Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai and Rabbi Akiva: Two First-Century Models for Thinking about Zionism in the Twenty-First Century

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> It is one of the great paradoxes of Jewish history that antithetic events, centuries apart, should have had the same effect on Judaism. The reestablishment of Jewish independence and the ingathering of exiles have proven as catastrophic for the Jewish religion as were, in their day, the destruction of the Jewish state, and the dispersion of the people. After the Roman conquest of 70 ce, the generation of Yohanan ben Zakai was confronted with the fateful question: Can a valid Judaism survive the loss of the sacrificial system? The revolutionary turn of events that has now produced the State of Israel confronts our own generation with an equally fateful question: Can a valid Judaism survive the emergence from conditions of Diaspora and political subservience in which it has subsisted for so long? [1]

The first and the twentieth centuries have probably been the two most tumultuous in Jewish history: the destruction of the Temple and the beginnings of exile and Diaspora on the one hand; the Holocaust and the foundation of the State of Israel on the other. Although they can be viewed as opposite to one

another, dispersion to ingathering, they must also be seen as having a major common denominator: the rupture of a long-enjoyed status quo and the need to adapt to completely new circumstances.

My attempt here is to sketch the biography and thoughts of two outstanding rabbinic leaders in the period from 70 to 135 ce—their attempts to adapt, formulate, and apply their beliefs and ideals in circumstances of such major upheaval—and to see them as alternative models for our own generation's orientation toward the events of our day and engagement with the questions with which we are all concerned.

Rabban Yohanan Ben Zakkai: The Courage of Compromise

Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai was the major rabbinic leader in the year 70 ce as the Roman siege of Jerusalem neared its close. Deep divisions existed between those trapped behind the city walls regarding what approach they should take to the Roman armies outside the wall. On the one hand were the *kana'im*—the zealots—who rejected any form of compromise, and would rather fight to the death than surrender to Rome. On the other hand were those willing to negotiate with Rome, albeit from a position of weakness—better, they reasoned, for something to be salvaged from the impending unavoidable defeat. It was to this latter group that Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai belonged. To be opposed to the policy of the zealots was not easy—they had burned the food provisions within the city to strengthen the inhabitants' resolve, and would kill anybody seeking to escape whom they suspected of leaving to negotiate with Rome. It is in this context that the following near-mythic story of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai's escape occurs.

> [When R. Yohanan ben Zakkai saw that the zealots of Jerusalem did not accept his plan for compromise,] he sent for his students and told them to place him in a coffin (to escape from Jerusalem). Rabbi Eliezer held him by the head and Rabbi Joshua held him by the legs and carried him until dusk. As they arrived at the gate, the guards said to them, "Who is this you carry?" They responded, "It is one who has died, and do you not know that a corpse may not pass the night in Jerusalem?"… They carried him out of the city until they reached the Roman general Vespasian. They opened the

> coffin and he stood before them. Vespasian said, “Are you R. Yohanan ben Zakkai? Ask of me and I shall grant it.” He responded, “All I ask from you is Yavne, where I will teach to my students and institute prayer there and perform all the commandments.” Vespasian said, “Go! And do everything that you propose.”

In this short exchange, one of the most seismic shifts ever to take place in Jewish history occurs: The central location of worship moves from Jerusalem to Yavne, a small community of scholars on the coast, which would develop into a major academy, and from which the foundations of the Mishna and Talmud would emerge. Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, seeing that the resistance’s days are numbered, gives up Jerusalem in order to save something from the flames. The Jewish people will lose their national center and political independence, and will cease to worship God through the medium of sacrifices. But their continued existence will be safeguarded by the new central practice of the study of Torah, an activity that is at once portable and democratic. As we will see, whether he had made the right decision was a question that would plague Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai for the rest of his life, but the decision had been made and would shape Judaism and Jewish practice for the next two millennia.

In addition to the replacement of the sacrificial order with the study of Torah, another major theme can also be discerned in Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai’s work: the renewed emphasis on the power and centrality of *gemilut hasadim*, acts of kindness.

In *Avot DeRabbi Natan*, chapter 4, we read:

> It once happened that Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai was leaving Jerusalem with Rabbi Joshua, and they witnessed the destruction of the Temple. Rabbi Joshua said, “Woe to us, for the place where the sins of Israel were atoned for has been destroyed.” Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai said, “Do not be bitter, my son, for we have another form of atonement which is as great, and this is *gemilut hasadim*; as the verse states, “for it is kindness I desire and not burnt offerings” [Hos. 6:6].

As they pass the Temple mount in ruins, Rabbi Joshua laments to his teacher that the prime mechanism through which Israel gained forgiveness from God—the

sacrifices—has been destroyed. How could Israel now maintain its relationship with God? Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai responds—acts of loving-kindness are just as efficacious at achieving atonement. We do not detect in his words even a hint that a relationship with God that is mediated through acts of kindness rather than sacrifices is in any way *bedi'eved*—a non-ideal second best—but that it is certainly on a par with the sacrifices. In fact, from the verse of the prophet Hosea that is quoted, the strong implication emerges that kindness and charity are far more preferable in the eyes of God than burnt offerings![2]

A simple way to put these developments is to recall the words of Simeon HaTzaddik, who, while head of the Sanhedrin when the Temple stood, had said that the world stands on three pillars: Torah, *avoda* (the sacrificial order), and *gemilut hasadim*. After the destruction of the Temple there was no longer *avoda*. If the world is to be pictured as a three-legged stool, the question arises as to what one can do after one of the legs has been destroyed. Two options present themselves: Either find a new leg, or strengthen the remaining two. It seems that Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai chose the latter, building on *gemilut hasadim* and Torah to maintain and rebuild the Jewish people's world.

The Role of the Temple in a World without the Temple

After the momentous events and decisions of the year 70, the most significant work of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai appears to have been nine pieces of legislation. All nine were concerned with various laws and practices that had taken place in the Temple, whose place in a world without the Temple was now uncertain.

This raft of legislation can be seen as having a dual goal: (1) remembering the Temple so that it would not become a distant memory; (2) articulating a Judaism that did not require a Temple and that could flourish even without political sovereignty, a centralized religious structure, or the sacrificial service.[3]

An obvious tension emerges between these two points: Does not ensuring the remembrance of the Temple hamper attempts to come to terms with a world without the Temple? The genius of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai's enactments is that they manage to embrace both objectives. To take but a single example, we read in Tractate *Rosh HaShana* regarding one of the enactments: "Kohanim [priests] are prohibited from ascending to perform the priestly blessing [in the

synagogue] while wearing shoes."[4]

The priestly blessing was one of the most ancient and significant features of the service in the Temple. By decreeing that it must also be performed in every synagogue, the significance of the ceremony and the special status of the kohanim were preserved, and the memory of the Temple retained.

The purpose of the enactment, therefore, would appear to be preserving the memory and significance of the Temple in the life of the Jewish people. Yet reading between the lines of the Gemara another theme emerges. The kohanim had been forbidden from wearing shoes in the Temple due to the sanctity of the location, in the same way in which Moses had been told to take off his shoes at the burning bush: "The place upon which you stand is holy ground."[5] Viewed from this angle, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai's decree is radical. Every place where Jews gather to pray, no matter where, no matter how many of them, now has the level of sanctity of the Temple, and those who ascend to perform the priestly blessing must remove their shoes just as they would have done in the Temple.[6]

Thus, as well as maintaining the memory of the Temple and its service, a very different objective was also achieved: The synagogue took on the role and even sanctity of the Temple, and allowed for religious and national continuity in a world that had been ruptured by the destruction of the Temple.

What, then, characterizes Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai's life and work? A crucial shift of Judaism away from the Temple and sacrificial order as circumstances dictated, and the replacement of this with a teaching that emphasizes deeds of kindness, intellectual study, and prayer. An ability to compromise, and a daring to innovate new strategies and practices of religious and national import when the larger goal is unattainable.

At certain moments history may be compared to a crucible. The material inside the crucible reaches such heat that its shape can be changed very dramatically and very quickly. Once the material cools, those changes assume a permanent nature and a return to the original shape is impossible. The master craftsman is able to manipulate the material in the heat of the moment in such a way that its shape when settled is the one best suited for the object's purposes. The year 70 was such a moment, and Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai was such a craftsman. What Isaiah Berlin said of Bismarck could easily apply to him: "Political genius consists in the ability to hear the distant hoof beat of the horse of history, and then by a superhuman effort to leap and catch the horseman by the coat tails."[7] Jerusalem fell, Yavne was saved, and Jewish history was changed forever.

Rabbi Akiva: Theology and Politics as One

> R. Yohanan ben Zakkai said, “Give me Yavneh and her wise men.” Rabbi Akiva said, “He [God[turns wise men backward and makes their wisdom foolish.” [Isa. 44:25].[8]

Akiva ben Joseph lived two generations after Yohanan ben Zakkai, a student of his students. The major political event of his day was not the destruction of the Temple but the Bar Kokhba revolts 65 years later. Whereas Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai had opposed the zealots by advocating accommodation and compromise, Rabbi Akiva considered this foolishness—lamenting that had Rabban Yohanan ben Zakai had only requested of Vespasian that Jerusalem be spared, then everything could have been saved.

Presumably Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai had also understood that potentially he could ask Vespasian for Jerusalem—but fearing that the magnitude of such a demand might make the general renege altogether, his political realism pushed him to choose the lesser, yet attainable, goal. In his cast-iron conviction Rabbi Akiva viewed this as a terrible missed opportunity and a decision of weakness.

Perhaps the best known story regarding Rabbi Akiva’s response to the destruction of the Temple is the episode described at the end of Tractate *Makkot*:

> Once Rabbi Akiva and his colleagues ascended to Jerusalem. When they reached Mt. Scopus, they tore their garments. When they reached the Temple Mount, they saw a fox emerging from the place of the Holy of Holies. The others started weeping; Rabbi Akiva laughed. They said to him: “Why are you laughing?” He said to them: “Why are you weeping?” They said to him: “A place [so holy] that it is said of it, ‘the stranger that approaches it shall die,’ and now foxes traverse it, and we shouldn’t weep?” He said to them: “That is why I laugh.”[9]

Rabbi Akiva goes on to explain that the prophet Isaiah had foreseen both the destruction of the First Temple and the rebuilding of the Second Temple. The

Temple Mount would fall into desolation and be ploughed like a field. Yet Jerusalem, after falling to such a low, would one day be rebuilt. He goes on to explain that until he had seen the first prophecy of utter devastation fulfilled, he was doubtful as to whether the second one of hope would come true. But now that he has seen a fox running through the Holy of Holies, he knows with certainty that “Old men and women shall yet sit in the streets of Jerusalem.” His colleagues respond: “Akiva, you have comforted us! Akiva, you have comforted us!”

The story is usually read as illustrating Rabbi Akiva’s optimism, his ability to comfort his colleagues—and the moral of laughter over tears in the face of calamity. But to my mind there is another, more fundamental element that lies at the root of Rabbi Akiva’s behavior: his conviction that the destruction and absence of the Temple is only a temporary situation, and one that would soon be rectified. Do not cry that the Temple has been lost, he says to his colleagues—for its return is guaranteed.

This reading of the story is borne out by the striking parallel to the passage from *Avot DeRabbi Natan* quoted earlier. In both cases Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai and Rabbi Akiva are walking with their rabbinic colleagues past the Temple mount, which lies in ruins. In both cases the colleagues lament the loss of the Temple and in both cases Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai and Rabbi Akiva respond with words of comfort. But these parallels only serve to draw attention to the enormous gulf between their words of consolation: Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai tells Rabbi Joshua not to be downcast at the loss of the Temple for even in its absence the relationship of the Jewish people with God can and will be maintained. We can survive and flourish without the Temple. Rabbi Akiva, on the other hand, tells his colleagues not to be downcast at the loss of the Temple, for before long it will be back with us.

Consideration of the argument between these two rabbinic leaders raises the question of whether their dispute is simply one of tactics and strategy vis-à-vis Rome or a more deeply rooted dispute over theology. From a number of sources it emerges that Rabbi Akiva has a very clear response to the fundamental question of to what extent our theology and politics are related to one another. His answer is that they are one and the same.

The Talmud in Tractate *Hagiga* discusses a difficult verse in the book of Daniel, which mentions two heavenly thrones. If one of the thrones is for God, then who is the other one for? “Rabbi Akiva taught, one is for Him [i.e., God] and the other for the House of David. Rabbi Jose HaGelili responded, ‘Akiva! Until when will you make the Shekhina [Divine Presence] profane?! Rather, one is for justice and the

other for charity.’”[10]

If Rabbi Akiva’s understanding of the verse is not immediately apparent, then the sharp response to it makes it clear: For him there is no division between sacred and secular, no distinction between realms of religious belief and of gritty reality. If God’s throne represents the heavenly or religious ideals, then the second throne for the earthly House of David represents the immediate implantation of those ideals.

For this reason, the Jerusalem Talmud tells us not only of Rabbi Akiva’s support for the Bar Kokhba rebellion, but of his belief that Bar Kokhba was himself the King Messiah.

> Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai taught: Rabbi Akiva would expound the verse “A star [*kokhav*] will emerge from Jacob” as “Koziba will emerge from Jacob”—for Rabbi Akiva considered with certainty that Bar Koziba was the Messiah. Rabbi Yohanan ben Turta said: “Akiva—grass will grow over your face, and the son of David [i.e., the Messiah] will still not have come.”[11]

For Rabbi Akiva our deepest-held beliefs and ideals can and must be made tangible in the politics of this world—without compromise, adjustment, or dilution. From the response of his colleagues in both of the pieces just quoted, we see just how controversial and contested such a position was. How great is the contrast to Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, who understood that what he valued the most was unattainable and instead set about reformulating his values so that they could be compatible with the politics and realities of this world.

To really capture the difference let us contrast the stories of the deaths of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai and Rabbi Akiva.[12] Concerning the former, we read:

> And it was that when Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai fell sick, his students came in to visit him. As he saw them he began to weep. His students said to him, “Candle of Israel, mighty hammer, for what are you crying?” He responded, “If I was to be brought before a king of flesh and blood, who is here today and tomorrow in the grave, who, if he is angry with me, his anger is not forever, and if he imprisons me, the imprisonment is not forever, and if he kills me, that death is not forever—and I could pacify him

> with words and bribe him with money—even if this was so I would still weep. And now that I am being brought before the King of kings, the Holy One who reigns forever, who, if He is angry with me, His anger is forever, and if He imprisons me, the imprisonment is forever, and if He kills me, that death is forever—and I cannot pacify him with words nor bribe him with money. Moreover, I see two paths before me, one stretches to Gan Eden and the other to Gehinnom—and I do not know which one they will lead me down—and should I not cry?!"[13]

Rabbi Akiva dies not at home and not of illness, but is executed at the hands of the Romans during the Hadrianic persecutions:

> "And you shall love the Lord your God"—When they were taking out Rabbi Akiva to be executed, the time for the recitation of the Shema had arrived, and as they removed his flesh with iron combs he accepted upon himself the yoke of Heaven. His students said to him, "Rabbi, even until this point?!" He responded, "All the days of my life I was troubled by the verse '[love God] with all your soul'—even if He takes your soul." I would say to myself, when will I have such an opportunity? Now that the chance is here shall I not fulfill it?"
>
> He extended his pronunciation of *ehad* until his soul left him proclaiming the unity of God. A heavenly voice proclaimed, "Happy are you, Rabbi Akiva, whose soul departed proclaiming God's unity." The ministering angels proclaimed, "Happy are you Rabbi Akiva, who has merited life in the World to Come!"[14]

Rabbi Akiva meets his death with calm determination—Judaism's paradigmatic martyr, willing to undergo terrible pain secure in the knowledge that he is fulfilling God's will. His place is assured in the World to Come. He was one of the ten martyrs executed by the Romans—an embodiment of the principle, "Better to die on his feet than to live on his knees."

Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai is anything but calm—he is in terror in his final moments. He sees two paths stretching before him—one to heaven and one to

hell—and has no idea which he will be led down. Astute readers of the passage have seen the two paths as a clear reference to that fateful decision made all those years before: in responding to Vespasian's question two paths stretched before him—he could choose the ultimate goal of the Temple and Jerusalem yet risk losing everything, or he could choose the lesser yet attainable goal and sacrifice Judaism's greatest symbols of national and religious pride.[15] He chose the latter—fatefully changing the next 1,900 years of Jewish history—and even at the very end of his life he did not know whether he had made the right decision.

The Historical Legacies of Rabban Yohanan Ben Zakkai and Rabbi Akiva

> Ulla said: Since the destruction of the Temple, God has had no place in this world except in the four cubits of halakha.[16]

In the end, the Bar Kokhba revolt failed, Masada fell, and a Diaspora of nearly two millennia began. National existence with a single religious and political center ceased, and Jewish peoplehood was maintained by common prayer and study, and a shared lifecycle. Rabbi Akiva had failed, his enormous contribution to the world of the oral law faring far better than his religious-political vision. Although, as far as we know, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai never left Israel, his legacy created the infrastructure for a religion that could survive and even flourish in the Diaspora—a framework for a people without a land. God had withdrawn from history; Jewish religiosity and national existence had withdrawn to the private sphere, existing within the four cubits of halakha: Shabbat, *kashruth*, and family purity. Grand themes and narratives—king messiahs, armies, nationhood, land, agriculture, and politics—became distant memories.

Even with the rise of secularization in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, newly emancipated Jews embraced many of the values Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai had positioned at the center of Judaism: study and intellectualism as central practices of Jewish life and shaping the necessity of an existence devoid of political power into a virtue.

And then Zionism came. In the words of Amos Oz:

> The Zionist revolution aspired not only to obtain a bit of land and statehood for the Jews, but also—perhaps mainly—to upend the spiritual pyramid as well as the economic one. To change the norms, create a new ideal, new focuses of solidarity and a new scale of desires.… Everyone agreed to undergo metamorphosis and be a new person, no longer a Jew but a Hebrew, tanned, strong and brave, free of complexes and Jewish neuroses, a person who loved to labor and loved the soil.[17]

In the search for models and historical templates to provide the imaginative underpinnings of a project that necessitated such a sea change for Jewish life, the attributes associated with Rabbi Akiva and ideological cousins of his such as the Maccabees returned to the fore, even though they frequently underwent secularization in the process.

From Trumpledor's "It is good to die for one's land" to Rav Kook's equation of messianism and politics, Rabbi Akiva's image loomed large, if only subconsciously. Even mainstream secular socialist Zionism exhibited this trend: The ethic of pioneering, of giving oneself up completely for the national dream and collective, draws, if only selectively, on the sorts of convictions Rabbi Akiva expresses.[18] The commitment necessary to settle, cultivate, and defend a land, to establish and maintain institutions of state, could only be brought about through ideologies that inspired belief in large, powerful ideas and inculcated a willingness for self-sacrifice. Without the energy and collective effort on the part of thousands inspired by the images and ideas associated with Rabbi Akiva, the reality of Zionism and the State of Israel would never have come into existence.

BaYamim HaHem, BaZeman HaZeh

It would be an overstatement to say that in the Rabbi Akiva–Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai tension all great figures and thinkers of the last century have emulated Rabbi Akiva. In every stream of Zionist thought there have been those who emphasized themes and ideas that could be associated with Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai.[19]

Nevertheless, contemporary discussions about Zionism, not to mention current events and politicians' statements, can often feel straitjacketed within a Rabbi Akiva view of the world. The commitment of Diaspora Jews to the State of Israel is

viewed as an all-or-nothing question, and advocating compromise on core issues is often seen as weakness or as stemming from a lack of conviction. The first stage of Zionism, the necessary hard graft of state-building, is long over. The critical priorities of today are not draining swamps or training an army, but resolving core issues about the state, society, and citizens. Questions of religion and state, the balance of the Jewish and democratic elements of the state, of the status of Israel's non-Jewish minorities, of borders and relationships with the Palestinians and the Arab world, of social and economic justice all require answers.

Might now not be the time to turn back to the figure of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai for guidance, and absorb afresh his teaching that a meaningful and flourishing existence can be attained even when reality falls short of our dearest dreams; that compromise is often necessary (and that this is nothing to be ashamed of); that acts of kindness and social justice are as valuable as worship in our holiest places; that authenticity can be attained even under the most trying of circumstances—and that all of the foregoing points are thoroughly Jewish?

There is a space between absolutes, between redemption and damnation—and it is called life.

[1] Yeshayahu Leibowitz, "The Crisis of Religion in the State of Israel" (1952), in *Judaism, Human Values and the Jewish State*, (London, 1992), 158.

[2] One could even suggest that Yohanan ben Zakkai had a special penchant for Hosea and would frequently cite him when breaking radical new ground, as in the following mishnaic source describing his abolishment of the *sota* practice (*Sota* 6:6): "When the adulterers increased, the bitter waters were discontinued—and it was Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai who discontinued them, based on the verse, 'I will not punish your daughters when they engage in prostitution, nor your daughters-in-law when they commit adultery, because the men are secluded with prostitutes and sacrifice with harlots'" (Hos. 4:14).

[3] *Rosh HaShana* 29b.

[4] *Ibid*., 31b.

[5] Ex. 3:5.

[6] See *Megilla* 28b: "'And I shall be for them a minor sanctuary' (Ezek. 11:16): these are the synagogues and study houses of Babylon."

[7] *Personal Impressions* (Princeton, 2001), 25.

[8] *Gittin* 56b.

[9] *Makkot* 24b.

[10] See Aviezer Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalismi* (Chicago, 1996), 5. The most striking articulation of Rabbi Akiva's position in the twentieth century would surely be Rabbi A. I. Kook's description of the State of Israel as "An ideal state, one that has the highest of all ideals engraved in its being, the most sublime happiness of the individual… this shall be our state, the State of Israel, the pedestal of God's throne in this world."

[11] Jerusalem Talmud, *Taanit* 4:5.

[12] In contrast to the Tanakh, where nearly every significant character has a story concerning their birth or childhood, the Talmud, with only very rare exceptions, does not relate stories of the birth of the sages. Yet any character of note in the Talmud will have a story concerning their death. The message appears to be that all are born with an equality of opportunity, and it is the moment of one's death that sums up a person's life and their significance for posterity.

[13] *Berakhot* 28a.

[14] *Berakhot* 61a.

[15] See Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik, *The Rav Speaks: Five Addresses on Israel, History, and the Jewish People* (Judaica Press, 2002), 50–3: “If the great Rav Yochanan ben Zakkai never ceased blaming himself for that historic decision, assuredly the dilemma of the two paths must always be before us as well. We should not vaingloriously assume that our actions are always the right ones.”

[16] *Berakhot* 8b.

[17] *Under This Blazing Light* (1979), 127.

[18] Many readers will think immediately of the religious Zionist youth movement Bnei Akiva. I discovered recently that in the early twentieth century in London, there had been a religious, non-Zionist youth movement called Bnei Zakai. Many Jews today, even knowledgeable ones, know next to nothing of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai.

[19] Such leaders in religious Zionism included Rabbi Reines, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, and my own great teacher Rabbi Yehuda Amital. In left-wing secular Zionism, figures who range from Ahad Ha’am to Yitzhak Rabin (at least in his later thought) could be seen as drawing on the motif of Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, and even in revisionist Zionism there have been moments, such as Begin at Camp David in 1979, when the idea of sacrificing a larger unattainable idea for a smaller yet plausible one has come to the fore.