# A Conversation with Ehud Banai

## Biographical Note

Ehud Banai, son of the actor Yaakov Banai, was born in Jerusalem in 1953. The Banais are well known as a family of actors, singers, artists, and entertainers. When Ehud was 4, the family moved to Givatayim. He did his military service in the Nahal Entertainment Troupe in Kibbutz Nir Eliahu, a period that had a great influence on his life. He lost his best friend at that time, in the Yom Kippur War.

In 1987, at age 34, he released his first album, “Ehud Banai and the Refugees,” considered one of the most important Israeli rock albums of the 1980s with its songs of rage and social protest. For example, in his song “Black Work” – Hebrew slang for grunt work – he condemned discrimination against Ethiopian Jews and called for equality in Israel. In “Mix the Cement,” Banai sang about Arab workers from Gaza, the roadblocks they pass through every day, their hard work, and minuscule paychecks.

Over the years, Banai has performed frequently and released ten albums and two books in Hebrew: *I Remember Almost Everything* (2001) and *This is the Place* (2012).

In September 2012, Banai began hosting a weekly radio program called “This is the Place” after his book. Every episode covers a single topic, interweaving songs and stories.

## Midrash Lamentations Rabbah (Buber) 4:3[[1]](#footnote-2)

There was an incident involving a certain man in Jerusalem, who made a feast.

He said to his emissary: “Go and bring me my friend, Kimtza.”

He went and brought his enemy, bar Kimtza.

He entered and sat among the guests.

[The host] entered and found him among those invited to the feast.

He said to him: “You are my enemy, and you are sitting in my house? What are you doing here? Get up and leave my house.”

He said to him: “Since I am here, do not shame me, and I will give you the cost of my meal.”

He said to him: “You will not recline [at the feast].”

He said to him: “Do not shame me and I will give the cost of half of your feast and I will not eat and drink.”

He said to him: “You will not recline [at the feast].”

He said to him: “I will give the full cost of this entire feast.”

He said to him: “No.”

He said to him: “Get up and leave.”

He laid hands upon him and removed him.
Rabbi Zekharya ben Avkilos was there and it was within his ability to protest, but he did not protest.

Immediately, [bar Kimtza] left. He said to himself: “These elderly rabbis who are reclining at the feast are sitting in serenity and did not protest to him; It must be acceptable to them. I will slander them to the king.”

What did he do? He went to the ruler and said to him: “The Judeans have rebelled against you. Those offerings that you send to the Jews for them to sacrifice, they eat them and sacrifice others in their stead.”

[The ruler] reprimanded him.

He went to him again and said to him: “All those offerings that you send to the Jews for them to sacrifice, they eat them and sacrifice others in their stead.”

He said to him: “Who says?”

He said to him: “Send with me one official and his offering, and you will know.”

He sent with him a three-year-old heifer.

While they were traveling on the way, the official fell asleep. [Bar Kimtza] arose during the night and rendered them all blemished animals on their upper lips. Some say on the eyelid, a place where for us it counts as a blemish, and for them, it is not a blemish.

When the priest saw them, he sacrificed others in their stead.

The emissary of the king said to him: “Why did you not sacrifice these offerings?”

He said to him: “We will sacrifice them tomorrow.”

The next day arrived.

He said to him: “Why are you not sacrificing them?”

He said to him: “Tomorrow.”

The Rabbis thought to accept them [the offerings] for the sake of peace with the authorities.

Rabbi Zekharya ben Avkilos said to them: “They will say that blemished animals are sacrificed on the altar!”

They thought to kill him [Bar Kimtza] that he not go and report.

Rabbi Zekharya said to them: “They will say that one who blemishes sanctified animals should be killed!”

When the third day had arrived and they did not sacrifice them, he [the emissary] sent and said to the ruler: “The matter of the Judean is the truth.”

Immediately, [the ruler] went up and destroyed the Temple.

That is what the people say: “Because of Kimtza and bar Kimtza the Temple was destroyed.” Rav Yosef said: “The humility of Rabbi Zekharya ben Avkilos burned the Sanctuary.”

## B. Gittin 55b–56a[[2]](#footnote-3)

Rabbi Yoḥanan said: What [is the meaning of that] which is written: “Happy is the man who fears always, but he who hardens his heart shall fall into mischief” (Proverbs 28:14)?

Jerusalem was destroyed on account of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza. …

There was a certain man whose friend was Kamtza and whose enemy was Bar Kamtza.

He made a feast.

He said to his servant: “Go bring me Kamtza.”

He went and brought him Bar Kamtza.

He [the host] came and found him [Bar Kamtza] sitting.

He said to him: “That man is the enemy of that man [that is, you are my enemy]. What do you want here? Arise and leave.”

He said to him: “Since I have come, let me stay and I will give you the cost of whatever I eat and drink.”

He [the host] said to him: “No.”

He said to him: “I will give you the cost of half of the feast.”

He said to him: “No.”

He said to him: “I will give the cost of the entire feast.”

He said to him: “No.”

He laid his hands on him, stood him up, and removed him.

He [Bar Kamtza] said: “Since the rabbis were sitting there and did not protest learn from it that they approved.”

 I will go and inform against them to the king.”

He went and said to the emperor: “The Jews have rebelled against you.”

[The emperor] said to him: “Who says?”

[Bar Kamtza] said to him: “Send them an offering; see whether they sacrifice it.”

[The emperor] went and sent with him a three-year-old heifer.

While Bar Kamtza was coming [to the Temple] he made a blemish on the upper lip. And some suggest he made a blemish on its eyelids,

a place where according to us is a blemish, but according to them, is not a blemish.

The Rabbis thought to sacrifice it for the sake of peace with the authorities.

Rabbi Zekharya ben Avkilos said to them: They will say that blemished animals may be sacrificed on the altar.

The Rabbis thought to kill him that he not go and report.

Rabbi Zekharya said to them: They will say that one who makes a blemish on sanctified animals is to be killed.

Rabbi Yoḥanan says: The humility of Rabbi Zekharya ben Avkilos destroyed our Temple, burned our Sanctuary, and exiled us from our land.

## T. Shabbat (Lieberman) 16:7

Beit Hillel says: One may clear bones and rinds from the table [on the Sabbath].

Beit Shammai says: One must lift the tabletop and shake them off.

Zekharya ben Avkilos followed neither the Beit Shammai nor Beit Hillel; he would pick them up and toss them behind the couch.

Rabbi Yosei said: The humility of R. Zekharya ben Avkilas burned down the Temple.

**Havrutah[[3]](#footnote-4)**

# Being Afraid

**Gil**: This narrative is undoubtedly one of the most familiar legends of the Destruction, narratives that articulate circumstances that led to the destruction of the Temple by the Romans. It has become emblematic of Tisha B'Av for many, serving as both an explanation of the catastrophe and a vehicle for moral instruction. Alongside the pathos generated by this context, it is perhaps surprising to note that a simple reading of the story reveals a mini-drama, a quotidian incident disconnected from historical or geographical context. This juxtaposition—the narrative's inherent simplicity and its profound cultural resonance—suggests that the key to apprehending this drama may reside in the Talmudic framing, particularly as it relates to the verse from Proverbs that extols the virtues of fear.

**Ehud**: We can speak about two antithetical worldviews. One is that of the verse cited by Rabbi Yochanan that inaugurates the Talmudic discourse, "Happy is the person who is always afraid." The other is evoked by Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav's famous aphorism, "A person needs to pass over a very narrow bridge. The fundamental principle is not to fear at all."[[4]](#footnote-5) However, I believe that the fear to which Rabbi Yochanan refers is not the same as the fear addressed by Rabbi Nachman. The fear in "Happy is the person who is always afraid," is reverence—an indispensable, healthy form of fear. “The fundamental principle is not to fear at all” refers to paralysis in the face of action.

As for myself, I have two significant fears. While I have overcome my stage fright, my fear of heights persists. Internally, these phobias are interlinked: the stage represents a precipice, while the audience embodies the abyss into which I fear to fall.

From a relatively tender age, it was evident to me that my vocation lay in the realm of music—to compose, to record, and to perform. However, it was not until the age of 34 that I crossed my personal Rubicon and began performing in public. Among the impediments to taking this step were the aforementioned fears: stage fright and fear stemming from the expectations from me as a member of my family. It took time to overcome these fears, to discover my voice, and to feel that my songs are not just an addition to the cacophony but contain a truth that offers a novel perspective reflecting my own introspection and creativity.

I think there’s a tension in this story between “Happy is the person who is always afraid” and “The fundamental principle is not to fear at all.” The struggle to strike a balance between these two forms of fear is something I live with every day. As both a performer and the host of a weekly program on the radio, I am acutely aware that my every word and action are subject to the scrutiny of a vast audience. This reality renders my professional life a tightrope walk, particularly given the complexities of our contemporary situation. I am constantly navigating the delicate balance between the imperative to face my audience without fear and the trepidation that I may inadvertently inflict harm. I must be responsible. I grapple with the tension of needing to get up each morning with the awareness that nothing can be taken for granted, mandating a cautious, tentative approach, and the imperative to not be afraid—to engage, to act, to articulate, to sing, to compose.

**Gil:**

This narrative delves into the multifaceted nature of fear, distinguishing between fear that is warranted and fear that is misplaced. The introductory verse that sets the stage for the account of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza is “Happy is the man who fears always, but he who hardens his heart shall fall into mischief” (Proverbs 28:14). It is composed of two distinct segments: the first relates to fear while the second cautions against insensitivity ("He who hardens his heart shall fall into mischief”). I anticipate that we will address this later.

**Ehud:** Permit me to share a little story about my uncle, Yossi Banai.[[5]](#footnote-6) When my brother became observant, we sat down together at the bridegroom’s *wort* [meeting of the families in honor of the couple’s engagement]. My father’s family, which is not Orthodox, had a fraught relationship with Orthodoxy and with my brother, who had become Orthodox. It transpired that the rabbi from my brother’s yeshiva sat next to my uncle. I was near them and I overheard the rabbi say to him, “You know, you are in a very special position. Someone in your position has to be very careful. You must proceed as if you were walking on a tightrope.” He went on, “I will give you an example. A jet pilot is completely different from someone riding a bicycle. A jet pilot takes a huge responsibility upon himself, simply because he can potentially cause great harm. Someone who is riding a bicycle, not so much.”

I do not know how much that rabbi knew about Yossi, but what he said resonated with him. Yossi had a practice that he called his daily dose of fear. “I inject myself every day with a daily dose of fear,” he used to say. What is this fear? It is the fear of standing in front of an audience, fear of the fact that knowing that what you say reaches an enormous number of people and might have tremendous repercussions. From his perspective, this fear was a positive emotion. It meant being accountable for everything that comes out of your mouth and for everything you do. I think that that is what R. Yochanan is saying here. In other words, “Happy is the man who fears always” – always think carefully about the consequences and potential outcomes of each decision because you have a certain stature. In this case, Rabbi Yochanan might be referring also to R. Zekharya ben Avkilus.

It is unclear whether ben Avkilus, was acting in accordance with “Happy is the man who fears always.” His attitude could perhaps be characterized as self-satisfied, bordering on arrogance that stands in stark contrast to humility. Maybe by the time the conversation is over we will be able to understand why the Rabbis paradoxically labeled his actions as “humility” when at first glance, there is nothing about his conduct that can be characterized as that.

# Names and Feasts

**Gil:** One of the most notable things about this narrative is the many named characters: R. Zekharya, R. Yochanan, Kamtza and Bar Kamtza (as the Talmud calls them), Kimtza and Bar Kimtza (as Lamentations Rabbah calls them). Notably absent, however, is the name of the host, who is just “that man.” Why do they not tell us who he was?

**Ehud:** The names Kamtza and Bar Kamtza are essential to the story, to explain the error. The similarity of the names would be enough to confuse anyone. As for the host, perhaps his name is unimportant, intimating that he could have been anyone.

**Gil:** You are saying this is an archetypal story that instructs us about proper social behavior. It is not necessarily about a particular person at a particular time. The question that has always troubled me is why R. Yochanan blames R. Zekharya ben Avkilus here. There are a lot of other people in this story who did not behave well. For example, the host, who is so rude to Bar Kamtza, so vindictive and hateful. And of course, there is the question of how all this relates to humility.

**Ehud:** At my sister-in-law’s wedding, I met a nice young man who was dancing and entertaining the bride and groom. After we left the festivities, he said to me, “You know, I was not invited. But I came. I didn’t behave like Kamtza, who did not come.” This confession caused me to realize something important. The narrative is not only about Bar Kamtza, the guest who attended the feast but also about Kamtza, the guest who did not. I assume that word of the party reached Kamtza. He could have come, and if he had, perhaps the host would not have been so rigid and aggressive. He had wanted to see his friend Kamtza and ended up having Bar Kamtza instead. What did Kamtza say to himself? “I was not invited, so I will not attend!”

The question remains, why did R. Yochanan end up transferring the responsibility to R. Zekharya ben Avkilus?

**Gil:** The nature of the feast is unclear. What kind of feast was it? When we call something a *se’udah*, it is usually a wedding reception, but the Talmud uses the word for a much wider variety of affairs, sometimes including Torah discussions, competitions, insults, and other significant events. A feast is also actually a very hierarchical place. The host is in charge; he is the master of the situation. The narrative contains a critique of the rabbis, who sat silently, took no responsibility, and showed no leadership. They accepted the authority of the host even when he behaved badly, sinfully. It is very interesting to consider a feast as a political space in which questions of leadership are enacted.

**Ehud:** I think a feast is meant to bring people closer to each other. Sitting down to a meal brings people together. I have a connection to the Ashlag Hasidim community in Bnei Brak, and I learned something from them. They host *se’udot*, festive meals, at every opportunity, and they call these meals *dibbuk haverim*, the bonding of friends. Eating together creates bonds.

I adopted the idea, and when, strangely, I became the gabbai[[6]](#footnote-7) of an Ashkenazic synagogue, I instituted a kiddush every Shabbat. Even though the synagogue is Ashkenazic, the worshippers were a mix of people from all kinds of traditions and backgrounds. The kiddush had very positive effects. People sit together after the prayers, eating and drinking, and at some stage, people feel comfortable enough and begin singing and sharing Torah. At first, I only had the kiddush once a month, but I got the feeling that people wanted it every Shabbat. If for some reason there was no kiddush on Shabbat, people would ask, “What happened? How come there is no kiddush?” Here, in the story, it is the same situation – food and drink are meant to bring people together and this is what happened.

**Gil:** Instead of creating bonds between people, it disconnected them.

**Ehud:** Even the language hints at this. The name Kamtza alludes to *kamtzanut*, miserliness. Not just miserliness about money, but miserliness of the heart. A celebratory meal should open the heart. When you have a feast, the emotional energy should be of largesse and generosity. Suddenly this name appears that symbolizes miserliness. It is miserliness not just in the context of the feast but in general, a lack of *hesed*, of openhearted kindness.

**Gil:** Ironically, Bar Kamtza appears to be someone who is not stingy at all – perhaps he is even generous. He is prepared to pay for everything he eats, then for half the feast, and then even for all of it. It is possible, of course, that he did not really intend to pay and just wanted to expose and embarrass the host. Then the host grabbed him and kicked him out – an act of violence.

**Ehud:** It is a difficult image. The guests are sitting there, all the most respectable people in Jerusalem, and they say nothing. The silence is unbearable; I think this is exactly where Bar Kamtza transforms. I believe he originally wanted to make peace with the host and that is why he offered to pay. When he left there so humiliated, he changed his mind and decided to make the false accusation and get revenge.

He goes too far with his anger. It is directed not just at the host who threw him out of the feast but at everyone who was there. Terrible anger. Perhaps because he was willing to pay to avoid being humiliated. Instead, he finds himself shamed in front of everyone and banished. He could not avoid it and no one came to his defense and that inspired in him a kind of passion for vengeance.

**Gil:** It recalls Sodom. Abraham negotiates with God (represented by the host), there is a question about hospitality, and, ultimately, destruction. The rabbis here do not act like angels – they do not seize the hero to rescue him from what is about to happen. Maybe the author is trying to evoke the biblical narrative of the destruction of Sodom, the city identified with immorality, and in doing so encouraging the reader to critique his own community’s norms and not focus only on the private sins of individuals.

# Introspection

**Ehud:** The key question, of course, is about the sentence “On account of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza, Jerusalem was destroyed.” When I began to appreciate the idea of the Three Weeks,[[7]](#footnote-8) I was disconcerted; it caught me unprepared. During the Three Weeks, people do not schedule music or entertainment. When about twenty years ago I started trying to become observant, suddenly all kinds of unexpected things started popping up and I was unprepared. I found out that the Three Weeks is beginning in two weeks. I opened a book of Jewish law and I saw that R. Ovadiah Yosef wrote that a Jewish singer must not perform under any circumstances before fellow Jews – only before non-Jews. I said to myself: I am not performing in Ramallah or Switzerland. I look at my calendar and I see that, by a stroke of luck, I do not have any performances scheduled for the Nine Days[[8]](#footnote-9) leading up to Tisha B’av, but between the 17th of Tammuz and the 1st of Av, I have three performances. What am I going to do? I found out that in circumstances like these, you have to know which rabbi to call. I called R. Menachem Froman,[[9]](#footnote-10) of blessed memory, and this is what he said: “Look, why is it forbidden to perform during the Three Weeks? So as not to make people happy, and so that they do not forget the Destruction. Let us consider what you can do. Orthodox people are not going to come to these performances. The secular audience at these performances has never heard of the Three Weeks and may not even know that there *was* a Destruction. What do you think about going on stage and telling the audience before one of the songs: ‘Right now we are in a period called the Three Weeks when we are mourning the destruction of the Temple, but I hope that one day, everything will blossom, and the heart of the world – the Temple – will be reestablished.’” Then he added, “I think even R. Ovadia Yosef would say, ‘Go for it.’” That is how he solved the problem, at least for that year. Since then, obviously, I do not perform during the Three Weeks. Eventually, I understood what we are mourning: The three weeks of mourning are not just about the destruction of the Temple, but about everything that has happened to us since then. If the Temple had not been destroyed, there would have been no Chmielnitzky massacres in 1648, no Holocaust, no conflict with the Palestinians – we would just be living here. It would be a fait accompli. We would not have had to live through the bitter Exile or the expulsion from Spain. It is possible, of course, that many positive things would also have been lost.

I came to understand that the Destruction was something that lasts to this very day. When the Rabbis instituted fasts on the 17th of Tammuz and the 9th of Av, and to not hold celebrations during the three weeks in between them, I could ask, why do I need to fast? Let the Romans fast! Let the descendants of the Romans fast! They did us a terrible wrong: they destroyed our Sanctuary and expelled us from our land! The Rabbis, very boldly, turned these disasters inward, to ourselves: Forget them. “On account of our sins, we were expelled from our land.” The Rabbis dared to respond to the Destruction by saying that *we* are the ones who have to fast, *we* must beat our breasts, *we* must understand why this happened to us. That is what this story does – it turns the whole thing around toward ourselves. It says: Look what is happening in our people, what is happening between us.

Most of the narratives about the Destruction are about what is happening in the Jewish nation. They are not about the Romans, those evil thugs; all of our enemies are agents. “Someone” gave them permission to do this thing. Why was it given?

**Gil:** Bar Kamtza blemished the calf, and the Talmud gives two versions of his action. He either put the blemish on its lips – its mouth – or on its eye. Of course, there is a technical halakhic aspect to this: These are places where the Romans did not regard the blemish as disqualifying the animal for sacrifice, but the Jews did. Nevertheless, if one reads the story with literary sensitivity, it is impossible to ignore the lips and the eyes: Perhaps they allude to the lips that did not protest, and the eyes that were closed so tight they could not see this person, who may have been unlikeable, but one should nevertheless make the effort to coexist with him. In this reading, the calf is the Jewish people, or perhaps the other guests are the blemished calf.

**Ehud:** That is the lesson for today as well. No matter how you interpret the details, the story is about baseless hatred, which the Rabbis claimed caused the Destruction. We are living in an era when baseless hatred is rampant. I am happy to say it is not so absolutely everywhere, and I think there is still a large part of our people that is looking for ways to be united. Nevertheless, it is impossible to ignore. It is impossible to ignore that we are living in a similar era where baseless hatred is rife, especially on social media where anyone can say whatever they feel like. There is a monster on the loose. The Kamtza and Bar Kamtza narrative teaches us that the monster already existed back then, just as it does today. The real question is whether we can learn anything from it and how we can repair things. Studying this narrative, the Three Weeks, and the fasts, all help repair this brokenness.

Putting a blemish on the calf is a metaphor for the blemished relationships between people. You put a blemish on me, you embarrassed me, you smeared me so that wherever I go, people scorn me. We are still talking about it 2,000 years later.

This act of putting a blemish on one another has become something sacred. You harmed something sacred to me, so I will harm something sacred to everyone. This is interesting, because the criticism is directed at the Rabbis who should have understood that blemishing ruins something society holds sacred. It was not just a private matter between the host and Bar Kamtza but like what you said before about Sodom. We are relating to a public matter with significance for the entire public.

# A Temple in Words

**Gil:** One can connect this narrative to a historical reference. Josephus writes that the great rebellion was declared on the day that Elazar, the son of Hananiah the High Priest, instructed them not to offer sacrifice in the Temple for Caesar, as they had traditionally done.[[10]](#footnote-11) Despite the connection, there is a significant difference between the two sources. In the midrash, the failure to offer the sacrifice was not an act of rebellion; it was the result of Bar Kamtza’s deception. In Josephus, it was the deliberate declaration of a revolt. There is another version of our story, in Lamentations Rabbah. One of the interesting differences between the two versions of the story concerns R. Zekharya ben Avkilus’s role. In the Talmud, he is the dominant figure in the rabbinic discussion of what to do in the temple. In Lamentations Rabbah, his role is completely different. According to this tradition, R. Zekharya was a guest at the feast who did not interfere. In a third version, R. Zekharya ben Avkilus appears both at the feast and in the rabbinic discussion. This third version might be an attempt to harmonize the two traditions from the Talmud and Lamentations Rabbah.

**Ehud:** R. Zekharya ben Avkilus did not object. He was silent when he could have spoken. According to the Talmud’s version, the Rabbis are responsible and that is very different. According to the Talmud, R. Yochanan holds the rabbi who insists on following the halakhah responsible for the Destruction. He insisted that it is forbidden to offer a blemished animal in the Temple and he was of course correct halakhically. It is also forbidden to kill someone who blemishes a sacrificial animal. But this same man who was so insistent on following the rules does not act according to what R. Yochanan said, “Happy is the man who fears always.” That is, there are times when you have to break the rules; “It is a time to act for the Lord, so they have violated Your teaching” (Psalms 119:126). One must be realistic. I think the story that appears in the Talmud after our story alludes to this idea. It is the story of R. Yochanan b. Zakkai asking Caesar for “Yavneh and its sages” and not for Jerusalem. Ben Zakkai was inside besieged Jerusalem and the Sicarii would not let anyone leave. He saw the impending Destruction and that the people inside the city could not save it and sought to leave. I generally do not approve of mixing learning with politics, but here there is no choice because it is a political story. Ben Zakkai asked Abba Sikra for help. Maybe, before helping him, Abba Sikra asked, “What happened to you, ben Zakkai? Have you become a leftist, a defeatist? Are you afraid?” This is so relevant to our own times. Should we divide Jerusalem? Should we make a move of some kind? I am not referring to the political questions but to the religious stance that is the foundation. Our generation must discuss these things, especially those who are familiar with Jewish sources. Once we are talking about the fasts and the Destruction, we must understand why the Rabbis decreed the Fast of Gedaliah,[[11]](#footnote-12) and whether the time has not come to declare a fast for the murder of Rabin[[12]](#footnote-13) as well. The resemblance is significant. The real question is what is going to happen next. R. Yochanan ben Zakkai’s daring plan, where he pretended to be dead, and Abba Sikra helped him escape from Jerusalem saved the Jewish people. I do not know whether we would be sitting here in Israel speaking Hebrew and studying the Talmud if not for what he did. He established “Yavneh and its sages,” and there in Yavneh, they chose to replace the Temple service with prayer, giving the people the means to survive for 2,000 years of exile, of indescribable darkness. What an amazing idea that was, to take the entire Temple ritual and turn it into words, and little by little to pack the whole thing into a prayerbook that a Jew anywhere in the world can tuck into his backpack and in a sense maintain the service of the Temple. That is what saved them, both spiritually and practically, physically. So it would be possible to come and tell Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai – You know, when you gave up on Jerusalem and escaped, you were violating the halakhah, since the land of Israel belongs to the Jewish people, and Jerusalem is our eternal capital, etc. However, that move reveals a profound faith. It is as if he were saying, “I am not giving anything up. I am simply paying attention to reality. The reality is the way it is right now. The Romans will ultimately fade away; we are eternal. I am not giving up Jerusalem. I see generations ahead.” That is a profound spiritual vision, to know, “I am not giving up anything. I am trying to be forward-looking and to fear always. “Happy is the man who fears always.” I am afraid of what might happen if I *do not* take this step. I have to do this because if I do not, all the nations of the world will stand against us.”

That is precisely what R. Zekharya ben Avkilus does not take into consideration. He does not make the calculation that R. Yochanan does. He follows the letter of the halakhah, and he does not see that by following the halakhah at this critical moment, by his unwillingness to be flexible, he might bring us to Destruction.

**Gil:** A decision was needed. He needed to take responsibility in that situation. The only other mention of R. Zekharya ben Avkilus in rabbinic literature is in a surprising place, in a halakhic discussion in the Tosefta to Tractate Shabbat. In a dispute between the schools of Shammai and Hillel about the laws of Shabbat, R. Zekharya avoids deciding in favor of one opinion or the other so as not to be exposed to criticism by either side. At the end of that passage, the statement about how his humility brought about the Destruction appears once more. Why did they accuse him of humility? Maybe his humility was the source of his inability to reveal that greatness of spirit that we were expecting.

**Ehud:** That is it exactly. It is the humility of someone who will not do anything he has not been specifically told to do, who will not take the initiative and act boldly, in contrast to R. Yochanan ben Zakkai, who had the greatness of spirit and the foresight to act in a way that in my eyes was one of the greatest decisions in Jewish history. The courage it took, first with regard to the Sicarii who wanted to pierce his body with a spear, and then the courage from a religious perspective to realize: that I am taking this bold step and not actually making any concessions.

Meir Ariel has a song I love, where he says, “You only relinquish the Land in your heart.” That is, relinquishing sovereignty is not really conceding anything. The only real surrender of the Land is internal, and the Jewish people will never do that. Our connection to Jerusalem is not necessarily linked to our sovereignty over Jerusalem. The prophet Jeremiah made this clear many generations ago. Jeremiah’s and R. Yochanan b. Zakkai’s situations were similar – they both left Jerusalem. Jeremiah’s battle was against the zealots who said to Zedekiah, “Fight to the end!”

**Gil:** The Yom Kippur War had a great influence on your life and your creative work. Is this attitude toward sovereignty and power, to ben Zakkai’s decision, connected to that?

**Ehud:** Unquestionably. We were a generation that experienced with full force the complacency and the sense of security and power from the Six-Day War when we were fourteen. Then came the Yom Kippur War, which shattered that feeling. We were traumatized and a lot of questions arose. My whole generation never escapes this feeling. In one of the songs I wrote, “All the Time In the Air,” on my third album, there is an expression of this trauma. It is the confession of a soldier who is going through an emotional crisis and goes to the army psychologist and tells him, “Understand, I really wanted to be part of the system, but the smell of canvas gives me a sick feeling at the bottom of my stomach; I feel like I am standing at the edge of an abyss.”

**Gil:** The story about R. Yochanan b. Zakkai objects to belligerence and zealotry, but our history and literary tradition also contain stories of struggle and going to war over identity. The story of Hanukkah, for example, focuses on the war against the Greeks and Antiochus.

**Ehud:** The way the Rabbis treat the Babylonians and the Romans is very different from the way they treat the story of Greece and the rebellion of Mattathias and the Hasmoneans. The reason, apparently, is that the Greeks did not merely reject the Temple service but sought to Hellenize us, to drive us away from serving God, from Judaism, for us to give up circumcision and the commandments. Under the circumstances, there was no choice – you have to fight, even if there is no chance of winning. However, once the question is not about religion but about political sovereignty, about whose flag will be flown, the attitude is justifiably different. For me, understanding that difference is very significant. Why was R. Yochanan ready to concede, why was Jeremiah ready to concede, but when it came to the Greeks no one was ready to concede? And in the end, the rebellion against the Greeks succeeded.

# The Travails of Redemption

**Gil:** Let us go back to our story. Lamentations Rabbah gives a central role to R. Zekharya ben Avkilus. It is almost possible to hear him arguing with himself: Am I supposed to intervene or not? This is the host’s affair, and according to the halakha, he can decide who gets to stay.

**Ehud:** Both in Lamentations Rabbah and in the Tosefta, R. Zekharya ben Avkilus looks indecisive, but in the Talmud, he is very decisive. He changes everyone’s position, that of the Rabbis and also that of the Emperor’s people. They both want to acknowledge the complexity of the situation; i.e., they are in the “Happy is the man who fears always” category. R. Zekharya ben Avkilus is portrayed as strong, and decisive, and he succeeds with his halakhic ardor in persuading them all.

**Gil:** Another expression that appears in the Lamentations Rabbah version a little differently than in the Talmud is “These elderly rabbis … are sitting in serenity” as opposed to the Talmud’s “the rabbis were sitting there and did not protest.” Lamentations Rabbah adds that the rabbis exhibited “serenity.” They were comfortable as they were, and could not see the other’s distress.

**Ehud:** I imagine that if Kimtza had not seen them sitting there so calmly, he might not have informed on them. If he had only seen that they were uncomfortable and upset about it, even if they were not intervening, he might not have slandered the Jewish people. It was their serenity in that situation, their impermeable indifference, that pushed him to vengeance.

I believe that just as there are travails of destruction, there are also travails of redemption, of renascence. I heard a wonderful story about the Dairyman[[13]](#footnote-14) where he discusses Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones. He says that today, we are in an era of rebuilding the body from scratch. The vision of the dry bones is about the bones reconnecting. In the Diaspora, the Jewish people was separated into various limbs, scattered all over the world. Now it is returning to the land of Israel and trying to rebuild this body. These limbs need to come together now, and only then can the spirit enter into them. That is exactly what happens in Ezekiel’s vision – the bones recombine, flesh and skin and muscles appear, and then the spirit arrives. We are waiting for the spirit to appear, but the bones are already in the process of coming together. Like surgery is painful, so is the coming together of the bones painful. But there is no alternative, somehow we must construct a body of the Jewish collective.

The lesson here is also for our era. Unity is not the same thing as uniformity.

# Toward a New Yavneh

**Gil:** How can this story teach us about the vision that Israeli society should aspire to?

**Ehud:** We need to build a new Yavneh for our time, something central that everyone can accept. There are already several things that connect us. We live together here in the same country and want to keep living here, we speak the same language, on Yom Kippur no one travels, and you can feel the Sabbath and the holidays in the air. I think these shared elements have to be developed. We should not expect an Ethiopian to become white or change who he is. All we need is to accept that we are all limbs of the same body. After that, may we deserve a spirit, a new spirit that needs to come.

The great lesson of the Destruction, in my opinion, is to know how to accept someone who does not think the same way I do and not be afraid of disagreement. The Talmud is full of disagreements. The disagreement needs to be enacted respectfully and not with hatred. It is legitimate to be a right-winger or a settler; it is also legitimate to be a left-winger and to protest the occupation. Everyone is right. But there has to be a conversation, and there is not taking place. The moment you say something, some baseless hatred flares up. If only we could learn to have a respectful discussion, in which both sides accept the other. I do not think like you and you do not think like me, but let us discuss it, let us try to find some way to reach, not agreement, but at least an understanding of how we can live together.

**Gil:** So that we can keep sitting together at the feast and not remove someone because he does not conform right now.

**Ehud:** Yes, that is exactly it. “I do not speak with him.” Do you understand what I mean? We are always in a hurry to ostracize anyone who does not conform to how we think. I can tell you that I have been badly burned this way.

I personally think that right and left no longer exist. I certainly no longer think in terms of right and left. When it comes to matters like Greater Israel, you can classify me as someone who thinks like a left-winger, and precisely for religious reasons. That is, I am closer to the ultra-Orthodox approach than to the national-religious approach.

You might think that it is because I became a baal teshuva[[14]](#footnote-15) in a Lithuanian yeshiva in Bnei Brak, but that is not the reason. I think the way I do because I read the stories of the Destruction and I see that the Rabbis had no problem blaming the Destruction on zealotry and radicalism. The Fast of Gedaliah is about zealotry. R. Yochanan b. Zakkai deals with the Sicarii, who were nationalistic zealots of the most extreme sort, and this sort of radicalism is very concerning. Prof. Yeshayahu Leibowitz, whose rhetoric was very harsh – perhaps too harsh – warned us about deviating in this direction. That was even before Rabin was murdered. In our generation, someone arose and murdered a prime minister. That is a fact that we have to take into account in any discussion about the Destruction. So you can categorize me on the left as far as that goes.

At the same time, I do not believe in ostracizing entire communities. There is a phenomenon of Israeli musicians who will not cross the Green Line.[[15]](#footnote-16) I do perform there, and I have for 20 years. I have been performing in Tekoa and other places for many years. I find myself in a place where on the one hand, I do not boycott anyone, but on the other hand, I express opinions that that particular public strongly disagrees with. Nevertheless, I do not consider myself separate from them. We disagree, but we also have a lot in common. I definitely have a devoted, faithful audience there, whom I value and respect very much. That is to say that there is no way they would invite me to perform and I would say, no, sorry, I will not talk to you. What would I achieve by not speaking with them? That is exactly the opposite of what I want. I want to go there and have discussions with them. I was invited once to perform in a settlement on the other side of the Green Line, and when the concert was publicized some left-wing friends requested that I not perform there because of some legal cases in that area, having to do with Palestinian land. I refused to cancel the concert. On my Facebook page, I wrote a post explaining my complex attitude: I do not boycott entire groups, but my views are left-wing and I am against the occupation. What happened was that the word “occupation” angered some people. I got difficult responses –some suggested throwing out their Ehud Banai CDs and no longer inviting me to perform. Somebody created a Facebook page called “Settlers against Ehud Banai.”

I learned that Israeli society loves to categorize people. Both sides say: Do not change, do not confuse us. The left says: If you are against the occupation, what are you doing in Susiya? The right says: If you are against the occupation, do not come here, we do not need you or want you. Do you understand? I was swept up in this storm that thank God has passed, but I am aware of the excessive sensitivity about these things. Instead of a substantive, true, important discussion, it almost immediately turns into an exchange of curses and blows.

**Gil:** Who is to blame for this situation? Is it even legitimate to assign blame?

**Ehud:** Maybe our political discourse is to blame, the way the Knesset operates, with a lack of respect and the disappearance of substance. I think intellectuals and educators need to conduct a real dialogue, where everyone can sit around the same table at a meal and if there’s a disagreement, then let us discuss it. Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai disagreed about many things but married into one another’s families. That was “a dispute for the sake of heaven.” I believe that everyone truly wants what is good for society and good for the country, but we have become habituated to igniting these fires. If you just mention a loaded topic, immediately there is tension in the air, so many people would rather just remain silent. A lot of people prefer not to speak because every unnecessary word in Israeli society is like lighting a match in a room saturated with gasoline fumes.

The continuation of the verse that is the point of departure for the story in the Talmud is “…but he who hardens his heart falls into misfortune.” Everyone in this story hardens their hearts: the host, the rabbis, Bar Kamtza, and by the end, also R. Zekharya ben Avkilus. Hardening, closing off of the heart, is at the center of this story. The heart is the center, the middle of the body, the organ of vitality. It is not the brain that keeps your body alive, it is the heart. There is a lesson here for our time, about how to open the heart and not harden it. How not to withdraw into my own belief system and how to avoid being certain that my side is entirely the side of justice. Rather, I should open my heart to someone who thinks differently, open my heart to someone who is different from me. The nation needs a heart at the center that unites the whole body.

“Fashion a pure heart for me, O God; create in me a steadfast spirit” (Ps 51:12), and also “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit into you: I will remove the heart of stone from your body and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezek 36:26).

A new heart is what we want, in place of the heart of stone, a new heart, and a new spirit.

Further Reading:

1. Translation according to the Sefaria Midrash Rabbah 2022, with adjustments. https://www.sefaria.org.il/Eikhah\_Rabbah.4.3?lang=en&with=all&lang2=en. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Translation follows the William Davidson Talmud with adjustments. https://www.sefaria.org.il/Gittin.56a?vhe=William\_Davidson\_Edition\_-\_Vocalized\_Aramaic&lang=en [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. ‘Havrutah’ is the traditional term for Talmud study in pairs in which the study partners read and analyze a text together. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. *Likkutei Moharan* 2nd edition, 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Yosef “Yossi” Banai (1932 –2006) was a singer, actor in film and theater, songwriter, comedian, lyricist, and Israeli theater director. He was awarded the Israel Prize for Theater in 1998 and the Israeli Theater Award in 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. ‘Gabbai’ or sexton, is the person in charge of organizing the synagogue prayers, appointing prayer leaders, calling people to the Torah and various other responsibilities. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. The three weeks between the 17th of Tammuz and the 9th of Av are traditionally a type of mourning and introspection. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. According to Ashkenazic custom,, the mourning practices are more stringent during the nine days before the 9th of Av. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. R. Menachem Chai-Shalom Froman (1945–2013) was the rabbi of Tekoa, a peace activist and poet. He taught in the Tekoa and Othniel yeshivas. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Josephus, *The Jewish War* 2:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. The fast on the 3rd of Tishrei commemorating the assassination of Gedalyah ben Achikam who had been appointed viceroy of Judea by the Babylonian conquerors. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Yitzchak Rabin, the fifth prime minister of Israel, was assassinated on November 4, 1995 by Yigal Amir, an Israeli law student who radically opposed Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin’s peace initiative, particularly the signing of the Oslo Accords. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Kabbalist R. Hayyim Avshalom Ezra Cohen, born in 1935. He is called “the Dairyman” after his occupation. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. I.e., began practicing Orthodox Judaism. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. The border between Judea and Samaria and pre-1967 Israel. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)