

## Respecting Tradition

By Rabbi Dovid Markel

When Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai saw that the destruction of the Temple and Judea was imminent he surreptitiously made his way out of Jerusalem to meet Vespasian and ensure the continuity of Judaism.

After Vespasian was placated for what seemed like an affront and elated that it was Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai who enlightened that he was to become Caesar, he told him that “You can, however, make a request of me and I will grant it.”

The Talmud (Gittin 56b) records the requests that Rabbi Yochanan asked: “He said to him: Give me Yavneh and its Wise Men, and the family chain of Rabban Gamaliel, and physicians to heal R. Tzadok.”

It is self-understood that at this pivotal moment in Jewish history that there would be a definitive centrality to his requests.

Indeed, the significance of his appeal for Yavneh and the family chain of Rabban Gamaliel is easily understandable.

In his request that Vespasian spare Yavneh and its scholars he literally ensured the continuity of Israel in the diaspora. In a speech in Y.U on Yom HaAtzmaut, Rabbi Yosef Ber Soloveitchik once elaborated that it was through this first request that gave the Jewish people hope to survive the exile.<sup>1</sup>

For, it was through a Jew identifying with Torah rather than nationalism that safeguarded a Jew would retain his identity throughout the exile. It is specifically through Torah study and identifying with Torah as a people that Israel has weathered the exile.

The second point, of not harming the “family chain of Rabban Gamaliel,” as well is understood. Safeguarding the Davidic line from destruction gives hope that eventually a scion will arise from the family who will be the Moshiach and redeem Israel.

What is not understood is the curious request that Vespasian heal R. Tzadok! At the time Rabbi Tzadok was already a very old man and had already regularly fasted for forty consecutive years that the destruction of Jerusalem not come; surely healing Rabbi Tzadok would not have kept him alive for many years.<sup>2</sup>

That being the case it seems to make no sense; when Rabbi Yochanan had the chance to make a request, why did he not ask for something more central to ensuring Israel’s survival than the healing of Rabbi Tzadok?!

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<sup>1</sup> David Holzer, The Rav, Thinking Aloud Vol. 1 Pg. 195ff.

<sup>2</sup> Gittin, 56a

However, in this request is embedded an important lesson in the secret of Israel's endurance. To ensure the future one must not only discuss the future but respects one's past. If the Jewish people do not respect the rabbinic heritage from where they were hewn their survival is uncertain.

Only, through a respect of thousands of years of our heritage has Israel lasted in exile. It is the respect of tradition of "If the earlier [scholars] were sons of angels, we are sons of men,"<sup>3</sup> that guarantees our survival.

There are individuals that deprecate thousands of years of Jewish scholarship, having the hubris to exclaim that the great sages of Israel that came before them did not objectively understand the Talmud.

Besides for the gall of these Johnny come lately to believe that their understanding of Talmud is greater than their predecessors, it undermines and destabilizes the very structure of Judaism.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, would often tell a story that aptly expresses this point.

*Once, in a Russian open-market, a Jew happened to come upon a peasant extolling his wares. He noticed that the peasant was selling a pair of Tefillin. They obviously did not belong to the peasant and were probably stolen goods.*

*The Jew asked the peasant how he had come across such an item, to which he responded: "Sam Saposhnik"—"I am a shoe maker. I sewed them myself."*

Only a fool would believe that he need not need the scholarship of our predecessors and can instead reconstruct a proper understanding of Torah and Talmud on his own.

When the Mishna (Avot 6:6) lists the forty eight qualities to acquire Torah it enumerates: "listening...awe, fear, humility,...serving the sages, ... faith in the sages..., knowing one's place..., lack of arrogance in learning etc." Only when one has proper humility, respects the sages and knows one place can they come to appreciate the true meaning of Torah.

It is for this reason that the Talmud is replete with long winded quotes of one rabbi quoting from another rabbi who quotes from another and so forth. Because, only when one's words are based on the scholarship of preceding generations and respects their Torah like the words of angels can the chain of Jewish scholarship be unbroken.

Indeed, the Talmud (Berachos 27b) goes so far as to say that "one who says something which he has not heard from his master causes the Divine Presence to depart from Israel."

May we indeed ensure the continuity of Judaism through an adequate respect for the Torah of our sages and ensure that the Divine Presence remain within Israel!

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<sup>3</sup> Talmud, Shabbos 112b