

Rebbe Yochanan ben Zakkai: Redeeming the Sparks of the Arzei Levanon

Rebbe Yochanan ben Zakkai, one of the greatest disciples of *Hillel haZaken*, was the chief Torah leader who witnessed the darkest period of *churban*. As Jerusalem was being torn apart by rebel-infighting and Jewish self-hatred, *Rebbe Yochanan ben Zakkai* hatched a plan to escape the city and convince the Romans to allow for the survival of *Torah*. Famously, his very own nephew, known as *Abba Sikra*, was one of the leaders of the *Biryonei* rebels. *Rebbe Yochanan* knew that these zealots would lead to the downfall of Jerusalem. Knowing that he could not stop the inevitable destruction of the *Beit HaMikdash*, he asked his nephew for help in escaping the holy city to allow for a הצלה פורתא, a small salvation.

After an elaborate faking of his death, *Rebbe Yochanan* is carried out of the city by his two greatest disciples: *Rebbe Yehoshua ben Chananya* (who we will discuss next week, *be'ezrat Hashem*) and *Rebbe Eliezer ben Hurkenus*. Upon meeting Vespasian and impressing the (soon-to-be) Roman emperor, *Rebbe Yochanan* famously asks for the right to re-establish the *Sanhedrin* in *Yavneh*. The *Tannaim* debated whether *Rebbe Yochanan* should have boldly requested that Vespasian not destroy the Temple itself. Instead, he only asked for the sparing of *Yavneh*. A superficial look at the story makes it seem as if *Rebbe Yochanan* only thought of the survival of the Torah as he turned his back on Jerusalem.

But there was another essential request made by *Rebbe Yochanan*. תן לי שושילתא דרבן גמליאל, give me the line of *Rabban Gamliel*.

What exactly was *Rebbe Yochanan* asking for? As we discussed several weeks ago, the first of the ten martyrs chosen for brutal execution was *Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel*, the descendant of *David HaMelech* who was the *Nasi* of Israel. When attempting to quash the pestering rebellion of the Jews, the Romans had naturally chosen such a prominent figure as their first victim. But *Rabban Shimon* had a wise and prominent son, named after his father. The Romans had not yet eradicated the line of *David HaMelech* as long as *Rabban Gamliel*, son of *Shimon*, was still alive. When Jerusalem would eventually be breached and destroyed, it is obvious that the Romans would have hunted down the last remnants of the monarchy that had first built the city. *Rabban Gamliel* was destined to follow his father's destiny as a holy martyr.

Rebbe Yochanan made an astounding request: please spare the Davidic line. Allow *Rabban Gamliel* to join me in *Yavneh* and take up his father's position as the head of the *Sanhedrin*. While the physical Jerusalem would be destroyed, *Rebbe Yochanan* knew that the soul of Jerusalem was inextricably linked with *David HaMelech* and his descendants. He boldly requested that he be allowed to extract that spiritual essence of Jerusalem from the city and spare it from destruction.

Rebbe Yochanan never turned his back on Jerusalem. He was the ultimate דורש ציון. Even as he left the city, he was already plotting its eventual glorious restoration. And such a beautiful return would require the return of תכין לתוכה תכין. And miraculously, his request was granted. From the literal ashes of Jerusalem, a spark of the eventual redemption was carefully preserved. *Rabban Gamliel d'Yavneh* would live on as one of the greatest sages of the post-*churban*. And his grandson, the great *Rebbe Yehudah HaNasi*, would single-handedly save *Klal Yisrael* from spiritual oblivion.

May we merit to see the plans of *Rebbe Yochanan* come to full fruition, speedily in our days.