

Jewish Wisdom for a Fractured Age

From the War Room to the Newsroom — a text study

Rabbi Elan Babchuck, *Executive Vice President, Clal* - Elan@Clal.org

When our world feels like it's breaking apart, what shall we hold onto? We begin with two master narratives about American Jewish life today - one of erosion and loss, another of possibility and hope, both of which are honest responses to this moment. Then we introduce a radical proposal from our rabbis about how to reconcile the two narratives, and move forward accordingly: bringing Jewish wisdom into the public square.

OPENING FRAME

The Two Notes

Reb Simcha Bunim of Peshischa taught that everyone should carry two notes, one in each pocket, and learn which to open when. In one pocket: "The world was created for my sake." In the other: "I am but dust and ashes."

בְּשִׁבְלִי נִבְרָא הָעוֹלָם

"The world was created for my sake." (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5)

וְאַנֹכִי עָפָר וָאֵפֶר

"I am but dust and ashes." (Genesis 18:27 — Abraham, speaking to God)

TEXT ONE · THE PIVOT

Yavneh: Give Me a School

Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 56a–56b

Jerusalem is under Roman siege. The zealots inside the walls burn the city's own storehouses, forcing a fight to the death. Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai has himself smuggled out of the dying city in a coffin, comes before the Roman general Vespasian, and greets him as a king. Word arrives that Vespasian has indeed been named emperor. He grants the old rabbi one request.

אָמַר לֵיהּ: מִיִּזְל אֶזְיִלָּנָא, וְאִינִשׁ אֶחָרִינָא מְשַׁדְרָנָא; אֵלָא בְּעֵי מִינָאִי מִיַּדִּי דְּאַתָּן לָךְ. אָמַר לֵיהּ: תֵּן לִי יִבְנָה וְחֻכְמִיָּה, וְשׁוֹשִׁילָתָא דְּרַבִּין גְּמָלִיאֵל, וְאַסְוִיתָא דְּמַסְיִין לֵיהּ לְרַבִּי צְדוֹק.

“Vespasian said: I am leaving and will send another in my place. But ask something of me and I will grant it. Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai said: Give me Yavneh and its Sages, and the dynasty of Rabban Gamliel, and physicians to heal Rabbi Tzadok.”

On the way out: which way are you facing

Avot d’Rabbi Natan 4 — a companion tradition

As Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai leaves the ruined city, his student Rabbi Yehoshua walks behind him, sees the Temple in ruins, and cries out.

פעם אחת היה רבן יוחנן בן זכאי יוצא מירושלים, והיה רבי יהושע הולך אחריו. אמר רבי יהושע:
אוי לנו על זה שהוא חרב, מקום שמכפרים בו עונותיהם של ישראל! אמר לו: בני, אל ירע לך. יש
לנו כפרה אחת שהיא כמותה — גמילות חסדים, שנאמר: כי חסד חפצתי ולא זבח.

“Rabbi Yehoshua cried out: Woe to us! The place where the sins of Israel were atoned now lies in ruins. Rabban Yohanan said to him: My son, do not grieve. We have another atonement just as powerful — acts of lovingkindness, as it is said, ‘For I desire kindness, not sacrifice’ (Hosea 6:6).”

Rabbi Yehoshua is still facing Jerusalem, the loss in front of him. Rabban Yohanan has already turned toward Yavneh, the loss behind him, and can see how to serve God in a new way. Your sense of this moment’s Churban or Yavneh may come down to nothing more than which direction you are facing.

For discussion

- Rabban Yohanan asked Vespasian for a school, not for the Temple. What did he grasp about survival that the zealots did not?
- Rabbi Yehoshua faces the ruins; Rabban Yohanan faces what comes next. Which direction is our community facing right now? What about you?

TEXT TWO • THE MANDATE

Seek the Welfare of the City

Jeremiah 29:4–7 — the prophet’s letter to the exiles in Babylon

כה אמר ה' צבאות אלהי ישראל לכל־הגולה אשר־הגליתי מירושלם בבבלה:

בנו בתים ושבו ונטעו גנות ואכלו את־פריהן:

ודרשו את־שלום העיר אשר הגליתי אתכם שמה והתפללו בעדה אלה' כי בשלומה יהיה לכם שלום:

“Thus said the God of Israel to the whole exile community I banished from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat their fruit... And seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you, and pray to God on its behalf; for in its welfare you shall find your welfare.”

For discussion

- Jeremiah tells a traumatized, exiled people to invest in Babylon — the very empire that destroyed them. Why bind our welfare to theirs?
- Where is “the city” whose welfare we are told to seek today?

TEXT THREE · OUT TO THE PEOPLE

Go Out and See

Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 45a — the same ruling recurs in Eruvin 14b and beyond

The study hall is deadlocked over a fine point — which blessing to say. The one who leads the beit midrash does not settle it with a sharper argument. He settles it by sending them outside.

פֹּק חָזִי מַאי עָמַא דְּבַר.

“Go out and see what the people are doing.” (*puk chazi mai ama d’var*)

When reasoning alone cannot resolve a question, the Talmud implores us to leave the study hall and watch how ordinary people actually live. The practice of real people in the real world outranks the theory of the scholars. Wisdom that never leaves the study hall has not yet become living Torah.

For discussion

- The beit midrash’s ruling sends you outside, to observe how everyday people live their lives, to resolve their dispute. Why would the tradition trust the streets over the scholars?
- If a piece of Jewish wisdom only ever reaches other Jews (or only the scholars themselves) has it gone far enough?

TEXT FOUR · THE WORLD COMES LOOKING

When Power Seeks Wisdom

Babylonian Talmud, Tamid 31b–32a — Alexander and the Elders of the Negev

Alexander of Macedon — the most powerful man in the world — poses his most pressing questions to a circle of Jewish elders.

מָה יַעֲבִיד אִינִישׁ וְיִחְיֶה? יָמִית עֲצָמוֹ. מָה יַעֲבִיד אִינִישׁ וְיָמוּת? חֲיֶה אֶת עֲצָמוֹ.

“What should a person do to truly live? Let him put himself to death — live with restraint. What should a person do to die? Let him keep himself alive — live only for indulgence.”

אִיזְהוּ חָכָם — הַרוֹאֶה אֶת הַנּוֹלָד.

“Who is wise? The one who sees what is coming.”

For discussion

- The most powerful man on earth brings his deepest questions to a circle of Jewish elders. What does the world actually want from Jewish wisdom?
- When have you seen Jewish wisdom answer a question whose implications stretched far beyond the Jewish community?

TEXT FIVE · HOW WE DO IT

Two Postures: Abraham and Esther

Abraham argues as an *outsider*

Genesis 18:23–32

וַיָּגֵשׁ אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הֲאֵף תִּסְפֶּה צְדִיק עִם־רָשָׁע:

“Abraham came forward and said: Will You really sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?” (18:23)

חֲלִלָּה לָּךְ מַעֲשֵׂת כַּדְּבָר הַזֶּה... הַשִּׁפּט כָּל־הָאָרֶץ לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט:

“Far be it from You to do such a thing... Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?” (18:25)

וַיַּעַן אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר... וְאֲנִכִּי עָפָר וָאֵפֶר:

“Abraham answered and said... and I am but dust and ashes.” (18:27)

Esther works from *inside* the palace

Esther 4:14, 4:16, 10:3

וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם־לֵיעַת כְּזֹאת הִגַּעְתָּ לְמַלְכוּת:

“And who knows whether it was for just such a moment as this that you came to royalty?” (Mordecai to Esther, 4:14)

וּבֵכֵן אָבוֹא אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר לֹא־כֹדֶת וְכֹאֲשֶׁר אֲבִדְתִּי אֲבִדְתִּי:

“Then I will go to the king, though it breaks the law; and if I perish, I perish.” (4:16)

דִּרְשׁ טוֹב לַעֲמוֹ וְדַבֵּר שָׁלוֹם לְכָל־זֵרְעוֹ:

“[Mordecai] sought the good of his people and spoke peace to all his kindred.” (10:3)

For discussion

- Abraham advocates from the outside; Esther influences from within. Which posture are you holding today?
- Both are bold enough to act and humble enough to recognize the stakes. What does it take to hold both at the same time?