

The escape of Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai

Tales of the Talmud with Rabbi Nick Renner

There were certain *Biryoni*¹ among the people of Jerusalem. The Rabbis said to them, "Let us go out and make peace with the Romans". But [the *Biryoni*] would not allow them. The *Biryoni* said, "Let us go out to fight them!" The Rabbis said, "You will not succeed." [The *Biryoni*] then rose up and burned the stores of wheat and barley in the city so that a famine ensued.

Marta, the daughter of Baitos, was one of the richest women in Jerusalem. She sent her assistant out saying, "Go and bring me some fine flour." By the time he went it was sold out. He came and told her, "There is no fine flour, but there is white flour." She then said to him, "Go and bring me some." By the time he went he found the white flour sold out. He came and told her, "There is no white flour but there is dark flour." She said to him, "Go and bring me some." By the time he went it was sold out. He returned and said to her, "There is no dark flour, but there is barley flour." She said, "Go and bring me some." By the time he went this was also sold out. She had taken off her shoes, but she said, I will go out and see if I can find anything to eat. She stepped in excrement, it stuck to her foot, and she died. R. Yohanan b. Zakkai said about her, "The soft and delicate among you who would not dare to set the sole of your foot upon the ground."²

Others said that she ate a fig left by R. Tzadok, and became sick and died. This is because R. Tzadok observed fasts for forty years in order that Jerusalem might not be destroyed, and he became so thin that when he ate anything the food could be seen as it passed through his body. When he would eat after a fast, they used to bring him a fig, and he used to suck the juice and throw the rest away. It was one of these figs that Marta ate. When Marta was about to die, she brought out all her gold and silver and threw it in the street, saying, "What is the good of this to me, according to the verse, 'They shall throw their silver into the streets.'³"

¹ Zealots

² Deuteronomy 28:57

³ Ezekiel 7:19, "They shall throw their silver into the streets and their gold shall be unclean. Neither their silver nor their gold will save them in the day of the Lord's wrath to satisfy or fill them, because they made them stumble into guilt.

Abba Sikkara⁴ was the head of the *Biryoni* in Jerusalem as well as the son of Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai's sister. R. Yohanan ben Zakkai sent a message to him saying, "Come to see me in secret." When he came, he said, "How long are you going to continue this and kill all the people through starvation?" Abba Sikkara replied, "What can I do? If I say something to them, they will kill me." R. Yohanan said, "Help me plan a way to escape. Maybe there will be some slight salvation."

Abba Sikkara said to him, "Pretend to be sick, and let everyone come to ask about your health. Bring something evil-smelling and put it by you so that they'll say you're dead. Then let your students come in to bring you to burial, but no one else so they don't realize you're light, since they know that a living being is lighter than a corpse."

He did so, and Rabbi Eliezer came to one side and Rabbi Yehoshua from the other. When they reached the gate to the city, some of the zealot guard wanted to pierce the coffin. Abba Sikkara said to them, "Should the Romans say, 'They have pierced their Master'?" The guards wanted to give it a push but Abba Sikkara said to them, "Should they say that they pushed their Master?"

They opened a town gate for R. Yohanan and he escaped.

Babylonian Talmud
Tractate Gittin 56a

⁴ Father of the Sicarii, another group of Jewish militants