**Why Did Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai Weep?**

**Based on a *sicha* by Harav Aharon Lichtenstein**

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The well-known Gemara in [*Berakhot* (28b)](https://www.sefaria.org/Berakhot.28b?lang=he-en&utm_source=torah.etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker) relates:

When Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai fell ill, his disciples came to visit him. When he saw them, he began to weep. His disciples said to him, “Light of Israel, right-hand pillar, mighty hammer – why do you weep?” He said to them: “Were I being led before a mortal king… I would weep; now that I am being led before the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He… and moreover, two paths are before me, one to Gan Eden and the other to Gehinnom, and I do not know upon which I am to be led – shall I not weep?”

They said to him, “Our teacher – bless us!” He said, “May it be [God’s] will that your fear of Heaven be like your fear of mortals.” His disciples said to him, “Is that all!?” He said to them, “If only it were so! Know that when a person transgresses, he says, ‘May no man see me.’”

Even after his lengthy response, the question of why Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai wept remains open. A giant of Jewish history, who influenced the world of Torah for many generations to come – could anyone imagine that he was to be led on the path of Gehinnom? He experiences here a deep-seated fear arising from the very fact that he is a “right-hand pillar and powerful hammer.” It is specifically his role as “light of Israel” which confronts him with the terrible question of whether his fear of heaven is at least as great as his fear of mortals.

A number of commentators suggest that a different thought disturbed Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai. They refer us to the account in [*Gittin* (56a-b)](https://www.sefaria.org/Gittin.56?lang=he-en&utm_source=torah.etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker) of the siege of Jerusalem, when tangible danger hung over the city and the leaders were divided as to how best to deal with the situation. Some, with firm faith in God and confidence in their own military strength, wanted to wage war against the Roman Empire. Others, who combined a realistic view of the world with their religious outlook, sought a path that would bring the nation at least partial salvation.

Although the former group viewed the latter path as surrender, a disgrace, or an abandonment of the nation, the Torah and the land, this latter group believed that this was the correct path at that time. Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai found himself in the latter camp. It is difficult to know how he arrived at this view, but it seems that it was no coincidence that he ended up in a position of leadership. The great men of the city at that time assessed his worldview and scholarship and chose him over the leaders of the other sects. They chose someone who perceived the long arc of Jewish history and Torah, someone who recognized different expressions of religious life, and someone who took responsibility for the fate of the nation as a whole.

The Gemara (*[Gittin](https://www.sefaria.org/Gittin.56?lang=he-en&utm_source=torah.etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker" \t "_blank)* [56a-b](https://www.sefaria.org/Gittin.56?lang=he-en&utm_source=torah.etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker)) recounts:

The *biryonim* (a group of Zealots) were then in the city. The Rabbis said to them: “Let us go out and make peace with them [the Romans].” They would not let them, but on the contrary said, “Let us go out and fight them.” The Rabbis said: “You will not succeed.” They [i.e., the *biryonim*] then rose up and burnt the stores of wheat and barley so that a famine ensued [and the Jews would be forced to fight]...

Abba Sikra, the leader of the *biryonim* of Jerusalem, was the nephew of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai. [Rabban Yochanan] sent to him, saying, “Come privately to me.” When he came, [Rabban Yochanan] said to him: “How long will you continue this say and kill everyone with starvation?”

He [Abba Sikra] said to him, “What can I do? If I say anything to them [i.e., to the other *biryonim*], they will kill me!”

He said to him, “Devise some way for me to escape [the besieged city of Jerusalem]; perhaps I shall be able to save a small portion.” [Rabban Yochanan then escaped and met with the Roman general Vespasian.] …

[Vespasian] said to [Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai]: “I am going now and someone else will come in my place. But you may make a request of me, and I shall grant it.”

He said, “Give me Yavneh and its scholars, and the dynasty of Rabban Gamliel, and doctors to heal Rabbi Tzadok.”

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai meets with his nephew, the head of the *biryonim*. It is apparent from their discussion that the latter has already, in principle, accepted Rabban Yochanan’s view, but he is not capable of doing anything about it. What he is willing to do is to arrange some clandestine way for Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai to leave the city so that he can meet with the head of the Roman forces. At the end of a lengthy conversation with him, Vespasian offers Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai the opportunity to make a request. Rabban Yochanan takes him up on the offer – even though some would say that this in itself represented weakness and submission. He requests three things: healing for Rabbi Tzadok, preserving the dynasty of Rabban Gamliel, and the town of Yavneh and its sages.

The concern for Rabbi Tzadok testifies to the importance of the individual in the eyes of Rabban Yochanan: he does not minimize or dismiss the suffering of the individual within an entire city that is under siege. The second request is somewhere between concern for the individual and concern for the community: Rabban Yochanan asks for protection for the dynasty of the *nesi’im*, the nation’s aristocracy and oligarchy, a symbol of the Israelite monarchy which is no more. The third request represents concern for all of *Am Yisrael* – and Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai chooses Yavneh and its sages. His choice astounds us: why settle for Yavneh, relinquishing the real center – Jerusalem?

We may propose two possible answers. One is that while Rabban Yochanan himself was able to predict the criticism that would later be directed at him for this decision, he felt that Jerusalem would not be given to him. The other possibility is that he perceived Yavneh and its sages as being in some way preferable to Jerusalem. Yavneh was a town on the periphery which, at that time, was witnessing a boom in Torah scholarship. Jerusalem was a divided, warring city in which even the Torah was subject to disputes and was tainted with causeless hatred.

The Gemara goes on to give voice to criticism of Rabban Yochanan:

Rabbi Yosef – some say Rabbi Akiva – applied to him [Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai] the verse: “[God] turns wise men backwards and makes their knowledge foolish” ([*Yeshayahu* 44:25](https://www.sefaria.org/Isaiah.44.25?lang=he-en&utm_source=torah.etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker)). For he should have said to [Vespasian], “Let [the Jews] off this time.” But [Rabban Yochanan] thought that so much would not be granted him, such that [if he were to make such a request] even a little would not be saved.

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai elects to make a smaller request in order to be certain that his request will be approved. His calculation is realistic, pragmatic, practical, and based on facts. He makes his calculation out of uncertainty as to what exactly the Romans will be prepared to allow. This leader of Israel adopts a self-consciously cautious approach: the spiritual future of the Jewish nation is not to be gambled with, and we do not ignore realistic, practical considerations. Sometime we are even prepared to suffice with “saving a little,” so long as it is the more certain option.

The Gemara presents a dissenting view, but this fact in and of itself testifies to Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai’s approach at this moment of crisis, faced with the danger of annihilation – he is fully aware of opposing views, which interpret his decision as weakness and submission.

**Viewing the considerations in their entirety**

Prior to the dramatic encounter described above between Rabban Yochanan and Vespasian, the Gemara records the deterioration amongst *Am Yisrael* which led to the gloomy situation in which Rabban Yochanan found himself. The well-known story of Kamtza and Bar-Kamtza demonstrates the depths of the baseless hatred that was rampant among the Jewish people. Bar-Kamtza, wishing to avenge himself for the despicable behavior to which he was subject, attempted to bring down upon the Jews the wrath of the Caesar:

He [Bar-Kamtza] went and said to the Emperor, “The Jews are rebelling against you.” He said, “How can I tell?” He said to him: “Send them an offering and see whether they will offer it [on the altar].” So he sent with him a fine calf.

While on the way, [Bar-Kamtza] made a blemish on its upper lip, or as some say on the white of its eye, in a place where we [Jews] count it a blemish but they [Romans] do not. The Rabbis were inclined to offer it in order not to offend the Government. Rabbi Zecharia ben Avkulas said to them: “People will say that blemished animals are offered on the altar.”

They then proposed to kill Bar-Kamza so that he should not go and inform against them, but Rabbi Zecharia ben Avkulas said to them, “Is one who makes a blemish on consecrated animals to be put to death?”

Rabban Yochanan thereupon remarked, “Through the scrupulousness of Rabbi Zecharia ben Avkulas our House has been destroyed, our Temple burnt, and we ourselves exiled from our land.” (*[Gittin](https://www.sefaria.org/Gittin.56a?lang=he-en&utm_source=torah.etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker" \t "_blank)* [56a](https://www.sefaria.org/Gittin.56a?lang=he-en&utm_source=torah.etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker))

Rabbi Zecharia ben Avkulas ignored considerations of the actual situation, and refused to contemplate an emergency deviation from standard halakha. Anyone with eyes in his head could easily understand the ramifications of what he was doing, in terms of how the emperor would view the accusation of rebellion. But if someone has no interest in considerations of the actual situation, why would he care about the emperor’s psychology? There he remains, holding the *Shulchan Arukh*, free of any blame.

The Gemara expresses an opinion about this approach, too. Rabban Yochanan’s conclusion is the bottom line of the discussion, criticizing Rabbi Zecharia: a constricted view that takes only local and isolated considerations into account, with no distinction between major and minor, is a mistaken halakhic approach. Halakha takes the real world into consideration, and someone whose books serve as blinders is ultimately responsible for the destruction of the Temple and the exile of the nation from its land. All of this arises from a mistaken ruling. Rabbi Zecharia did not turn the question over to Rabban Yochanan, but rather ruled on the basis of his own personal opinion – and thereby brought about terrible destruction.

We began our discussion with the view that connects Rabban Yochanan’s fear upon his deathbed to the fateful decision he had taken during the terrible time of the Destruction. As his life is about to end, he delves into his past to re-evaluate his ways and his actions. He is aware of the background to his decision and the considerations that led to it, but fears that perhaps he was mistaken; perhaps he chose the easier option rather than the more correct one. This doubt breaks down his internal barriers and he bursts into tears of pain and sorrow, repentance and regret. God has placed us in a world of doubt, and the measure of certainty which had allowed him to reach his decision was unavailable to him when he looked back on it.

Against this background we must examine two decisions: the decision of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, which was based on mature and responsible deliberation, with an examination of all possible alternatives, and the decision of Rabbi Zecharia, which was taken with a narrow-sighted refusal to consider alternatives. Rabbi Zecharia ben Avkulas does not weep. He is a man of certainty; he leaves doubts and self-examination to others. He takes into consideration only the narrow elements with which he is familiar, not opening his eyes to other horizons.

When faced with any decision, especially those that are weighty, there are two questions we must ask: what factors are to be considered and examined, and what is the relationship between the concerns that are weighed up against each other. Someone involved in the messy work of decision-making on the national level must be expert in the precise weighing-up of every factor in its own right, and must be skilled in understanding the relationship between the various elements and their mutual influences and effects. He must also always keep in mind Newton’s law that every action is accompanied by an equal and opposite reaction.

**Deliberation in decision-making**

Beyond the question of values and the relative weight to be assigned to various considerations, there is the question of the pace of decision-making.

On Yom Yerushalayim we heard an account, related in the name of one who was present in the room, of a meeting between Prime Minister Netanyahu (in his first term) and US Secretary of State Madeline Albright. The Secretary of State strongly admonished the Prime Minister for his plans to build in Jerusalem, and threatened that the United States would remove its support for Israel at the United Nations if Israel did not comply with its demand to cease building. The Secretary of State said that she understood this was a hard decision and gave the Prime Minister three days to respond. The Prime Minister replied that he required no time to consult and to formulate an answer; he refused on the spot to comply with the American demands.

I mention this episode not because I wish to advocate a specific political approach, but because it touches on key issues of morality and public life, including decision-making processes and consideration of values and halakha in matters of supreme importance.

On Yom Yerushalayim, the speaker lavishly praised the Prime Minister for his unhesitating response. I take a different view. Let us imagine a rabbi sitting in his office and responding to those who seek his guidance. A woman arrives with a blood stain or a chicken; he examines the evidence before him as accurately as he can, and then he may find that the situation is subject to a halakhic dispute. He may take a while to investigate the question further and study the different opinions in more depth. Thus, it can take some time to decide a question pertaining to a blood stain or the kashrut of a chicken. If one deliberates so seriously over a these halakhic questions, is it possible that fateful decisions regarding the future of the entire nation should be taken instantly?

When a political leader needs to make a decision concerning the entire community, can he risk jumping to a decision just because he may otherwise be considered weak or hesitant? Perhaps he needs to consult, to meditate, to gird himself for three days. How can anyone have the audacity to say that a decision of this sort, affecting the lives of many people, must be taken on the spot? Can all of this be dismissed with a wave of the hand, scorning considerations of the real world and glorifying instant decision-making?

**Weighty decisions**

Obviously, Jerusalem is a unique place in the world, and the very thought that part of it could be given up causes us to tremble. But a public leader cannot make a decision merely on the basis of trembling. A leader needs to learn from the example of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai; he, too, was dealing with the question of Jerusalem. Unlike some people today, he did not believe that decisions regarding Jerusalem are to be divorced from all rational considerations.

In a famous midrash, Chazal teach:

“A song unto Assaf: O God, heathen nations have come into Your inheritance” (*[Tehillim](https://www.sefaria.org/Psalms.79.1?lang=he-en&utm_source=torah.etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker" \t "_blank)* [79:1](https://www.sefaria.org/Psalms.79.1?lang=he-en&utm_source=torah.etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker)) – Is it appropriate that this psalm is introduced as a “song”? Surely it is a dirge! Similarly, it is written, “And David ascended the ascent of the olives, weeping as he ascended” ([*II Shemuel* 15:30](https://www.sefaria.org/II_Samuel.15.30?lang=he-en&utm_source=torah.etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker)) and yet it is written, “A song unto David when he fled” (*[Tehillim](https://www.sefaria.org/Psalms.3.1?lang=he-en&utm_source=torah.etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker" \t "_blank)* [3:1](https://www.sefaria.org/Psalms.3.1?lang=he-en&utm_source=torah.etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker))…

This may be compared to a king who had a son, who was difficult, and did not obey him. What did the king do? Since he was angry, he entered his son’s wedding canopy and cut and tore and cast down the curtains until they were all torn, and he threw them out. The king said, “Have I not acted well in tearing up my son’s bridal canopy, where I can make a more beautiful one? Moreover, I did not kill him in my anger, for if I had killed him then my brother’s son would have inherited me; it is better that my own son should inherit me.”

So said Assaf: Did God not act well in venting His anger on stones and wood, and not on His children? Therefore it is said, “God has finished His anger; He has poured out His wrath and ignited a fire in Zion” (*Eikha* 4:11). Therefore it is written, “A song unto Assaf: O God, heathen nations have come into Your inheritance.” (*Midrash* *Tehillim*, *mizmor* 79)

Better a destruction of wood and stones than a destruction of people! This is a most painful statement, and it is not difficult to imagine the sorrow with which the psalm was written. Perhaps it is possible to determine that the preservation of the Sanctuary is worth a certain price in human life, but why is it necessary to give an immediate answer?

In deliberating political processes – as well as personal processes – a person must choose between different alternatives, different values, and different dangers. There is much to ponder and many factors to weigh.

It was a terrible and bitter time that Assaf viewed in his prophecy – “Heathen nations have come into your inheritance; they have defiled Your holy temple; they have made Jerusalem into heaps.” But Chazal understood, as Assaf himself did, that the Jewish nation had already known much sorrow and many crises, and it was important to view these in perspective.

Our nation has had many opportunities for weeping. Heightening our awareness of distress, our sensitivity to human life and suffering, can bring a person to tears. A wonderful midrash speaks of the weeping of *Knesset Yisrael*:

Israel says, “Master of the universe, the princes sin – and they bring a sacrifice and it atones for them. Mashiach sins – and he brings a sacrifice and it atones for him. As for us – we have no sacrifice.” He said to them, “And if the entire congregation of Israel sins…” ([*Vayikra* 4:13](https://www.sefaria.org/Leviticus.4.13?lang=he-en&utm_source=torah.etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker)).

They said to Him, “We are poor and are unable to bring sacrifices.” He said, “Words are what I seek, as it is written, ‘Take words with you and return to God’ ([*Hoshea* 14:3](https://www.sefaria.org/Hosea.14.3?lang=he-en&utm_source=torah.etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker)) – and I shall forgive all of your transgressions.” And “words” always means “words of Torah,” as it is written, “These are the words which Moshe spoke…” (*[Devarim](https://www.sefaria.org/Deuteronomy.1.1?lang=he-en&utm_source=torah.etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker" \t "_blank)* [1:1](https://www.sefaria.org/Deuteronomy.1.1?lang=he-en&utm_source=torah.etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker)).

They said to Him, “We do not know [words of Torah].” He said to them, “Weep and pray before Me, and I shall accept it. When your forefathers were enslaved in Egypt, was it not through prayer that I redeemed them? As it is written, ‘And Bnei Yisrael groaned from the labor, and they cried out’ (*[Shemot](https://www.sefaria.org/Exodus.2.23?lang=he-en&utm_source=torah.etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker" \t "_blank)* [2:23](https://www.sefaria.org/Exodus.2.23?lang=he-en&utm_source=torah.etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker))”… So, too, even though the people of Jerusalem angered Me, I had mercy upon them because they wept…

Therefore David says, “I wash my hands in innocence…” (*[Tehillim](https://www.sefaria.org/Psalms.26.6-7?lang=he-en&utm_source=torah.etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker" \t "_blank)* [26:6-7](https://www.sefaria.org/Psalms.26.6-7?lang=he-en&utm_source=torah.etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker)). It does not continue, “…to offer sacrifices to You,” but rather “to sound the voice of thanksgiving” – I am thankful to You for the words of Torah. (*Shemot Rabba* 38)

Weeping demonstrates sorrow, but also other elements. One who does not weep expresses excessive self-confidence. Weeping breaks down barriers; it allows a person to uplift and rededicate himself, owing to the determination that can emerge from sorrow.

Some people would say that the weeping in the midrash is appropriate for the exile, where the Jews had no political and military strength; all they were able to do was weep. In Eretz Yisrael, they claim, a new type of Jew has emerged – upstanding, mighty, believing in his power. Avraham, who did not inherit the land, was able to weep; Bnei Yisrael, enslaved in Egypt, could weep. But in Eretz Yisrael there is a new ethos, which precludes spontaneous weeping; in fact, it precludes weeping altogether. Even if people in Eretz Yisrael sometimes weep, this is an outdated expression of the broken-hearted helplessness of the Jew in exile.

The midrash comes to tell us that it was weeping which redeemed the Jews of Jerusalem. Sorrow and broken-heartedness are bound up with human suffering, bound up with God Himself Who says, “My soul shall weep in hidden places” (*[Yirmiyahu](https://www.sefaria.org/Jeremiah.13.17?lang=he-en&utm_source=torah.etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker" \t "_blank)* [13:17](https://www.sefaria.org/Jeremiah.13.17?lang=he-en&utm_source=torah.etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker)) – and they exist in Eretz Yisrael, too. The person who weeps must also be the person who makes decisions. May we be worthy to learn to weep properly. Fateful decisions must emerge out of weeping and prayer. Heaven forefend that our human sensitivity disappear in a cloud of national pride. At the setting of the sun, on the eve of God’s great and awesome day, Jews stand, wrapped in their *tallitot*, and from every weeping, praying throat there arises a prayer:

May it be Your will, Who hears the sound of weeping, that You collect our tears in Your bottle, and deliver us from all harsh and cruel decrees, for our eyes look only to You.

(This sicha was delivered on the 29th of Iyar 5770 [May 13, 2010].)