

Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai II

Tales of the Talmud with Rabbi Nick Renner

When R. Yohanan reached the Romans he said, “Peace upon you, King, peace upon you, King.” General Vespasian said, “You shall die for two reasons, First--because I am not a king and you call me king. Second--if I am a king, why did you not come to me before now?”

R. Yohanan replied, “As for your saying that you are not a king, in truth you are a king, since if you were not a king Jerusalem would not be delivered into your hand, as it is written, ‘And Lebanon shall fall by a mighty one.’¹ ‘Mighty one’ applies only to a king, as it is written, ‘And their mighty one shall be of themselves’² and Lebanon refers to the Temple, as it says, ‘This good mountain and Lebanon.’³ As for your question, ‘Why if you are a king, I did not come to you till now,’ the answer is that the *Biryoni*⁴ did not let me.”

Vespasian said to him, “If there is a jar of honey and a snake is wrapped around it, wouldn’t they break the jar in order to kill the snake?” R. Yohanan ben Zakkai was silent, and could give no answer. R. Yosef, or as some say R. Akiva, said about R. Yohanan, “I am the Lord... who turns sages backwards and makes their knowledge foolish.”⁵ R. Yohanan should have said to Vespasian, “We take a pair of tongs to seize the snake and kill it, so we leave the jar intact.”

Meanwhile, a messenger arrived from Rome saying to him, “Rise, for the Emperor has died, and the noblemen of Rome have decided to make you head of the State.” At that time, Vespasian was wearing only one boot and when he tried to put on the other he could not. He tried to take off the first but it would not come off. He said, “What is this?” R. Yohanan said to him, “Don’t worry for good news has reached you, as it says, ‘Good tidings make the bone fat.’⁶” But Vespasian said, “What do I do?” He replied, “Let someone whom you dislike come and pass before you, as it is written, ‘A broken spirit dries the bones.’⁷” He did so, and the boot went on. Vespasian said to him, “Since you’re so wise, why didn’t you come to me until now?” He said, “Didn’t I tell you?” — Vespasian retorted, “I also told you.”

¹ Isaiah 10:34

² Jeremiah 30:21

³ Deuteronomy 3:25

⁴ Zealots

⁵ Isaiah 44:25

⁶ Proverbs 15:30

⁷ Proverbs 17:22

Vespasian said, "I'm going to Rome now, and will send someone to take my place. But you can make a request and I will grant it." R. Yohanan said to him: Give me Yavne and its sages, as well as the family line of Rabban Gamliel." R. Yosef, or some say R. Akiva, said about him, "I am the Lord... who turns sages backwards and makes their knowledge foolish."⁸ He should to have said to Vespasian, "Spare the Jews this time." But R. Yohanan thought he wouldn't even do that much, and there wouldn't even be the slightest salvation.

Babylonian Talmud
Tractate Gittin 56b

⁸ Isaiah 44:25