



The Indefatigable YBZ: Ancient Wisdom For Leading In A Modern Crisis

By Dr. Hal M. Lewis

Long before the Jewish world adulated “The Notorious RBG,” to whom, now more than ever, we extend wishes for good health, long life and continued vitality, we, as a people, drew inspiration and guidance from another legal scholar, the one I call “The Indefatigable YBZ.” I refer, of course, to the revered Rabban, Yohanan ben Zakkai, the one individual who, more than any other, kept Judaism alive following what was arguably our greatest crisis, the destruction of the Temple.

I have been thinking a great deal about Yohanan ben Zakkai during these days of Coronavirus. While contemporary Jews understandably draw strength and inspiration from Andrew Cuomo and Jacinda Ardern, among a handful of others, we have our own rich tradition of leaders who understood what it meant to lead in crisis, and in this regard, none is greater than YBZ.

Perhaps most well-known for his daring escape from Jerusalem (sequestered in a coffin), ben Zakkai implored Roman authorities to allow him to reestablish the rabbinic academy and supreme religious court (Sanhedrin) in the village of Yavne, at a safe distance from the holy city (Gittin 56a-b). Having predicted the fall of Jerusalem, ben Zakkai was unwilling to let Judaism crumble along with the Temple itself. Faced with an uncertain future, Yohannan ben Zakkai sought to maximize the opportunities inherent in the crisis at hand. He knew what few others in his day comprehended. Despite the importance of Jerusalem to the Jewish people, responding to the crisis by continuing to do what had always been done was nothing short of a prescription for disaster. “Tein li Yavne, v'hakameha – Give me Yavne and its sages,” became the new rallying cry of a post-Temple Jewish people, sufficiently resilient, and agile enough to move beyond what surely seemed the inevitable end of Jewish life.

Several years following his efforts at Yavne, Rabban Yohannan ben Zakkai was walking with his disciple, Rabbi Joshua, near the then destroyed city of Jerusalem. Looking out over the place where the Temple stood, Rabbi Joshua was distraught. Everything he knew to be good and valuable and true in the world had been upended. The life he

lived, the rituals he practiced, the means by which he served God were no longer. One can almost feel the pathos in his wail, when, according to Avot de Rabbi Natan (4:5), he looked at his teacher, and cried out, "Alas for us! The place that atoned for the sins of the people Israel (through the ritual of sacrifices) lies in ruins!"

Like many crisis leaders of our day, Yohannan ben Zakkai understood the pain and distress, the fear and uncertainty, felt by his colleague. After all, he too was mourning the loss of the Temple and everything it stood for. He knew all too well that what had been destroyed was much more than an imposing edifice. But Yohannan ben Zakkai was impelled to move beyond his own fears and sadness. He knew that a leader in times of crisis must offer followers much more than commiseration or a sympathetic shoulder to cry on. His job was to help Rabbi Joshua and the people at large, to envisage a different model, to foresee life beyond the cataclysm. The text continues:

Then Rabbi Yohannan ben Zakkai spoke to him, "Do not be distressed my son. For we have a form of atonement just like it (Temple sacrifices). And what is it? Acts of kindness, as it says (Hosea 6:6), 'Loving kindness I desire, not sacrifice.'"

Before anything else, Yohannan ben Zakkai understood the need to acknowledge the pain of his student. His response is not flippant or managerial. He doesn't shake him dismissively and taunt him with cries of, "Get over it, man. It is what it is." Instead he first offers words of comfort. He speaks directly to Rabbi Joshua's heart and soul. Effective crisis leaders understand the import of connecting first on a human level, what some today would call emotional intelligence. 'The future is scary, I'm scared too, and the loss is overwhelming. But we will get through this even as tomorrow will look very different from today.'

Yohannan ben Zakkai's leadership, however, is found not in his compassion alone. Just as he did when he established the center at Yavne, he knew it was essential to provide Rabbi Joshua with a concrete plan for the future. He neither hesitated to move forward nor did he pretend that everything would remain the same. Instead, like every good crisis leader, he painted a picture for those who needed it most of what life post-crisis would look like. 'Of course, we will still need a way to seek atonement, and while it is not sacrifice, it is arguably something far more accessible and achievable, namely the performance of good deeds.' Here Rabbi Yohannan ben Zakkai spoke not only to Rabbi Joshua but to generations of Jews after him. His message was as unambiguous as it was uplifting. One can still be Jewish and serve God even though what was once thought to be the only way of doing so now lies in ruins. Because of his leadership, the consummate pivot had been effectuated. What was once thought to be the only truth is now but a truth from our past. Judaism survives, ben Zakkai insisted, we will survive and in this new system we will thrive as never before.

And then Rabbi Yohannan does something that those who lead in crisis must always seek to do. Rather than hovering in the nether world of vacuous and unsubstantiated promises, he comes as close as he can to validating his new vision by offering a proof, or in this case, a proof text. His renown as a scholar notwithstanding, why would this new plan be enough to convince his coreligionists that Judaism can endure beyond the current crisis? What great leaders understand is that in the aftermath of a crisis, a new plan or a restructure, or a reinvention can only be legitimated when it reflects the core values of the enterprise, either an organization or a people. And that is precisely what Yohannan ben Zakkai did when he invoked the teachings of the prophet, Hosea. Radically redefining the path to atonement from sacrifice to good deeds was far from self-evident. Only by citing the words of Hosea, who had previously made known God's teachings that lovingkindness, not sacrifice is the preferred approach, was he able to lend authenticity to his model of a new future.

What Rabban Yohannan ben Zakkai understood is that leading through crisis requires compassion and optimism, clarity of purpose and tenacity. By acknowledging the pain and uncertainty of the present, while refusing to wallow in fear, by instilling confidence and foresight in one's followers and by linking a new vision to the underlying core values that give us meaning, a leader can bring her people to a new place; a place that over time will prove far more adaptable and resonant than ever imagined.

Dr. Hal M. Lewis is the current Chancellor and former President and CEO of Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership. He is the Principal Consultant for Leadership For Impact LLC, an executive coaching and organizational consulting firm, specializing in the nonprofit sector.