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 program on Army Radio called “This is the Place” after his book. Every episode covers a single topic, interweaving songs and stories.

**Midrash Lamentations Rabbah (Buber) 4:3**

A story about a man in Jerusalem who hosted a party.

He told his servant: Go bring my dear friend Kimtza.

He went and brought a different Kimtza, his enemy, who came and sat down among the guests, where the host found him among those who had been invited.

“You?! My enemy?! What are you doing sitting in my house? Who asked you to come here? Go on, get out of my house!”

“Since I have already arrived, please don’t embarrass me. Let me pay you the cost of my dinner.”

“You are not eating here.”

“Don’t embarrass me. Let me pay half the cost of your party, and I won’t eat or drink anything.”

“You are not eating here.”

“The whole party – I’ll pay the whole cost.”

“No.”

He told him to get out.

He grabbed his arm and threw him out.

R. Zechariah ben Avkilus was there and might have objected, but he did not.

No sooner had the man left when he said to himself, “Those elderly rabbis sat there calmly and did not object – it was fine with them! I’ll go to the palace and slander him.”

What did he do? He went to the ruler and said, “The Jews have rebelled against you. Those sacrifices you are sending to their Sanctuary? They just eat them and offer replacement animals in their stead.”

He dismissed him.

He went back and told him, “All those sacrifices you are sending to the Jews to offer for you they eat for themselves and offer others in their place.”

“Who says?”

“Send a prefect and some offerings with me and you’ll find out.”

He sent some three-year-old heifers with him.

While they were on the road, the prefect fell asleep.

Kimtza got up in the middle of the night and secretly put a blemish on their lips – some say, on their eyes, a blemish that disqualifies an animal for sacrifice according to us, but not according to them.

When the priest saw the blemishes, he sacrificed other animals instead of those.

The king’s man said to him, “You’re not going to offer these animals as sacrifices?”

“We’ll offer them tomorrow.”

The next day the prefect asked, “Why are you not sacrificing them?”

“Tomorrow.”

The rabbis decided to accept the offerings in order to keep the peace with the government.

R. Zechariah ben Avkilus said to them, “People will say blemished animals are being offered on the altar.”

Then they decided to kill Kimtza to keep him from informing on them.

R. Zechariah ben Avkilus said to them, “People will say someone who blemishes a sanctified animal is to be killed.”

When the third day came and they had not yet sacrificed the king’s animals, the prefect went and told the king, “What the Jew said to you is true.”

He immediately went and destroyed the Temple.

That is what people say: Because of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza, the Temple was destroyed.

Said R. Joseph: The humility of R. Zechariah ben Avkilus burned down the Sanctuary.

**B. Gittin 55b–56a**

R. Yochanan said: “Happy is the man who is always afraid. But he who hardens his heart falls into misfortune” (Prov 28:14).[[1]](#footnote-1)

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

There was once a man who had a friend named Kamtza and an enemy named Bar Kamtza.

He gave a party.

He told his butler: Go get Kamtza.

He went and got Bar Kamtza.

The man who gave the party saw Bar Kamtza at the party.

“We hate each other! What are you doing here? Get out!”

“Since I am already here, let me be and I’ll pay you for what I eat and drink.”

“No.”

“I’ll pay half the cost of the party.”

“No.”

“I’ll pay the whole cost.”

“No!”

He grabbed his arm and threw him out.

Bar Kamtza said, “Since the Sages sat there without objecting, they must consider what he did acceptable behavior. I shall denounce them to the authorities!”

He went and told the Emperor, “The Jews have rebelled against you.”

“Who says so?!”

“Send them an animal to sacrifice on your behalf and see if they will offer it.”

He sent Bar Kamtza with a three-year-old heifer, but on the way Bar Kamtza made a blemish on its lips; some say, on its eyes – [either way,] something that we consider a blemish that disqualifies the sacrifice but they do not.

The Sages decided to offer it anyway in order not to keep the peace with the government.

R. Zechariah ben Avkilus objected, “People will say you are offering blemished animals on the altar.”

Then they decided they should kill Bar Kamtza, to keep him from going and informing on them.

R. Zechariah ben Avkilus objected, “People will say that anyone who blemishes a sacrificial animal must be killed.”

Said R. Yochanan, “The humility of R. Zechariah ben Avkilus destroyed our Temple, burned down our Sanctuary, and exiled us from our land.”

**T. Shabbat (Lieberman) 16:7**

The House of Hillel say: One may clear bones and rinds from the table [on the Sabbath].

The House of Shammai say: One may lift the tabletop and shake them off.

Zechariah ben Avkilus followed neither the House of Shammai nor the House of Hillel; he would toss them behind the couch [instead of putting them on the table].

Said R. Yosé: The humility of R. Zechariah ben Avkilus burned down the Temple.

**Text Study**

**Being Afraid**

**Gil:** This story is undoubtedly one of the best-known of the legends of the Hurban, the Destruction of the Temple. Among the general public, it seems to have become the one that symbolizes Tisha B’av. It explains the origins of the calamity and, at the same time, its moral and educational purpose. Alongside the powerful emotions the story evokes, it’s surprising to discover that a straightforward reading of it presents us with a little mini-drama, almost a non-event, a trivial human incident that is independent of time and place. This difference between the story itself and the way we all think of it makes me think maybe the key to understanding this drama is found in the way the Talmud has framed it: in the context of the verse from Proverbs that speaks in praise of fear.

**Ehud:** The verse that opens the discussion in the Talmud is “Happy is the man who is always afraid.” There is obviously a dispute between two opposing world views, one of them in the words of R. Yochanan in this story and the other associated with R. Nachman of Bratslav, who says, “We are crossing a very narrow bridge. The main thing is not to be afraid at all.”[[2]](#footnote-2) But I think the fear that R. Yochanan is speaking about is not the same fear that R. Nachman is speaking about. “Happy is the man who is always afraid” is, in my eyes, a fear that is akin to awe. A necessary fear. The fear in “The main thing is not to be afraid at all” is fear of taking action.

I myself have two significant fears. I’ve managed to overcome one of them, but not the other. I’ve managed to overcome stage fright, but not my fear of heights. Inside me, I’ve connected these two fears: the stage was the height; the audience was the depth where I might fall.

I knew from a relatively young age that I wanted to make a living with music. To write it, to record it, to perform it. I did not cross the Rubicon and begin my first performances until I was 34 years old. One of the things that stopped me from performing in public was these fears. Stage fright, fear of all the expectations my family had of me. It took me a long time to overcome my fear and find my voice. To feel that there was something true in what I was singing – not just adding another voice to the clamor, but a voice that had something new to say. A lot of creative, internal work.

I think there’s a tension in this story between “Happy is the man who is always afraid” and “The main thing is not to be afraid.” This struggle to find the balance between these two kinds of fear is something I live with every day. As a performer and host of a weekly show on Army Radio, everything I say and do is exposed to many, many people, and it’s really a tightrope walk, especially in our complicated reality. I’m always debating between the need not to be afraid, to face my listeners without fear, and the fear of causing harm. I have to act responsibly. I’m living the tension between the need to get up in the morning with a feeling that nothing is obvious and that I have to be very careful, even hesitant, and the need *not* to be afraid: to act, to do, to say, to sing, to write.

**Gil:** The story is about fear, fear that’s appropriate and fear that isn’t, but the verse that introduces the tale of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza is Prov. 28:14, and it has two parts: one that is about fear (“Happy is the man who is always afraid”), and one that is about hard-heartedness (“He who hardens his heart falls into misfortune”). I presume we will get to that part eventually.

**Ehud:** Yes, indeed. Here’s another story, a little story about my uncle, Yossi Banai. When my brother became religious, we sat down together at the *wort* [meeting of the families in honor of the couple’s engagement]. My father’s family, which isn’t Orthodox, has a fraught relationship with Orthodoxy and with my brother, who had become ultra-Orthodox. It happened that the rabbi from my brother’s yeshiva sat next to my uncle. I was sitting near them, and I heard 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’ll 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’s riding a bicycle, not so much.”

I don’t know how much that rabbi knew about Yossi, but what he told him really spoke to him. Yossi had a kind of thing he called A Daily Dose of Fear. “I inject myself every day with a daily dose of fear,” he used to say. What is this fear? It’s the fear of standing in front of an audience, being afraid because what you say reaches an enormous number of people and might have tremendous repercussions. From his perspective, being afraid was a very positive thing. It meant being accountable for everything that comes out of your mouth – everything you say and everything you do. I think that’s what R. Yochanan is saying here. “Happy is the man who is always afraid” means that you always have to think carefully about what might happen if you make this decision or that one, because you are in a particular situation. In this case, he may have been referring specifically to R. Zechariah ben Avkilus.

This ben Avkilus, it’s not clear whether he was acting in accordance with “Happy is the man who is always afraid.” Maybe he was behaving sort of smugly, with a kind of hubris, exactly the opposite of humility. Maybe by the time we’re done we’ll understand why the rabbis call what he did “humility.” On the face of it, there is nothing humble at all about it.

**Names and Parties**

**Gil:** The first thing you see in this story is that there are a lot of names, a lot of characters in the story: R. Zechariah, R. Yochanan, Kamtza and Bar Kamtza (as the Talmud calls them), Kimtza and Kimtza (as Lamentations Rabbah calls them). The only name we don’t know is the name of the host, who is just “that man.” Why don’t they tell us who he was?

**Ehud:** The names Kamtza and Bar Kamtza are essential for the story – to explain the confusion. It’s enough to confuse anyone. As for the host, it could be that his name is just not that important since he could have been anyone.

**Gil:** So you’re saying this is a kind of archetypal story that teaches us about correct social behavior. It’s not necessarily about a particular person at a particular time. The thing that has always bothered me about this story is why R. Yochanan pins this “case” on R. Zechariah ben Avkilus and accuses him. There are a lot of other people in this story who did not act impeccably. For example, the host of the party, who is so uncaring toward his guest, Bar Kamtza, so vindictive and hateful. And of course, there’s the question of how this relates to humility.

**Ehud:** At my sister-in-law’s wedding, in Maalot, I met a nice young guy who was dancing and entertaining the bride and groom. After we left, he said to me, “You know, I wasn’t invited. But I came. I didn’t behave like Kamtza, who didn’t come.” Instantly, because of this guy, I realized something important. The story is not only about Bar Kamtza, the guest who came, but also about Kamtza, the guest who didn’t come. I have to assume Kamtza heard about the party and decided *not* to come, maybe because the host wasn’t insistent that he come, and Kamtza was angry about it. The man who gave the party wanted to see Kamtza and ended up having to see Bar Kamtza instead. But what did Kamtza say? “I wasn’t invited, so I’m not coming.”

So the question is, why did R. Yochanan end up transferring the responsibility to R. Zechariah ben Avkilus?

**Gil:** The whole thing about the party is unclear. What kind of party was it? When we call something a *se’udah*, it’s usually a wedding reception, but the Talmud uses the word for a much wider variety of affairs. Sometimes there are Torah discussions, sometimes competitions, sometimes even insults. Lots of life-altering events. A party is also actually a very hierarchical place. The one who provides the food is the host. That is, for the moment, he is master of the situation. It appears to be that the complaint here is against the rabbis, who sat and took no responsibility; they said nothing and reported nothing. They accepted the authority of the host even when he did something wrong, even sinful. It’s very interesting to consider the party space as a leadership space, a political space.

**Ehud:** I think a party should bring people closer to each other. When people eat together, it brings them together. I have a connection to the Ashlag Hasidim 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 attachement of friends. A meal really people.

I got the idea from them, and when fate very strangely made me the gabbai of an Ashkenazic synagogue, I instituted a kiddush every Shabbat. Even though the synagogue was Ashkenazic, the worshippers were a mix of people with all kinds of traditions and backgrounds. I found that kiddush had very positive effects. There’s something about people sitting around after the prayers, eating, drinking, and before you know it people begin singing. Someone gives a dvar Torah. At first, I only did it once a month, but suddenly I got the feeling that people wanted it every Shabbat. If once in a while there was no kiddush on Shabbat, people would ask, “What happened? How come there’s no kiddush?” But in the story, with the same situation – food and drink and people and celebration – exactly the opposite happened.

**Gil:** Instead of connecting people, it disconnected them.

**Ehud:** Even linguistically, the name Kamtza hints at *kamtzanut*, miserliness. Not just miserliness about money, but miserliness of the heart, a celebratory meal is something that should open up the heart. When you invite someone to a party, you’re thinking of how to make everything as lavish as possible – money is no object. And suddenly we see this name that reminds us of miserliness. Not just miserliness about the feast itself, but not being generous. Being stingy with kindness.

**Gil:** Bar Kamtza appears to be someone who is not stingy at all – perhaps he is even too much the opposite way. He’s prepared to pay for everything he eats, then for half the feast, and then even for all of it. It’s possible, of course, that he didn’t really intend to pay and just wanted to expose the host to disgrace. But the host grabbed his arm, pulled him up, and kicked him out –an act of violence.

**Ehud:** It’s a difficult image. The guests are sitting there, all the most respectable people in Jerusalem, and they say nothing. This silence is intense; it’s too hard to bear. I think this is exactly where Bar Kamtza undergoes a change of some sort. I believe he really did want to make up with the host. He didn’t just “offer” to pay. I think what happened to him was that at the moment 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 outrage. He is angry not just at the host who threw him out of the party but at everyone who was there. A terrible anger. Maybe because he really did intend to pay, he simply wanted to undo the embarrassment, and suddenly he finds himself being shamed in front of everyone and ejected. He not only failed to avoid embarrassment, the host expelled him and no one said a word. So he really got a kind of appetite for revenge.

**Gil:** It reminds me of Sodom. Abraham negotiates with God (played by the host in this story), there is an account of taking in guests, and at the end of the story … destruction. We’ve got rabbis who do not play the role that the angels do in Genesis, that is, they don’t grab the hero to rescue him from what is about to happen. Maybe the author is trying to echo the biblical story about the destruction of Sodom, the city of immorality, leading the reader to identify the moral flaws as community norms and not the private sin of an individual.

**The Destruction: Bringing It Home**

**Ehud:** The big question, of course, is about the sentence “On account of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza, Jerusalem was destroyed.” When I first understood this whole idea of the Three Weeks, I began to get very worked up about it. At first, the idea caught me unprepared. During the Three Weeks, people don’t schedule music or entertainment. About twenty years ago, I started trying to keep the commandments, and suddenly all kinds of things that you weren’t planning for pop up at you. Suddenly I find out that two weeks from now is the Three Weeks … I open a book of Jewish law and I see that R. Ovadiah Yosef wrote that a Jewish singer must not perform, under any conditions, in any situation, except before Gentiles. I said, Okay, I’m not performing in Ramallah and not in Switzerland, so I look at my datebook and I see that, by a stroke of luck, I don’t have any performances scheduled in the Nine Days leading up to Tisha B’av. But between the 17th of Tammuz and the 1st of Av, I have three performances. What am I gonna do? I found out that in circumstances like these, you have to know which rabbi to call. I called R. Menachem Froman,[[3]](#footnote-3) of blessed memory, and here’s what he told me: “Look, why are you forbidden to perform during the Three Weeks, after all? So as not to make people happy, and not to make them forget the Destruction. Let’s think for a minute. Religious people are not going to come to your performance. A non-religious guy who comes to your performance has no clue what the Three Weeks are and may not even know that there *was* a Destruction. So what do you say, when you go on stage, before one of the songs you tell the audience: ‘You should know that right now we are in a period called the Three Weeks, when we are mourning the Destruction of the Temple. Personally, I’m hoping that one day, everything will blossom, and the heart of the world – that’s the Temple – will open up.’” Then he added, “I think even R. Ovadia Yosef would say, ‘Go for it.’” That’s how he gave me permission to perform, at least for that year. Since then, obviously, I don’t 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 hadn’t been destroyed, the Cossack massacres of 1648 and Chmielnitzky, the Holocaust would never have happened, we would never have had any conflict with the Palestinians – we would just be living here. It would be a fait accompli. We wouldn’t have had to live through the bitter Diaspora or the expulsion from Spain. It could be, of course, that we would have lost a lot too.

Then I understood that the Destruction was something that has lasted to this very day. So when the rabbis come and tell you to fast on the 17th of Tammuz and the 9th of Av, and not to hold celebrations during the three weeks in between them, I can ask, why do I need to fast? Let the Romans fast! Let the descendants of the Romans fast! They did a terrible wrong to us: they destroyed our Sanctuary and expelled us from our land! But the rabbis, quite boldly, bring the whole thing home and say: Forget it, forget them. “On account of our sins, we were expelled from our land.” The rabbis had this boldness, to come along after the Destruction and say that *we* are the ones who have to fast, *we* must beat our breasts, *we* must understand why this happened to us. And that’s what this story does – it turns the whole thing around toward ourselves. It says: Look what’s happening within our people, what’s happening between us.

Most of the stories about the Destruction really deal with what was happening among the Jews. They’re not about the Romans, those evil thugs, since they were all just stand-ins for someone else. “Someone” gave them permission to do this thing. And why was it given?

**Gil:** Bar Kamtza blemishes the calf, and the Talmud gives two versions of that. He either put the blemish on its lips – its mouth – or on its eye. There’s of course a technical halakhic aspect to this: These are places where the Romans would not consider the animal blemished that disqualifies for sacrifice, but the Jews did. Reading the story, though, it’s impossible to ignore this thing about the lips and the eyes: Maybe the lips are the lips that did not protest, and the eyes are the eyes closed so tight they could not see this man, whom you maybe don’t like, but you nevertheless make the effort to let him exist in your space. The calf is the Assembly of Israel in this interpretation, or perhaps the other guests are the calf who has these blemishes.

**Ehud:** And that’s the lesson we have to learn nowadays as well. No matter how you read it, this is a story about baseless hatred, which the rabbis warned us was what caused the Destruction, and we are living in an era when baseless hatred is rampant. I’m happy to say it’s not so absolutely everywhere, and I think there is still a large part of society that’s looking for something unifying. Nevertheless, it’s impossible to ignore. It’s impossible to ignore that we are living in the same kind of era, especially on social media where everyone can say anything he wants to. There’s a monster on the loose – and that story has this same monster as if telling 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 fix things. Studying this story, living through the Three Weeks, these fasts – they 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, that is, you embarrassed me, you smeared me. Wherever I go, people scorn me. So much so that we are still talking about it 2,000 years later.

This act of tarnishing one another has become something sacred. You tarnished something sacred to me, so I will tarnish something sacred to everyone. Which, by the way, is extremely interesting, because, on the face of it, it was the rabbis who were being criticized – for not understanding that creating the blemish invalidated something sacred to the whole society. It’s not just a private matter between the host and Bar Kamtza. It’s like what you said about Sodom. We’re talking about a public matter with public significance.

**Packing a Temple into Words**

**Gil:** There’s a historical reference that has a connection with the story we are discussing. Josephus writes that the great rebellion was declared on the day that Eleazar, the son of Hananiah the High Priest, instructed them not to offer sacrifice in the Temple for the Emperor, as they had traditionally done.[[4]](#footnote-4) Despite the connection, there’s a significant difference between the two sources. In the midrash, failing to offer the sacrifice is not an act of rebellion, it’s the result of Bar Kamtza’s deception. In Josephus, we’re talking about deliberately declaring a rebellion. There’s another version of our story, in Lamentations Rabbah. One of the interesting changes between the two versions of the story is in the role played in each of them by R. Zechariah ben Avkilus. In the Talmud, he’s the star of the discussion; in Lamentations Rabbah his role is completely different. According to this tradition, R. Zechariah is a guest at the party and doesn’t interfere. In a third version, R. Zechariah ben Avkilus appears both at the party and in the rabbinic discussion. This third version could be an attempt to harmonize the two traditions from the Talmud and Lamentations Rabbah.

**Ehud:** R. Zechariah ben Avkilus did not object. He didn’t say anything. He could have said something, but he didn’t. According to the Talmud’s version, the one whom R. Yochanan considers responsible for the Destruction was the one who was so insistent on following the law about offering a blemished animal in the Temple. Halakhically, of course, he is correct. The truth is, it’s 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 is always afraid.” That is, there are times when you have to break the rules. The traditional expression for that is reading Ps 119:126 to say, “It is a time to act for the Lord, so they have violated Your teaching.” You’ve got to be realistic. I think the story that appears in the Talmud after our story alludes to it. It’s the story of R. Yochanan b. Zakkai asking the Emperor for “Yavneh and its sages” and not for Jerusalem. Ben Zakkai is inside besieged Jerusalem and the Sicarii aren’t letting anyone leave. He sees that the Destruction is coming soon and that there is no way the people inside the city can save it. He requests to leave. I’m not comfortable injecting politics into study, but I don’t have any choice here because this is a political story. There’s no getting away from that. Ben Zakkai asks Abba Sikra for help. Maybe, before helping, he asks him, “What happened to you, ben Zakkai? You’ve turned into a leftist, a defeatist? What are you, afraid?” This is so relevant to our own times. Should we divide Jerusalem – yes or no? To make a move of some kind – yes or no? At the moment, I’m not talking about the politics of it but about the religious perspective that stands behind it. I think our generation has to discuss these things, especially those who are familiar with Jewish sources. I think once we are talking about fasting and Destruction, we must understand why the rabbis decreed the Fast of Gedaliah, and whether the time hasn’t come to declare a fast for the murder of Rabin as well. The resemblance is significant. The question is, What’s at stake? The step taken by R. Yochanan ben Zakkai, who says, “I’ll pretend to be a corpse, and you help me escape from Jerusalem” – that’s the step that saved the Jewish people. I don’t know whether we would be sitting here in Israel speaking Hebrew and studying the Talmud if not for what he did, because he established “Yavneh and its sages,” and there in Yavneh they chose to replace the Temple service with prayer. That gave the people the wherewithal to hang on 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 inside his backpack and by that means keep the Temple ritual going. Isn’t that what saved them? Both spiritually and practically, physically. So it would be possible to come and tell R. Yochanan ben Zakkai – you know, when you slipped out of Jerusalem and gave it up, you were violating the halakhah (since the land of Israel belongs to the Jewish people, and Jerusalem is our eternal capital and all that) but this step, to me, bears witness to a profound faith. It’s as if he were saying, “I’m not giving anything up. I’m just paying attention to reality. The reality is, at the moment, thus and so. It’s the Romans who will fade away; we are eternal. I’m not giving up Jerusalem, just looking many generations ahead.” That’s a profound spiritual idea, to know, “I’m not giving up anything. I’m trying to be forward-looking, and I’m afraid. “Happy is the man who is always afraid.” I’m afraid of what might happen if I *don’t* take this step. I have to do this, because if I don’t, all the nations of the world will be against us.”

That’s precisely what R. Zechariah ben Avkilus does not take into consideration. He doesn’t make the same calculation that R. Yochanan does. He certainly follows the halakhah, but he doesn’t see that following halakhah at this critical moment, the fact that he’s not ready to be flexible in that regard, is the very thing that might bring us to Destruction.

**Gil:** What you’re talking about here is making a decision. He’s got to take responsibility for what’s happened, for the situation. The only other mention of R. Zechariah 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 the Sabbath, R. Zechariah abstains and avoids doing anything anomalous, in order not to be criticized by either side. At the end of that passage, the assertion about his humility appears once more, that it brought about the Destruction of the Temple. Why are they blaming his humility? Maybe humility is the inability to reveal that greatness of spirit that we were expecting.

**Ehud:** That’s it exactly. That’s the humility of someone who won’t do anything he hasn’t been specifically told to do, who’s not ready to take the initiative and act boldly as R. Yochanan b. Zakkai did. He had the greatness of spirit and the foresight to take a step that in my eyes is one of the greatest known to us in Jewish history. The courage it took, first just the risk he took with regard to the Sicarii who wanted to stick a spear through his body, and second the courage it took from a religious perspective to realize: I am taking this bold step but not actually making any concessions.

Meir Ariel has a song I love, where he says, “you can give up on your country only in your heart.” That is, giving up sovereignty is not really conceding anything. The only real giving up is internal, and we don’t have any of that kind of giving up. Our connection to Jerusalem is not necessarily linked to our sovereignty over Jerusalem. This was stated many generations before him by the prophet Jeremiah. There’s a kind of resemblance between these two situations, Jeremiah’s and R. Yochanan b. Zakkai’s – the two who left Jerusalem. Jeremiah’s whole battle was against the zealots who said to Zedekiah, “Fight to the finish!”

**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:** For sure. We were the 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 went around with a sense of brokenness, of trauma. Lots of questions came up. I think this feeling never leaves my whole generation. In one of the songs I wrote, “In the Air All the Time,” on my third album, there’s an expression of this trauma. It’s a soldier, confessing that he’s going through a spiritual, experiential crisis. He goes to a psych officer and admits, “You understand, I really wanted to be part of the system, but the smell of canvas makes me sick to my stomach, I feel like I’m standing at the edge of an abyss.”

**Gil:** The story about R. Yochanan b. Zakkai is against belligerence and zealotry, but in our history and literary tradition, there are also stories about the struggle over identity. The story of Hanukkah, for example, the war with 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 Greece wanted to get us not merely out of the Temple but entirely away from serving God, from Judaism, to give up circumcision and commandments like that – in fact, to Hellenize us. When it comes to that, you do have to fight to the finish. Whether there’s a chance or there isn’t any chance, you’ve got to fight. But when it’s a question not of religious but of political sovereignty, the flag that will fly there, it’s totally different. To me, that’s a very significant point, to understand that difference. 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 after all, in the case of the Greeks the rebellion succeeded.

**The Travails of Redemption**

**Gil:** Let’s go back to our story. Lamentations Rabbah gives R. Zechariah ben Avkilus a quite central role, it’s almost possible to hear him arguing it out with himself: Hang on, am I supposed to get mixed up in this or not? Halakhically, at least, this house belongs to the host, and what he says goes.

**Ehud:** Both in that version and in the Tosefta, R. Zechariah ben Avkilus looks indecisive, but in the Talmud, he is very decisive. That is, he manages to change everyone’s position, that of the rabbis and also that of the Emperor’s people. They want to acknowledge the complexity of the situation. That is, they are in the “Happy is the man who is always afraid” category … and you see that he is the one who is portrayed as strong, decisive, and successful – with his halakhic ardor – in persuading them all to do it.

**Gil:** There’s another expression that appears in the Lamentations version a little differently than in the Talmud: “The rabbis sat there calmly” as opposed to “the rabbis sat there and did not object” in the Talmud. That’s something extra: “calmly.” They were quite comfortable as they were, not paying any attention to the other person’s distress.

**Ehud:** I thought about that, that if Kimtza hadn’t seen them sitting there so calmly, he wouldn’t have informed on them. If he had seen that they were uncomfortable and upset about it, then even if they hadn’t done anything he wouldn’t have gone to the authorities to frame them. It was their calm in that situation, their impermeable indifference, that pushed him to vengeance.

I think that, just as there are travails of Destruction, there are also travails of redemption. Travails of renascence – rebirth pangs. I heard a wonderful story about the Dairyman[[5]](#footnote-5) where he talks about Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones. He says: “We today 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 Jews were separated into various limbs scattered all over the world. Now we are returning to the land of Israel and trying to rebuild this body from scratch. These limbs need right now to reassemble, and only then can the spirit enter into them.” That’s exactly what happens in Ezekiel’s vision – the bones recombine, flesh and skin and muscles appear, and then the spirit arrives. We are at the stage of waiting for the spirit to show up, but the bones are already in the process of recombination. The same way surgery is painful, recombining the bones this way is also painful. But there’s no alternative, somehow we’ve got to build some kind of body out of this thing.

And there’s a lesson here that we’ve got to learn for our own time. Unity is not the same thing as uniformity.

**Toward a New Yavneh**

**Gil:** What’s the moral of this story that we today, in Israeli society, should aspire to fulfill?

**Ehud:** I see in our time a need to build a new Yavneh that will set up something central that everyone can accept. There are already several things that connect us. The very fact that we are living together here in the same country and want to keep living here, speaking 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 aspects have to be developed, there’s no need to wait for the Ethiopian to become white or change what he is, just to know enough to accept that we are all limbs of the same body. After that, may we deserve a spirit, a new spirit that’s got to come.

To me, that’s the great lesson of the Destruction, to know to accept someone who doesn’t think the same way I do and not be afraid of conflict. The Talmud is full of disagreements. But to have a disagreement not out of hatred but out of respect. It’s legitimate to be a right-winger, it’s legitimate to be a settler, it’s legitimate to be a left-winger and sound off about the occupation. Everybody’s correct here. But there’s got to be a conversation, which there isn’t. The minute you open your mouth, some baseless hatred flares up. If only we could learn to listen to each other with respect when we discuss things. I don’t think like you, you don’t think like me, but come on, let’s talk about it, let’s try to maybe find some way to reach, not agreement, but at least an understanding of how we might live together.

**Gil:** So we can keep sitting together at a festive meal and not kick someone out because he doesn’t fit in with us at a given moment.

**Ehud:** Yes, that’s exactly it. “With him, I just don’t speak,” get it? We’re always in a hurry to ostracize anyone who doesn’t think like me. I can tell you that I have really been burned this way.

By now, I personally think that there’s no such thing as right and left, and I certainly no longer think in terms of right and left. But when it comes to things like Greater Israel, you can classify me as someone who thinks like a left-winger, and precisely for religious reasons. That is, I’m closer to the ultra-Orthodox approach than to the national-religious approach.

You might argue that it’s because I became religious studying in a Lithuanian yeshiva in Bnei Brak, but that’s not the reason. I think that way because I read the stories of the Destruction and I see that the rabbis have no problem whatsoever blaming zealotry for the Destruction. The Fast of Gedaliah is about zealotry. R. Yochanan b. Zakkai talks about the Sicarii, that’s an extreme form of nationalistic zealotry, and I’m very suspicious of it. Prof. Yeshayahu Leibowitz, who expressed himself very harshly – perhaps too harshly – warned us about deviating in this direction. And that’s even before Rabin was murdered. I say, in our generation, someone arose and murdered a prime minister. That’s a fact that we have to take into account in any discussion about the Destruction. So you can classify me on the left side as far as that goes.

All the same, I’m not one to ostracize entire communities. There’s a phenomenon of Israeli musicians who won’t perform on the other side of the Green Line, but I do perform there, and I have for 20 years. I’ve been performing in Tekoa and other places for a long time now. And you’ll find me in that kind of place because on the one hand, I don’t ostracize anyone, but on the other hand, I express opinions that maybe don’t sit well with that particular public. But I don’t see only what separates me from them. There’s a disagreement between us, but I’ve also got a lot in common with the. I’ve definitely got an audience there, devoted fans, very faithful, whom I very much value and very much respect for their appreciation of me. All of which is to say that there’s no way they would invite me to perform and I would say, no, sorry, I’m not talking with your kind. What would I achieve by saying, “I don’t speak with your kind”? Exactly the opposite of what I want. I want to go there and talk with them. I was invited once to perform in a settlement on the other side of the Green Line, and when it was announced, my left-wing friends asked me not to go, because of some legal cases in that area, having to do with Palestinian land. I wouldn’t cancel the performance. Instead, I wrote a post on my Facebook page explaining my attitude, which I admit is complex: I don’t ostracize entire groups, but my views are left-wing views and I’m against the occupation. What happened was that the word “occupation” ignited the anger of some people. I got difficult responses – throwing Ehud Banai CDs out of the house, not inviting me to perform. Somebody created a Facebook page called “Settlers against Ehud Banai.”

It taught me that Israeli society loves to classify people. Don’t change, don’t confuse us, both sides say. The left side says: If you’re against the occupation, what are you doing in Susiya? The right side says: If you’re against the occupation, then don’t come here, I don’t need you, don’t want you. Get it? I got stuck in this storm that thank God has passed, but I’m aware of the extreme sensitivity about these things. So instead of a substantive, true, important discussion, it almost immediately turns into an exchange of curses and blows.

**Gil:** Who’s 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 festive meal – and if there’s a disagreement, then let’s talk about it. Hillel and Shammai disagreed on practically everything, but their followers intermarried. That was “a dispute for the sake of heaven.” I really believe that bottom line, everyone wants what’s good for society and good for the country, but we’re so used to having these fires ignite. Just mention something loaded and immediately you can feel such a vibe that a lot of people would rather just keep silent. Lots of people would rather not speak. Because every extra word you say, anything you might say about Israeli society, is like lighting a match next to the gas pump.

The rest of that verse that starts the story in the Talmud is “But he who hardens his heart falls into misfortune.” All the people in this story harden their hearts: the host, the rabbis, Bar Kamtza, and by the end, even R. Zechariah ben Avkilus. What you’ve got here is hardening of the heart, closing off of the heart. The heart is the center, right in the middle of the body, the organ that keeps it alive. It’s not the brain that keeps your body alive, it’s the heart. So there’s a lesson here for our own times as well, a lesson about how to open the heart and not harden it. How not to enclose yourself in the thing I believe in and not be so certain that I’m 100% right, but to open my heart to someone who doesn’t think what I think, to open my heart to someone who’s different from me. The nation needs a centered heart like this, one 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. Biblical quotations are based on NJPS. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Likutei Moharan*, Part II 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 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-3)
4. *Wars of the Jews* 2:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. R. Hayyim Avshalom Ezra Cohen, born in 1935, a kabbalist called “the Dairyman” after his occupation. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)