

GIVE ME YAVNE: JUDAISM IN TIMES OF DESTRUCTION

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In the year 70 CE, the city of Jerusalem was on fire. The Romans were breaching the walls and the Jews within the walls were about to die. The zealots understood this and believed that with the Temple destroyed and religious life over, life was not worth living. Those zealots perished, most of them in the flames. Had that been the only response, the story of the Jewish people would have ended.

Another group fled the city for the south, establishing themselves on Masada with the hopes of staving off the Romans as long as possible. When it became clear that there was no chance of survival, they entered into a pact of mass suicide. Had that been the whole response, that too would have ended our story as a people.

A third group fled north to a town called Tzipori. They essentially assimilated into the surrounding culture and while they survived, their Judaism largely disappeared.

Three responses to crisis, all understandable: die fighting, die by one's own hand, or assimilate. Had these been the only responses to the destruction of the Temple, Judaism would have died altogether. But there was one small group that took a different course which made all the difference. Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, a prominent leader in Jerusalem, came up with a plan. He would pretend to die, and his students would bring him out of the city in a coffin. He was snuck out of the city and met with Vespasian, a Roman commander. He asked for a favor: "Give me Yavne and its sages." Recognizing that Jerusalem was lost, ben Zakkai understood that Judaism wasn't about a particular piece of real estate, but about the continuation of study and teaching.

The commander agreed, and this is why Judaism survived the cataclysmic loss of the Temple. I doubt that Yohanan ben Zakkai understood the full weight of this decision or its implications, and his deal was not without significant sacrifice. But Ben Zakkai was clear about the core of Judaism and what was possible within the realities of the time.

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I think it's fair to say that circumstances in Jewish history have made us a pivoting people. We've developed a muscle not just for surviving, but for animating our values in new ways with what emerges from tragedy. So perhaps this is our moment. **In the face of so much loss, so much death, and so much disruption, we will once again have to focus on what really matters, what can be saved and what must be let go so that Judaism — its values and its path to help us be better, kinder, more generous humans — can thrive.**

Even though Yohanan ben Zakkai was forced to give up the most important Jewish place in the world, the Jewish literature, tradition, and culture that had developed over thousands of years persisted. So at the same time that we must grieve for all that has been lost, we must think big and be clear about what matters most. **We must find the strength within ourselves and in our communities to move forward.**

