Salvage Whatever We Can

A Talk with Prof. Yuli Tamir

Biographical Note

Yuli (Yael) Tamir (b. 1954) is a professor of philosophy and an erstwhile Member of Knesset, Minister of Immigrant Absorption in 1999–2001, and Minister of Education in 2006–2009, representing the Labor Party.

Born in Tel Aviv, she attended Alliance High School in the city. In the Yom Kippur War, she served as an officer in an Israel Defense Forces outpost in Sinai and was demobilized at the rank of Lieutenant.

In 1978, she earned a Bachelor’s degree in Biology and in 1985 a Master’s degree in Political Science, both at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. In 1989, she was awarded the degree of Doctor of Political Philosophy from Oxford University in the UK. From 1989–1999, she taught at the Department of Philosophy at Tel Aviv University and was a research fellow at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, Princeton University, and Harvard University.

Tamir was a co-founder of the *Peace Now* movement in 1978. From 1980–1985, she was active in the Movement for Civil Rights (*Ratz*),[[1]](#footnote-2) and from 1998–1999 chaired the Association for Civil Rights in Israel. From 1985 to 2009, she was active in the Labor Party.

Tamir was a co-author of the *Kinneret* *Covenant*.[[2]](#footnote-3) Today she is president of *Shenkar* College of Engineering and Design.

Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 56a[[3]](#footnote-4)

There were certain Zealots [among the people of Jerusalem]. The Sages said to them: Let us go out and make peace with them [the Romans]. They did not allow them. They said to them [the Sages]: Let us go out and engage [them] in battle against the Romans. The Sages said to them: You will not be successful. They arose and burned down the storehouses of wheat and barley, and there was famine.

[…]

Abba Sikkara was the leader of the Zealots of Jerusalem and the son of the sister of Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai. He [Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai] sent to him: Come to me in secret. He came and he [Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai] said to him: How long will you do this and starve everyone to death? He [Abba Sikkara] said to him: What can I do, for if I say something to them they will kill me. He [Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai] said to him: Show me a method so that I will leave the city and perhaps thus there will be some small salvation.

He [Abba Sikkara] said to him: Pretend to be sick, and have everyone come and ask, [so that word will spread about your ailing condition]. Afterward, bring something putrid and place it near you, and have people say that you have died. Have your students enter and let no one else come in so that they do not notice that you are still light as they [the Zealots] know that a living person is lighter than a dead person.

He [Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai] carried out [the plan]. Rabbi Eliezer entered from one side and Rabbi Yehoshua from the other side [to take him out]. When they arrived at the exit from the city, they [the guards, who were of the faction of the Zealots], wanted to stab him [to confirm that he was dead]. He [Abba Sikkara] said to them: They [the Romans] will say that they stab their master! They wanted to push him. He said to them: They [the Romans] will say that they push their master! They opened the gate and he was taken out.

When he [Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai] arrived there [the Roman camp], he said: Greetings to you, the king; greetings to you, the king. He [Vespasian] said to him: You are liable for two death penalties, one because you call me the king and I am not the king, and furthermore, if I am the king, why did you not come to me until now? He [Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai] said to him: As for what you said about yourself: I am not the king, in truth, you are the king. For if you are not the king, Jerusalem will not fall into your hand, as it is written: “And the Lebanon shall fall by a mighty one” [Isaiah 10:34]. And “mighty one” means only a king, as it is written: “And their mighty one shall be of themselves [and their ruler shall proceed from the midst of them]”—[Jeremiah 30:21], indicating that “mighty one” parallels “ruler.” And “Lebanon” means only the Temple, as it is stated: “That good mountain and the Lebanon” [Deuteronomy 3:25]. And as for what you said: If I am the king why did you not come to me until now, the Zealots among us did not allow us.

He [Vespasian] said to him: If there were a barrel of honey and a snake was wrapped around it, would they not break the barrel in order [to kill] the snake? [=destroy the city of Jerusalem in order to kill the Zealots barricaded within it?] He [Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai] was silent. Rav Yosef read the following verse about him, and some say it was Rabbi Akiva: “[I am the Lord]…Who turns wise men backward and makes their knowledge foolish” [Isaiah 44:25]. He should have said to him: In such a case, we take tongs, remove the snake and kill it, and leave the barrel intact.

[…]

He [Vespasian] said to him [Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai]: I will be going to Rome and I will send someone else [to continue besieging the city]. But ask something of me that I [can] give you. He [Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai] said to him: Give me Yavne and its Sages and the dynasty of Rabban Gamliel [the Patriarch] and medics to heal Rabbi Tzadok. Rav Yosef read the following verse about him, and some say it was Rabbi Akiva: “[I am the Lord…] Who turns wise men backward and makes their knowledge foolish” [Isaiah 44:25]. He should have said to him to leave them alone this time. And why didn’t Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai make this request? He maintained that Vespasian might not do that much for him, and there would not be even a small amount of salvation.

**Havruta**

**Gil**: In the text that we chose, we join the story of the destruction of the Second Temple at a stage where the Romans had already laid siege to Jerusalem. The Zealots spurned the Sages’ proposal to make peace. “Let us go out and engage [them] in battle,” they proposed. “You will not succeed,” the Sages replied; your war will be futile. To resolve the debate, the Zealots took a step from which there was no turning back: They torched the city’s stocks of grain, causing a general famine. Their purpose was to prod the population to wage war against the Romans—saying, as it were, that you, the Sages, will not be able to sustain the uncertain situation that prevailed, in which Jerusalem might manage to survive the siege with the help of its wealthy denizens.

**Yuli**: I ask myself if there was something, anything, that could have led to a solution at that stage. It is interesting that the story is told here only from the rabbinical elite’s point of view. The Zealots did not attempt to offer any possible solution; they wanted war. The Sages, contrarily, took a very pragmatic stance. Their argument—you will fail—appealed neither to morality nor values but to pragmatism. It was neither a normative argument nor an especially inspiring response.

**Gil**: That would be so unless you impose a religious interpretation on their position and say that the Zealots’ action would not receive divine assistance. One can find support for this idea from another famous homily in the Talmud. Two sages, R. Yosei ben Kisma and R. Ḥanina ben Teradyon, engage in a dialogue about pragmatism and reliance on miracles. R. Ḥanina ben Teradyon takes no account of the Romans’ laws and devastating decrees. R. Yosei ben Kisma demurs:

Rabbi Yosei ben Kisma said to him: Ḥanina my brother, do you not know that this nation [Rome] has been given reign by Heaven? The proof is that Rome has destroyed God’s Temple, burned His Sanctuary, killed His pious ones, and destroyed His best ones, and it still exists. Yet I heard about you that you sit and engage in Torah, convene assemblies in public, and have a Torah scroll placed in your lap in total disregard for the Romans’ decrees.

Rabbi Ḥanina ben Teradyon said to him: Heaven will have mercy.

Rabbi Yosei ben Kisma said to him: I am saying reasonable matters to you, and you say to me: Heaven will have mercy? I wonder if they will not burn both you and your Torah scroll by fire.

R. Yosei ben Kisma counsels against relying on miracles. The fact that the Roman Empire remains in control despite all of its nefarious doings indicates that God allows it to reign, making defiance hopeless. “Heaven will have mercy” is a dangerous thing to say; it bespeaks denial of true responsibility for dire outcomes. That is, God will not save you and you are doomed to an agonizing death. Of course, the redactors of this passage of Talmud, and those who study it as well, know full well how R. Ḥanina ben Teradyon met his end. Rabbi Yosei ben Kisma was right.

Now to our story. Abba Sikkara, chief of the Jerusalem Zealots and Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai’s nephew, attends a secret meeting at his uncle’s house. “How long will you [in the plural] do this and starve everyone to death?” his uncle asks him.

“What can I do?” the nephew replies, “if I say something to them they will kill me.”

Abba Sikkara, chief of the Zealots, is trapped by his own followers. The leader of his faction comes across as one who is unable to exert control and leadership. He himself is being led, making him not a leader but a victim.

In effect, two channels of communication are operative here: overt and covert. The overt conversation is between the Sages and the Zealots; the covert one, alluding to the possibility of cooperation, takes place on a back channel, between two rivals who are also relatives.

**Yuli**: Here you have overt rhetoric versus covert rhetoric. An attempt to persuade is made behind the scenes because this channel may prove to have greater potential influence. It has become conventional wisdom, as I see it, that you can agree on matters secretly that you cannot necessarily agree on openly unless you have reached a comprehensive agreement that justifies the compromises made. Many people see compromise as a blow to their honor and status; it triggers fear of criticism. It is always simpler to work out compromises behind the scenes than on center stage. The responsible adult is Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai, and it is he who turns to the back channel.

**Gil**: Research has shown that observers of negotiations play a negative role.[[4]](#footnote-7) When negotiators sit by themselves, they can often bridge very difficult gaps. The problem is that the negotiators ultimately have to go back to the community that sent them. Then the group whom they represent often accuses them of betrayal.

**Yuli**: That is what happened between Rabin and the PLO. Their representatives pivoted to a back channel and were able to work out agreements. Had they negotiated openly, their reference groups would have put them under enormous pressure.

You can see something similar in other negotiating situations such as public sector labor disputes. When representatives of labor and the Finance Ministry address the public, they always take extreme and uncompromising positions and use expressions such as “There is no way we will compromise.” But when the dialogue is handled and organized correctly, compromise may be attained even when it seems to be a lost cause. Secrecy creates an opportunity for openness, for listening. Abba Sikkara literally collaborates with ben Zakkai: Show me a way to leave the city; perhaps some small salvation will result from it, he is asked. He is about to deceive his people. Here you have a strategy that is in no way simple.

**Gil**: Indeed, but notice that an important verb in this narrative is ‘aseh [to make / to do]—“Let us make peace.” It recurs further on: “What shall I do?” “Make yourself look ill.” It is a leading word that emphasizes responsibility, a continuous and uncompromising demand for measures, initiative, and action. Let’s move on with the story: The plot succeeds: Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai manages to pass through the gate, leave Jerusalem, and make his way to Vespasian. When he gets there, he blesses the ruler: “Greetings to you, the king; greetings to you, the king.”

Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai’s acceptance of authority is emphasized. He accepts the Empire’s judgment—a very surprising thing that is mentioned en passant in the course of the story, against the background of a highly pointed political discussion of the appropriate way to refuse to accept the Romans’ authority.

Interestingly, there has been a tendency in Israeli right-wing punditry in recent years to read Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai’s initiative critically. According to this opinion, Zionism and Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai (the concession-maker?) cannot coexist…. Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai’s stance vis-à-vis a representative of the Roman authorities, in which he honors them and accepts their authority, reminds the critics of the exilic Jew whom Zionism sought to stamp out.

**Yuli**: Did he have a choice? I think about the scene in which he dresses up as a corpse. Let’s imagine it: how he arrives, climbs off the litter, and tells him: “Greetings to you, the king.” The passivity symbolized by his dead-man costume signifies the end of all other normal possibilities.

**Gil**: At this stage, the snake parable appears in the narrative: a snake wrapped around a barrel of honey.

He [Vespasian] said to him: If there were a barrel of honey and a snake was wrapped around it, wouldn’t they break the barrel to kill the snake? He [Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai] was silent.

Instead of falling silent, Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai seemingly should have answered: The barrel of honey—Jerusalem—can be salvaged if we kill the snake by using a pincer. That is, you can fight the snake without harming the barrel. Indeed, in a later comment, we see Rabbi Akiva’s critique of what had happened. This is the selfsame Rabbi Akiva who will join the supporters of Bar Kokhva rebel, years later. Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai, however, has come neither to condescend nor to bargain but to surrender. He seems resigned to the thought that he could attain nothing but some small salvation. He assumes that this must be something focused and that if he demands everything, he will come away with nothing.

So what does he ask for? To spare the Sages’ wisdom; the patriarchal dynasty. He wants to preserve the potential future leadership.

**Yuli**: He assumes that Jerusalem is lost. The Romans feel they are the rulers of the country; they are about to conquer Jerusalem and there is no point in asking to save it. It is for this reason, perhaps, that Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai asks for Yavne and its sages. Here you have the possibility of preserving knowledge, wisdom, and discernment without challenging Rome’s dominion in Jerusalem. While Jerusalem was not considered the capital city, it was an important one nevertheless. It is interesting that ben Zakkai asks for nothing that is related to Jerusalem.

**Gil**: For me, this remark demonstrates with greater acuity how much his asking for Yavne stings: Yavne juxtaposed to Jerusalem. He abandons Jerusalem so quickly, as if taking it for granted, neither bargaining nor suggesting a compromise. He may have received a positive reply so quickly because his request came at a relatively low cost.

**Yuli**: It is important to emphasize. What he wants to salvage is not political power but only intellectual power. Essentially, he says: the important city has already fallen to the Romans, and the political elite will not survive, so at least let the intellectual elite survive. In this context, it is important to discuss the role of the R. Tzadok story.

**Gil**: Rabbi Tzadok is a model of extreme asceticism. He fasts and torments himself with hunger, to save Jerusalem. To heal him is to save a symbol, a religious symbol.

**Yuli**: Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai comes across as a pragmatist in everything he does. This pragmatism, however, will ultimately lead to preserving the culture.

**Gil**: He may be no less troubled about Jerusalem being saved by the Zealots. Here you have, in effect, two snapshots of a discourse, and it is the more discouraging one, of all things, that describes the internal one. Surprisingly, the conversation with the Romans bears fruit: it makes progress and records achievements. There’s no demonization of the Romans; on the contrary, there’s demonization of the group of Zealots. A conscious wish to produce a counter-analogy may be at work: the great collapse, the great devastation, occurs between two groups that have a shared interest and a shared identity. And even though the conqueror is cruel and destructive, a discourse with him takes place anyway.

**Yuli**: As I see it, Jerusalem fell twice: at its gates because the Romans surrounded it and inside because that is where the Zealots ruled. So if Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai has to start something, he re-starts Yavne. I do not see it as a question of giving the elites preferential treatment. Ben Zakkai is also concerned about the possibility that Jerusalem will fall into the Zealots’ hands. We should forgo our freedom rather than follow the Zealots’ path; we should prefer a spiritual focus at the expense of a political one.

**Gil**: As it turned out, representatives of this dynasty, the Yavne dynasty, continued to lead the Jewish community from the era of Hillel the Elder to long after the destruction of the Temple, with varying levels of authority that the Romans gave them. At the time of R. Yehuda ha-Nasi (“the Prince”), 130 years later, Judea enjoyed so much autonomy that R. Yehuda almost proclaimed the abrogation of the fast of the Ninth of Av[[5]](#footnote-8) because the Redemption must have arrived. In this respect, Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai may be saying here that governance has been lost. Namely, we have lost control of Jerusalem, which has been taken over by a gang of zealots. It is a waste of time to fight for Jerusalem; let us preserve something that is pure and refined. By so doing, we will preserve ourselves and survive like a clipping from a plant from which worthy stock may sprout one day.

**Yuli**: This is the hope of creating something new—a government that is different and improved. He sees that he cannot stop the war, so at least he wishes to create a sort of nature reserve.

**Gil**: The discourse between Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai and Vespasian takes place between a conqueror and a man whose life dangles like a leaf blowing in the wind. This is no discourse of equals. Nevertheless, the Talmud presents it as if negotiations between equally powerful sides are taking place.

**Yuli**: But negotiations do seem to be taking place here. The mighty conqueror needs the weak party’s recognition.

**Gil**: Jerusalem is surrendered to you. You are not the one who conquered it. The conquered party (and its God) are handing you the victory, as it were.

**Yuli**: It evokes interesting thoughts about the power of disempowered positions, about how badly hegemonic forces and elites need recognition from the disempowered.

**Today’s Jerusalem**

**Gil**: The historical account offers us the possibility of discussing today’s Jerusalem. In what way, if any, do you see a similarity between the social tensions back then and the dilemmas and conflicts in Jerusalem today?

**Yuli**: One cannot speak of today’s Jerusalem as a city controlled by zealots, of course, but I would say that in the dilemma between going to war and making peace, the power of the former is prevailing.

We already know that war does not solve problems and neither, so it seems, does peace. There are only stops on the way and the question is how you get to the next stop in the best, quietest, and least harmful manner. This, I think, is what Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai does: He searches for the best way-station that can exist in his time. Surely he, too, dreams of restoring control of Jerusalem. For the time being, however, this is what you have got.

**Gil**: Among various ways of reading the narrative, you choose to place it within a pragmatic discourse.

**Yuli**: Going to war will not lead us to a solution. Extreme negotiating positions have not given us any results; they have done the opposite. Even if we do not manage to obtain a thing, let us lower our expectations and simply accept whatever we can get and salvage whatever we can.

It is reminiscent of difficult situations in the Holocaust, situations in which there was no choice but to salvage the little that remained to be saved. Let’s start with this and live with the realization that this is what can be salvaged.

**Gil**: The expression that the Talmud places in the Sages’ mouths at the beginning of the story—“You will not be successful”—is interesting in this context. The Sages approach the matter realistically: Your extreme position will not work. Neither will it work to ask Vespasian for all of Jerusalem. Evidently, we are going to have to compromise; nothing else will help.

**Yuli**: Only a pragmatic analysis of reality can salvage something of what can be salvaged. I am always outraged by the delusional notion that now, yes, there’s a problem, but reality will undergo a miraculous change one day and everything will fall into place. Here, however, we are facing something very present right now: a problem that demands a solution and will not be solved by dreams alone.

**Gil**: Here Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai faces a challenging moment of choice when Vespasian instructs him to “ask something of me that I [can] give you.”

**Yuli**: Many philosophers discuss the question of freedom of choice. As Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai sets out from Jerusalem, he seems to have few alternatives. It is interesting that ultimately he has to choose from a place of distress, but he chooses. The responsibility for his choice is his alone. So, even though he chooses under dire distress, he chooses freely and assumes sole responsibility for the outcomes of this choice.

**Gil**: But there’s no overlooking the distress from which the choice is made.

**Yuli**: Apparently, ben Zakkai thinks his modest choice has a value that surmounts his personal humiliation. It is indeed, I assume, a severely humiliating situation for a person to be in: to leave town dressed up as a corpse and approach the conqueror. But this personal humiliation may help salvage something.

**Gil**: If not redemption, then at least some small salvation.

**Yuli**: Better small salvation than heroic defeat. At least we’ll retain Yavne, which in good time will preserve this story of salvation.

**Gil**: Before, we mentioned briefly that when one reads our story from a Zionist perspective that places heroism—the heroism of the Maccabis, the story of Massada—in the center, criticism almost immediately surfaces about the exilic comportment of Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai, who grovels before the oppressor. For you, however, it is a story of choosing, of taking responsibility, because Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai’s choice of trying to preserve Judaism and not fight to the bitter end embodies a totally different axiological approach than the one built from the Massada story.

**Yuli**: As I see it, the model he presents is an amazing model of true heroism. In the Zionist context, Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai’s struggle to negotiate for the survival of Yavne reminds me of Ben-Gurion’s dialogue with the Haredi public before statehood. Ben-Gurion wanted the Haredi community to recognize the Zionist project that he was promoting and was willing to pay for this recognition by salvaging “Yavne.” That is, Ben-Gurion was a pragmatist when he sought a comprehensive consensus but he also wanted to preserve, alongside the pioneering spirit, the tradition that had been obliterated in the Holocaust. Spirit and power were interlocked in his thinking.

Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai’s heroic struggle to preserve Yavne and the patriarchal dynasty is certainly a principle worth adopting and juxtaposing with the myth of heroism at Massada. Those who choose ben Zakkai’s way ensure the survival of the Jewish people. Those who choose the Zealots’ path risk annihilation.

The idea of seeking a pragmatic compromise in a national crisis is near to my heart. As I see it, it reflects Israeli reality today: It teaches us that frontal conflict is not always worthwhile; instead, we should search for the best way of ensuring national survival.

I identify with the Sages’ choice, which was a difficult one. Ultimately, yes, it entailed concessions and surrender, but it attained its overarching goal: preserving the spiritual core for the future. It was the right choice. Had the extremists’ path been chosen, nothing would have remained.

National leadership should strive for realistic compromise that serves the future. Personally, I have been committed to compromise in all stages of my life. I believe a smart compromise is better than any struggle. My activity in *Peace Now* mirrors this stance. I have always favored diplomatic and political arrangements. The wording of the *Kinneret Covenant* also reflects this idea. I thought it important to find a compromise among ourselves such that, instead of each trying to destroy one another, we would learn to live with each other.

1. *Ratz* was a left-wing political party in Israel that focused on human rights, civil rights, and women's rights. It was active from 1973 until its formal merger into *Meretz* in 1997. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. The *Kinneret Covenant* is 10-article document produced in 2001. It is an attempt to articulate the common denominators among different segments of Israeli society — religious and secular Jews, Sephardic and Ashkenazic Israelis, right and left. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. English based (with adjustments) on the William Davidson Edition, downloaded from sefaria.org. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. R. Brown, “Negotiation in three dimensions: Managing the Public Face of

International Negotiation,” *Negotiation in International Conflict* (Routledge: New York, 2014), 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
5. B.Megilah 5a; p.Taaniyot 4, 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)