

MINIARIES

Personalities
in the
Rebbe's Torah

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לזכות הרה"ת ר' אברהם צמח הלוי שיחי'
רוזנפלד

בקשר עם יום הולדתו ב' מנחם-אב
הקב"ה יצליחו ללכת מחיל אל חיל בכל
הענינים ביחד עם זוגתו וכל צאצאיו שיחי'
נדפס ע"י משפחתו שיחי'

Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai

Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai, the renowned Tanna and one of our people's greatest leaders, was born in Eretz Yisroel under the reign of the Chashmonai kings circa 3713 (47 BCE), just over a century before the *churban* Beis Hamikdash.

In his youth, Rabban Yochanan studied under the last of the *Zugos* (pairs of Tannaic leaders), Hillel and Shammai, and was entrusted with the task of preserving and transmitting the *Mesorah* to subsequent generations, as we are told in Pirkei Avos.

Rabban Yochanan, or "Ben Zakkai" – as he was referred to before receiving *Smicha*, was primarily a student of Hillel Hazaken, and is counted as the "smallest" (or youngest) of Hillel's eighty great Talmidim. The Rebbe contrasts him with the greatest of Hillel's students, Rabbi Yonasan Ben Uziel, explaining that while Rabbi Yonasan was superior in his personal study of Torah, Rabban Yochanan excelled in making Torah accessible and comprehensible to his students and future generations. This explains why it was Rabban Yochanan, the "smallest" of Hillel's Talmidim who took center stage as the vital link in the chain of *Mesorah* at a crucial time.

Before his passing, Hillel asked, "Where is the smallest of you who is a father to wisdom and the father of the generations?" This alluded to Rabban Yochanan's significant role in ensuring the survival and growth of Torah and Yiddishkeit.

A Life of Learning

Rabban Yochanan's teaching in Pirkei Avos reveals much about his life of learning. He says, "If you have learned a lot of Torah, do not hold yourself in high esteem; this is what you were created for." Chazal describe him as someone whose entire life was Torah¹. The Gemara testifies that Rabban Yochanan never walked four *amos* without Tefillin and Torah, was always first to arrive and last to leave the Beis Midrash, and was never found idle and not learning.

The Gemara lists the subjects that Rabban Yochanan learned and completed as a student. They range from Mikra and Mishna to the "*Havayos*" of Abaye and Rava (discussions) and the mystical wisdom of *Maaseh Merkava*. Rabban Yochanan's wisdom extended to many worlds of study, down to the language of demons and 'fox fables.' The Gemara says that from when Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai passed away, the *Ziv Hachochmo* – the splendor of wisdom passed from the world.

The Midrash tells us that Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai lived for 120 years; during the first forty he engaged in trade, for the next forty years he studied, in the final forty he taught. The Rebbe explains that even during the forty years that Rabban Yochanan was involved in commerce, he was fully aligned with his G-dly duties, in total sync with his *avodas Hashem*². It seems that much of his initial learning, under Hillel, took place during these first forty years.

The Rebbe explains the significance of the number forty in connection to the years of his study. It speaks to the level of understanding that Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai attained after forty years – when "*ka'im inish ada'ata d'Rabbei*," one can finally perceive the full teaching of one's teacher.³

Teacher of a Generation

Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai is perhaps most famous for his wise and courageous leadership during the period of the *churban*, yet his impact on Yiddishkeit and the Jewish world started long before. His legacy looms large in the realms of Torah study, education, and *Mesorah*. While the *churban* took place during the final years of his life, at least forty years of his life were dedicated to education and teaching. And while he did serve in his final years as *nossi*, for the longer part of his life, he had a Yeshiva and taught Talmidim, in the town "Arav" in the Galil.

When Hillel passed away, his son Shimon took over the *nesius*. Shimon was succeeded by his own son Rabban Gamliel Hazaken. After Rabban Gamliel passed away, the *nesius* passed to his son Rabban Shimon Ben Gamliel (referred to as *Haneherag*, or *Hazaken*), to distinguish him from his grandson by the same name, the oft-quoted Rashbag, father of Rebbi

Yehuda Hanasi).

The *nesius* stayed in the hands of this prestigious family until the Great Revolt when Rabban Shimon was killed by the Romans, one of the *Asara Harugei Malchus*. At this point, the role of *nossi* went to Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai, who later restored the *nesius* to the house of Hillel by appointing Rabban Gamliel (*d'yavneh*) as *nossi*. In his *Hakdama* to Mishneh Torah, the Rambam writes that the *Mesorah* was received from Hillel by two people – his son Shimon and Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai. This is also what is indicated to be understood from the order and descriptions in Pirkei Avos.

Toldos Tanaim Va'Amoraim suggests that during much of this time, Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai served as the *Av Beis Din*, alongside the *nossi* from the house of Hillel.

It is in the realm of teaching that we find Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai's greatest impact. His five great Talmidim became the pillars of Torah for following generations, upon whom *Torah Shebal Peh* was built. The Rebbe uses the term (borrowed from what is said about Rebbi Akiva) "*Kulhu Aliba DeRabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai*" [all is based on Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai].⁴

The five Talmidim were Rebbi Eliezer and Rebbi Yehoshua, titans of the Mishnah and teachers to Rebbi Akiva and his friends, Rebbi Yosi Hakohen, Rebbi Shimon Ben Nesanel, and Rebbi Elazar Ben Arach. Through them, Rabban Yochanan Ben



A SHUL IN ERETZ YISROEL BELIEVED TO STAND ON THE SPOT OF THE BEIS MIDRASH OF RABBAN YOCHANAN BEN ZAKKAI.

Zakkai shaped the future of the Jewish people.

The Mishnah in Pirkei Avos describes the differing perspectives of these five Talmidim in their approach to *avodas Hashem*, and Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai's response. The Rebbe explains that Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai had many more Talmidim, yet they all followed these five categories and approaches in Torah and are represented by these five. The Rebbe also notes that while Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai appreciates Rabbi Elazar Ben Arach's answers more than his colleagues, he accepts and values his other Talmidim's views as well.

Moreover, since they are presented as Talmidim of Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai, he is the origin of all five perspectives. In him, they were incorporated as one, and therefore he sums up his teaching in only one short line in Pirkei Avos, and does not need to expand on the specifics as his students do.⁵

“Like a Minister Before the King”

Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai was not only a learned scholar and a gifted teacher, nor was he just a man of Torah. He was a *nossi* whose *middos* and character shined in every area of his life and in every aspect of his work.

The Rebbe explains Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai's strict take on a case of theft, saying, that as a person whose whole life was Torah, he didn't accept that it is excusable for a person to steal if it is against the rule of Torah, and therefore leaves no space for justifications. Additionally, he himself was not a wealthy man, and as such, did not accept poverty as a reasonable basis for leniency.

In the same *sicha*, the Rebbe shows that Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai was a powerful proponent of Gemilus Chassadim – kindness and compassion. The Rebbe quotes a statement from Avos D'Rebbi Nosson which the Rebbe refers to as a “*Vilder vort*” [a wild idea]:

Shortly after the *churban*, Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai was walking with his student Rabbi Yehoshua. Passing the destroyed Beis Hamikdash, Rabbi Yehoshua exclaimed painfully, “Woe to us that this has been destroyed, the place where the Jewish people's sins would be forgiven!” To this Rabban Yochanan responded, “My son, let this not bother you, we have another form of *kapparah* just like it — Gemilus Chassadim.”⁶

The Rebbe explains that as opposed to other Tzaddikim who served Hashem in the way of an *eved* – a servant - with an emphasis on *kabalas ol* and submission, Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai's *avoda* was that of a *sar* — a minister — whose service to the king transcends mere *kabalas ol* and putting oneself away; rather he incorporated his full personality and

character in his service of Hashem. The Rebbe explains how we see this in his teaching in Pirkei Avos where he used the word “*Notzarta*” [created - formed] – alluding to the service of Hashem in full form — mind, heart, and spirit.

The effects of Rabban Yochanan's great leadership and kindness spread even to the simplest of men and to the worst of foes.⁷ The Gemara says that no one ever had a chance to greet Rabban Yochanan before he had greeted them, even a non-Jew in the market. Additionally, Rabban Yochanan dealt peacefully and diplomatically, even with the Roman agitators and commanders.

Rabban Yochanan's leadership qualities, courageous and difficult choices, humility, and sense of urgency will be discussed below, giving us a glimpse of his greatness, and the pivotal place he holds in the annals of Jewish history from his time to the present day.

Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai - Nessi Yisroel

The mantle of leadership came to Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai at probably the most precarious time in Jewish history. He witnessed his people as they descended into bitter rivalries and disputes, pitting one Jew against another in bloody battles and violent skirmishes.

At the same time, he witnessed his oppressed nation crushed under the oppressive boot of the Roman Empire.

It was his understanding and far-seeing choices that kept the nation alive after the terrible destruction and the subsequent troubles and tribulations that severely traumatized the Jewish People. It was his courageous stance that established Yiddishkeit post-*churban*, and set the Jewish people on a sure track toward *Geulah*.

The Rebbe explains how his decisions and strategy show Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai's deep care for the survival of Yiddishkeit and the Jewish people.

The story of his brave and farseeing leadership begins with the encounter he had with Aspasianus (Vespasian), the Roman general laying siege to Yerushalayim.

At that point, there were warring groups and factions in Yerushalayim with opposing opinions on how to deal with the Romans; one party supported rebellion, the other advocated concession to Roman rule. It was a dangerous time, as minor rebellions and the Roman response to them embroiled Eretz Yisroel in bloodshed. As the situation deteriorated, it became clear to Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai that it was Hashem's plan for the Beis Hamikdash to be destroyed. He needed to act to save what he could.

With the help of his nephew Abba Sikra who was a member of one of the warrior brigades, Rabban Yochanan and his

Talmidim, Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua snuck out of Yerushalayim to talk to the Romans and see what could be done.

Outside the walls of the holy city, Rabban Yochanan met General Aspasianus. After informing him that he would soon become emperor, Rabban Yochanan made three requests: That the Romans spare the city of Yavneh (where the Sanhedrin had moved) and its *chachamim*, That the family of the *nossi*, Rabban Gamliel be kept alive, and that doctors tend to Rabbi Tzadok (who had been fasting for decades on behalf of the Jewish people).

The tyrant agreed to all three. Yavneh would become the new center of Torah learning and instruction, and the House of Hillel (and Dovid Hamelech) would be reinstated.

It may seem surprising that Rabban Yochanan did not ask to save the Beis Hamikdash. It was clear to him, however, that the *churban* was going to happen, and that only the request to keep the Torah alive, through the *chachamim* – the true shepherds of the Yidden, would insure the continuation of Yiddishkeit and the Jewish people.

The Rebbe explains that the theme of Rabban Yochanan's life was to bring *Shalom Ba'olam* (peace in this world). Highlighting this were his moves to salvage Torah – which brings peace, and reestablish the spreading of Torah which moves us toward the *Geulah*.⁸

The Rebbe points out the incredible fact that Rabban Yochanan secured Jewish survival with the support of the Romans. This is an extraordinary example of *Ishapcha* (transformation); the seeds of *Geulah* were planted through the hands of our oppressors.

The Rebbe compares this Roman-backed victory of the Jewish spirit to the release from prison of the Alter Rebbe and Frierdiker Rebbe, when the Czarist and Soviet powers themselves ruled that they should be released, reaching entirely new levels in the transformation of the evil powers in this world.⁹

The cure that Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai presented to the Jewish people ties into the *avoda* to which he was most connected. Rabban Yochanan was a man of Torah in every aspect of his life. Even during his years engaged in “*praktmatia*” – trade, first and foremost to him was *Kedusha* and Torah¹⁰, and we find that even in his workings and dealing with the Roman authorities, Rabban Yochanan incorporated Torah perspectives, values, and direction.¹¹

Foundations for the Future

Following the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash and the sacking of Yerushalayim, Rabban Yochanan's Sanhedrin in Yavneh was the seat of Jewish leadership and the place to which all eyes looked for guidance and comfort.



TZIYUN OF RABBAN YOCHANAN BEN ZAKKAI IN TVERIA.

For centuries, the Beis Hamikdash had stood tall, serving as a testament to Hashem's presence among His people, and as the center of Jewish observance. The *churban* upended everything. The Jewish people were not only broken in body and spirit, they were lacking the very base of Yiddishkeit as they knew it. It fell on the shoulders of the *chachamim* of the day led by Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai, to answer the people and lead them on the path of Torah.

Rabban Yochanan established several *Takanos* for the Yidden of his time, helping them to adapt to a life of Torah and Mitzvos in a post-*churban* world. The *Takanos* of Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai incorporate an acceptance of the current state and the courage to adapt to the new situation, while remembering and keeping the hope and belief in the rebuilding of the Beis Hamikdash and the coming of Moshiah at the forefront of our minds.

Perhaps, even more important than his *Takanos*, it was his students and the values he imparted and promoted which shaped the following generations of Tanaim, and subsequently, the entire *Mesorah*.

The Rebbe pointed out that when it comes to discussing the advantages of his Talmidim and their different styles, Rabban Yochanan chooses the quality of “*Sinai*”—one who has extensive (albeit less deep) knowledge in all elements of Torah, over the “*Oker Harim*”—one who “uproots mountains”, who delves deeply into the subjects he learns, contrasting and questioning until reaching a deeper understanding.

The Rebbe explains that while Rabban Yochanan surely saw the greatness of the *Oker Harim* (*Mayan Hamisgaber* - Rabbi Elazar Ben Arach, as we see that Abba Shaul suggests this also in the name of Rabban Yochanan), as the *nossi* – leader of the Jewish people, and one responsible for the continuation of the *Mesorah* and the perpetuation of basic Torah

knowledge and wisdom, he found the “*Bor Sud*” [a plastered cistern which loses not a drop of water] (Rebbi Eliezer Ben Horkenus) and retains all his knowledge, as the quality most needed for his generation.¹²

In a later Sicha, the Rebbe takes this point even further. The Rebbe contrasts the two qualities of “*Bor Sud*” [Plastered cistern – retainer of knowledge] and the “*Maayan Hamisgaber*” [Gushing spring – innovator of new ideas]. The Rebbe explains that Rabban Yochanan was not just a regular *nossi* of Klal Yisrael, he was the leader at a most critical and pivotal moment, as the Jewish people were transitioning from *Zman Habayis* to *galus*, and as such he found it imperative to implant and emphasize two fundamental qualities which would serve as the guiding light for the generations descending into *galus*.

For the Jewish people to survive and to keep Yiddishkeit

alive, especially through the hardships and confusions of *galus*, Rabban Yochanan highlights the immense importance of base core values and principles, unshakable truths, and unbendable Torah clarity to conserve the G-dly foundation on which the Jewish people and our holy *Mesorah* are based. At the same time, Rabban Yochanan underlines the equally indispensable quality of growth and forward progression. The Rebbe explains *Maayan Hamisgaber* not only as an intellectual exercise, but rather the progress and adaptation of Torah and the growth and the propelling of Torah and Yiddishkeit into the future. Rabban Yochanan emphasized through his diverse Talmidim and diverse approaches to Torah and *avoda*, that both elements need to work in tangent, and only with both can Yiddishkeit thrive during *galus* and progress towards the *Geulah*.¹³

IN HIS TORAH

וְכַשְׁחָלָה רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן בֶּן זַכַּי נִכְנְסוּ תַלְמִידָיו לְבַקְרוֹ. כִּיֵּן שָׂרָאָה אוֹתָם הַתְּחִיל לְבָכּוֹת.
אָמְרוּ לוֹ תַלְמִידָיו: “יֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל, עֲמוּד הַיְמִינִי, פֶּטִישׁ הַחֹזֵק”, מִפְּנֵי מָה אַתָּה בּוֹכָה?

אָמַר לָהֶם: אֵילוּ לִפְנֵי מֶלֶךְ בֶּשָׂר וְדָם הָיוּ מוֹלִיכִין אוֹתִי, שֶׁהֵיוּ כָּאן וּמִחָר בְּקִבְרִי... אֶף
עַל פִּי כֵן הָיִיתִי בּוֹכָה, וְעַכְשָׁיו שְׁמוֹלִיכִים אוֹתִי לִפְנֵי מֶלֶךְ מַלְכֵי הַמְּלָכִים הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ
הוּא, שֶׁהוּא חַי וְקַיִם לְעוֹלָם וְלְעוֹלָמֵי עוֹלָמִים, שְׂאֵם כּוֹעֵס עָלַי — כְּעֵסוֹ כְּעֵס עוֹלָם
וְכוּ'. וְלֹא עוֹד, אֲלֵא שֶׁיֵּשׁ לִפְנֵי שְׁנֵי דַרְכִּים, אַחַת שֶׁל גֵּן עֵדֶן וְאַחַת שֶׁל גִּיהֵנוֹם, וְאֵינִי יוֹדֵעַ
בְּאִזּוֹ מוֹלִיכִים אוֹתִי, וְלֹא אֲבֻכָּה! (בְּרֻכּוֹת כח, ע"ב)

When Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai fell ill, his students entered to visit him. When he saw them, he began to cry. His students said to him: Lamp of Israel, right pillar, mighty hammer, why are you crying?

He said to them: If they were leading me before a flesh and blood king who is here today and in the grave tomorrow... even so I would cry. Now that they are leading me before the supreme King of Kings, the Holy One, Blessed be He, Who lives and endures forever and all time; if He is angry with me, His anger is eternal... Moreover, I have two paths before me, one to Gan Eden and one to Geihinom, and I do not know on which they are leading me; will I not cry?

This famous exchange is quoted dozens of times in the Rebbe's Torah, and over the years the Rebbe shared several explanations of this anecdote. On some level, the Rebbe's explanation encapsulates the life and message of Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai.

The glaring question this brings is why Rabban Yochanan was afraid of where he was going; did he really not know who he was and where he was holding? Obviously, he was not speaking with false humility. How could he not know his own greatness?

For the sake of brevity, we will review the basic outlines of two of the answers to this question.

First, Rabban Yochanan was not worried about what was happening in his revealed faculties. He knew that on a practical level, his life was devoted to the service of Hashem. What he was worried about was what was happening in the depths of his soul, where his *Etzem* was holding, was there any hidden evil-force left inside? And being that tiny vestiges of *Ra* (evil) can be indiscernible, Rabban Yochanan wondered where he was holding in that regard.

The second point, which the Rebbe often connected to the previous idea, highlights the *timing* of this story — as Rabban Yochanan was about to leave this world. The Rebbe explains that Rabban Yochanan was so devoted to a life of Torah and *avoda* that he did not have a moment to spare for introspection. He was honestly too busy and preoccupied with *avodas Hashem* and his responsibilities to his people to even think about where he was holding on a personal level. Only as he was readying to depart was he able to take a moment for a *cheshbon hanefesh* to analyze his own state.

In the famous Maamar *Lo Sihye Meshakeilah* 5712, the Rebbe repeated this story and explanation and broke out in tears, exclaiming “*Vos Mir Ahava! Vos Mir Yirah! Vos Mir Ratzon! Vos Mir Taanug!*” (A person thinks to himself: “What love? What fear? What [spiritual] will? What [spiritual] pleasure? I don't have time for these lofty pursuits. I'm busy serving Hashem with every moment I have...”) displaying to the Chassidim a glimpse of what it means to fully and completely devote one's self to Hashem's will, “sacrificing” one's personal *avoda* and feeling of connection to Hashem.¹⁴

1. Shabbos Parshas Mishpatim 5730. Sichos Kodesh 5730 vol. 1 p. 513.

2. Shabbos Parshas Behaaloscha 5751; Sefer Hasichos 5751, vol. 2, p. 608.

3. Shabbos Parshas Matos-Masei 5747; Hisvaaduyos vol. 4, p. 151.

4. Shabbos Parshas Shelach 5741; Sichos Kodesh 5741 vol. 3, p. 720.

5. Shabbos Parshos Mattos-Masei 5737, Sichos Kodesh 5737 vol. 2, p. 333.

6. See Shabbos Parshas Mishpatim 5730 *ibid*.

7. Likkutei Sichos vol 16, pg. 258. Vov Tishrei 5740; Sichos Kodesh 5741 vol. 1, pg. 45.

8. Vov Tishrei 5740; Sichos Kodesh 5740 vol. 1, pg. 45.

9. Shabbos Parshas Mishpatim 5730. Sichos Kodesh 5730 vol. 1, pg. 513.

10. Shabbos Parshas Behaaloscha 5751, Sefer Hasichos 5751 vol. 2, p. 608.

11. Shabbos Parshas Tazria-Metzora 5742; Hisvaaduyos 5742 pg. 1404.

12. Shabbos Parshas Devarim 5742. Hisvaaduyos 5742 vol. 4, pg. 1976.

13. Vov Tishrei 5744. Hisvaaduyos 5744 vol. 1, pg. 107.

14. Maamar Lo Sihye Meshakeilah 5712, Pg. 323. Shabbos Parshas Nitzavim 5714, pg. 225. Simchas Torah 5742, pg. 263. Et. Al.