.. One of them said to the leaders of the city: I will feed the residents with wheat and barley. And one of them said to leaders of the city: I will provide the residents with wine, salt, and oil. And one of them said to the leaders of the city: I will supply the residents with wood.. 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. the zealots arose and burned down these storehouses [*ambare]* of wheat and barley, and there was a general famine. . .

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 Yohanan 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. (Gittin 56)

And after Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai said this [to them] day after day, and saw that they would not accept his advice, he sent for his students, Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua, and said to them: My sons, take me out of this place! Make me a coffin, and I will sleep in it. So Rabbi Eliezer held [the coffin] on one end, and Rabbi Yehoshua held it (on the other, and they carried him until the sun set, right up to the gates of Jerusalem. The gatekeepers said to them: What is this? They replied: A dead body – and you know that a corpse cannot remain overnight in Jerusalem. They said: If that is a dead body, go ahead and take it out [of the city]). So they took him out (and they were carrying him until sunset) until they came to Vespasian, and they opened the coffin, and [Rabbi Yohanan] got up and stood before him. He said: So you are Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai. Ask for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you. He replied: I ask nothing from you except for Yavneh. I will go there and teach my students, and I will establish prayer, and I will do all the *mitzvot* [mentioned in the Torah]. [Vespasian] replied: Go. All that you wish to do, you may do. (Avot deRabbi Natan 4)

While Jerusalem was being taken, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai was sitting and waiting, and he trembled (before God), just as Eli sat and watched, as it says (I Samuel 4:13), “There was Eli, sitting on a seat on the side of the road, waiting, and his heart trembled because of the Ark of God.” When Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai heard that Jerusalem was destroyed and the Holy Temple was burning in flames, he tore his clothes, and his students tore their clothes, and they cried and screamed and lamented. (Avot deRabbi Natan 4)

How to Mourn

Once, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, left Jerusalem, and Rabbi Yehoshua followed after him. And he saw the Holy Temple destroyed. [Rabbi Yehoshua said: Woe to us, for this is destroyed –] the place where all of Israel’s sins are forgiven!. [Rabbi Yohanan] said to him: My son, do not be distressed, for we have a form of atonement just like it. And what is it? Acts of kindness, as it says (Psalms 89:3), “For I desire kindness, not a well-being offering.” (Avot deRabbi Natan 4)

When the Temple was destroyed a second time, there was an increase in the number of ascetics among the Jews, whose practice was to not eat meat and to not drink wine. Rabbi Yehoshua joined them to discuss their practice. He said to them: My children, for what reason do you not eat meat and do you not drink wine? They said to him: Shall we eat meat, from which offerings are sacrificed upon the altar, and now the altar has ceased to exist? Shall we drink wine, which is poured as a libation upon the altar, and now the altar has ceased to exist?

Rabbi Yehoshua said to them: If so, we will not eat bread either, since the meal-offerings that were offered upon the altar have ceased. They replied: You are correct. It is possible to subsist with produce. He said to them: We will not eat produce either, since the bringing of the first fruits have ceased. They replied: You are correct. We will no longer eat the produce of the seven species from which the first fruits were brought, as it is possible to subsist with other produce. He said to them: If so, we will not drink water, since the water libation has ceased. They were silent.

Rabbi Yehoshua said to them: My children, come, and I will tell you how we should act. To not mourn at all is impossible, as the decree was already issued. But to mourn excessively impossible, as the Sages do not issue a decree upon the public unless a majority of the public is able to abide by it.

Rabbi Yehoshua continues: Rather, this is what the Sages said: A person may plaster his house with plaster, but he must leave over a small amount in it without plaster to remember the destruction of the Temple. . . (Bava Batra 60)

What Did RYBZ Accomplish in Yavneh?

With regard to the Festival day of Rosh HaShana that occurs on Shabbat, in the Temple they would sound the *shofar* as usual. However, they would not sound it in the rest of the country outside the Temple. After the Temple was destroyed, Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai instituted that the people should sound the *shofar* on Shabbat in every place where there is a court of twenty-three judges. Rabbi Elazar said: Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai instituted this practice only in Yavne, where the Great Sanhedrin of seventy-one judges resided in his time, but nowhere else. They said to him: He instituted the practice both in Yavne and in any place where there is a court.

At first, during the Temple era, the *lulav* was taken in the Temple all seven days of *Sukkot*, and in the rest of the country outside the Temple, it was taken only one day, on the first day of the Festival. After the Temple was destroyed, Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai instituted that the *lulav* should be taken even in the rest of the country all seven days, in commemoration of the Temple. (Mishnah Rosh HaShanah 4)

Commemorating and Moving On

ושיהא יום הנף כולו אסור: מ"ט מהרה יבנה בית המקדש ויאמרו אשתקד מי לא אכלנו בהאי מזרח עכשיו נמי ניכול

The mishna taught: Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai also instituted that for the entire day of waving the *omer* offering, eating the grain of the new crop is prohibited. The Gemara asks: What is the reason for this ordinance? The reasoning is that soon the Temple will be rebuilt and people will say: Last year, when the Temple was in ruins, didn't we eat from the new crop as soon as the

eastern horizon was illuminated on the morning of the sixteenth of Nisan, as the new crop was permitted immediately? Now too, let us eat the new grain at that time.

Decisive Action but No Messianism

תנו רבנן פעם אחת חל ראש השנה להיות בשבת [והיו כל הערים מתכנסין אמר להם רבן יוחנן בן זכאי לבני בתירה נתקע אמרו לו נדוןאמר להם נתקע ואחר כך נדון לאחר שתקעו אמרו לו נדון אמר להם כבר נשמעה קרן ביבנה ואין משיבין לאחר מעשה:

Once Rosh HaShana occurred on Shabbat, and all the cities gathered at the Great Sanhedrin in Yavne for the Festival prayers. Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai said to the sons of Beteira, : Let us sound the *shofar*, as in the Temple. They said to him: Let us discuss whether or not this is permitted. He said to them: First let us sound it, and afterward, when there is time, let us discuss the matter. After they sounded the *shofar*, the sons of Beteira said to Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai: Let us now discuss the issue. He said to them: The horn has already been heard in Yavne, and one does not refute a ruling after action (Rosh HaShana 29b)

"הוא היה אומר (רבן יוחנן בן זכאי) אם היתה הנטיעה בתוך ידך ויאמרו לך הרי משיח בא, נטע את הנטיעה ואח"כ צא והקבילו". (אבות דרבי נתן, פרק לא)

When the Sages entered the Vineyard in Yavneh, they said, "In the future, there will come an hour when a person seeks a teaching from the teachings of the Torah and he will not find it, or in the teachings of the Scribes, and he will not find it." As it says, "Behold, days are coming, says the Lord, etc. they will seek out the word of God and they will not find it (Amos 8)." 'The word of God' refers to prophecy. 'The word of God' refers to the End (of Days). 'The word of God', so that there shall not be one word of Torah similar to its fellow. They said, "Let us begin from Hillel and Shammai!"... (Tosefta Eduyot 1:1)

Less Power to Kohanim

Moses received the Torah at Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly. (Pirkei Avot 1:1)

Greater is learning Torah than the priesthood and than royalty, for royalty is acquired by thirty stages, and the priesthood by twenty-four, but the Torah by forty-eight things. (Pirkei Avot 6:6)

Rabban Gamliel: That There Should Only Be One Torah

And even Rabban Gamliel, the *Nasi* of the Sanhedrin at Yavne, the head of the Sages who were responsible for the decision to ostracize Rabbi Eliezer, was coming on a boat at the time, and a large wave swelled over him and threatened to drown him. Rabban Gamliel said: It seems to me that this is only for the sake

of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, as God punishes those who mistreat others. Rabban Gamliel stood on his feet and said: Master of the Universe, it is revealed and known before You that neither was it for my honor that I acted when ostracizing him, nor was it for the honor of the house of my father that I acted; rather, it was for Your honor, so that disputes will not proliferate in Israel. In response, the sea calmed from its raging. (Bava Metzia 59)

Rabbi Levi said: The blessing of the heretics, which curses informers, was instituted in Yavne . . . Rabban Gamliel said to the Sages: Is there any person who knows to institute the blessing of the heretics, a blessing directed against the Sadducees? Shmuel HaKatan, who was one of the most pious men of that generation, stood and instituted it. (Brachot 28b)

Rabban Gamliel sent a message to him [Rabbi Yehoshua]: I decree against you that you must appear before me with your staff and with your money on the day on which Yom Kippur occurs according to your calculation; he took his staff and his money in his hand, and went to Yavne to Rabban Gamliel on the day on which Yom Kippur occurred according to his own calculation. Upon seeing him, Rabban Gamliel stood up and kissed him on his head. He said to him: Come in peace, my teacher and my student. You are my teacher in wisdom, my student, as you accepted my statement (Mishnah Rosh HaShanah 2:9)

Threats From Early Christianity

Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus remembered that he was walking on the main street of Zippori and Jacob of Kfar Sachnaya came and told him some Torah and it pleased him (Kohelet Rabba 1:8)

An objection was raised: 'No man should have any dealings with Minim, nor is it allowed to be healed by them even [in risking] an hour's life. It once happened to Ben Dama the son of R. Ishmael's sister that he was bitten by a serpent and Jacob, a native of Kfar Sekaniah, came to heal him but R. Ishmael did not let him; whereupon Ben Dama said, 'My brother R. Ishmael, let him, so that I may be healed by him: I will even cite a verse from the Torah that he is to be permitted'; but he did not manage to complete his saying, when his soul departed and he died. Whereupon R. Ishmael exclaimed, Happy art thou Ben Dama for thou wert pure in body and thy soul likewise left thee in purity; nor hast thou transgressed the words of thy colleagues, who said, (Kohelet 10) *He who breaketh through a fence, a serpent shall bite him*'? — It is different with the teaching of *Minim*, for it draws, and one [having dealings with them] may be drawn after them (Talmud Bavli Avodah Zarah 27b)