



## **RABBAN YOCHANAN BEN ZAKKAI BUILDS THE NEW NORMAL**

**W**e find ourselves poised to observe Shavuot in the midst of a pandemic unlike any we have experienced in our lifetimes. This pandemic has totally transformed our lives on multiple levels: social, professional, religious, and economic. As we struggle to make sense out of these changes, we turn to *Pirkei Avos* for insight and inspiration. For centuries, the study of *Pirkei Avos* served as a way to prepare for celebrating Shavuot and its commemoration of the giving of the Torah. In this essay, we analyze a passage from *Pirkei Avos* which seeks to instruct us in choosing the

ideal path in life. This passage and its message resonate powerfully as we prepare to observe Shavuot in the throes of the “New Normal.”

רבן יוחנן בן זכאי קבל מהלל ומשמאי. הוא היה אומר, אם למדת תורה הרבה, אל תחזיק טובה לעצמך, כי לך נוצרת. חמשה תלמידים היו לו לרבן יוחנן בן זכאי, ואלו הן, רבי אליעזר בן הורקנוס, ורבי יהושע בן חנניה, ורבי יוסי הכהן, ורבי שמעון בן נתנאל, ורבי אלעזר בן ערך. הוא היה מונה שבחן. רבי אליעזר בן הורקנוס, בור סוד שאינו מאבד טפה. רבי יהושע בן חנניה, אשרי יולדתו. רבי יוסי הכהן, חסיד. רבי שמעון בן נתנאל, ירא חטא. ורבי אלעזר בן ערך, כמעין המתגבר. הוא היה אומר, אם יהיו כל חכמי ישראל

בכף מאזנים, ואליעזר בן הורקנוס בכף שניה, מכריע את כולם. אבא שאול אומר משמו, אם יהיו כל חכמי ישראל בכף מאזנים ורבי אליעזר בן הורקנוס אף עמהם, ורבי אלעזר בן ערך בכף שניה, מכריע את כולם. אמר להם, צאו וראו איזוהי דרך ישרה שידבק בה האדם. רבי אליעזר אומר, עין טובה. רבי יהושע אומר, חבר טוב. רבי יוסי אומר, שכן טוב. רבי שמעון אומר, הרואה את הנולד. רבי אלעזר אומר, לב טוב. אמר להם, רואה אני את דברי אלעזר בן ערך מדבריכם, שבכלל דבריו דבריכם. אמר להם: צאו וראו איזוהי דרך רעה שיתרחק ממנה האדם. רבי אליעזר אומר, עין רעה. רבי יהושע אומר, חבר רע. רבי יוסי אומר, שכן רע. רבי שמעון אומר, הלוה ואינו משלם. אחד הלוה מן האדם, כלוה מן המקום ברוך הוא, שנאמר (תהלים לז)

Dedicated in honor of our daughter Chava's engagement to Levi Goldman.  
May they merit building a home imbued with all the good traits mentioned in this essay.

לזה רשע ולא ישלם, וצדיק חונן ונותן. רבי אלעזר אומר, לב רע. אמר להם, רואה אני את דברי אלעזר בן ערך מדבריכם, שבכלל דברי דבריכם.

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai received [the oral tradition] from Hillel and Shammai. He used to say: if you have learned much Torah, do not claim credit for yourself, because for such a purpose were you created. Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai had five disciples: Rabbi Eliezer ben Hurkanus, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya, Rabbi Yose HaKohen, Rabbi Shimon ben Nesanel and Rabbi Elazar ben Arach. He [Rabban Yochanan] used to list their outstanding virtues: Rabbi Eliezer ben Hurkanus is a plastered cistern which loses not a drop; Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya — happy is the woman that gave birth to him; Rabbi Yose HaKohen is a pious man; Rabbi Shimon ben Nesanel is one that fears sin, and Rabbi Elazar ben Arach is like an ever-flowing spring. He [Rabban Yochanan] used to say: If all the sages of Israel were on one scale of the balance and Rabbi Eliezer ben Hurkanus on the other scale, he would outweigh them all. Abba Shaul said in his name: If all the sages of Israel were on one scale of the balance — including Rabbi Eliezer ben Hurkanus — and Rabbi Elazar ben Arach on the other scale, he would outweigh them all.

He [Rabban Yochanan] said unto them: go forth and observe which is the right way to which a man should cleave? Rabbi Eliezer said, a good eye; Rabbi Yehoshua said, a good companion; Rabbi Yose said, a good neighbor; Rabbi Shimon said, foresight. Rabbi Elazar said, a good leiv. He [Rabban Yochanan] said to them: I prefer the words of Elazar ben Arach, for in his words your words are included. He [Rabban Yochanan] said unto them: go forth and observe which is the evil way which a man should shun? Rabbi Eliezer said, an evil eye; Rabbi Yehoshua said, an

evil companion; Rabbi Yose said, an evil neighbor; Rabbi Shimon said, one who borrows and does not repay, for he that borrows from man is as one who borrows from God, blessed be He, as it is said, “the wicked borrow and do not repay, but the righteous deal graciously and give” (Psalms 37:21). Rabbi Elazar said, an evil leiv. He [Rabban Yochanan] said to them: I prefer the words of Elazar ben Arach, for in his words your words are included.

#### Avos 2:9-14

This description of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai’s students is puzzling:

First, the statement that Rabban Yochanan had five students seems inaccurate. Rabban Yochanan taught Torah for forty years (*Rosh HaShana* 31b), teaching all day to large crowds in the shadow of the Beis HaMikdash (*Pesachim* 26a). It seems odd to describe him as only having five students. Even the suggestion that these were Rabban Yochanan’s best students seems inaccurate. In addition to these students, he taught Rabbi Tarfon (*Tosefta, Chagiga* 3:11), Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa (*Berachos* 34b), Rabban Gamliel II, Rabbi Elazar HaModa’i, and Rabbi Nechunya ben HaKaneh (*Bava Basra* 10b). All the aforementioned rabbis were giants in their own right.

Second, it seems very atypical for the Mishna to spend time describing what Rabban Yochanan saw as the outstanding character traits of these five students. It seems even stranger that the Mishna then discusses which of these students could be considered the “best” among them. What lesson are we to gain from these statements?

To answer these questions, we need to appreciate the unique role Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai played in Jewish history.

Rabban Yochanan was already a prominent Jewish leader before the destruction of the Second Beis HaMikdash. When it became clear that Jerusalem would fall to the Romans and the Beis HaMikdash would be destroyed, he proactively took steps to ease the Jewish people’s transition into a post-Churban (destruction) reality. As described dramatically by Chazal (*Gittin* 56b), he convinced Vespasian — the Roman general who became Emperor — to allow the Sanhedrin to relocate to Yavneh and to spare the family of Rabban Gamliel, who had led the Sanhedrin for generations. After the Beis HaMikdash was destroyed, Rabban Yochanan instituted several new enactments to help the people remember the Beis HaMikdash, while at the same time teaching that Judaism was still able to continue post-Churban, despite the horrific loss of the Beis HaMikdash and everything it entails (See *Avos D’Rabbi Nasan* 4:5).

If we view Rabban Yochanan’s statements in *Pirkei Avos* in light of his mission to help the Jewish people adjust to a post-Churban reality, we can answer the questions we posed above.

Rabban Yochanan indeed had many more than five students. Some of his students may have been even greater, in certain respects, than those mentioned in *Pirkei Avos*. But Rabban Yochanan felt that these five students exemplified character traits that were crucial for rebuilding Jewish life after the Churban. Although it is unusual for the Talmud to record a teacher rating the character traits of his students, in this case it was essential to do so. The students’ unique qualities and strengths served as the foundation of the “New Normal,” which Rabban Yochanan was so bent on establishing.

This perspective also helps us understand the preoccupation with establishing which of the students was “the best.” The issue was not one of vanity. The question at hand concerned identifying which personal quality would be the most essential in preserving Jewish life under radically new conditions.

What were these five essential qualities that Rabban Yochanan saw as essential to rebuilding the Jewish community?

### **Breadth in Torah Learning and Knowledge**

This quality was personified by Rabbi Eliezer, the “plastered cistern who would not lose a drop” — someone who was a vast repository of the traditions he had learned from his teachers and that had been passed down from Sinai. Indeed, Rabbi Eliezer was a faithful transmitter of the tradition; he never said anything which he had not heard from his teachers (*Sukka* 28a).

Rabbi Eliezer’s statement that the best path a person can choose in life involves cultivating a “good eye” can be understood against this background as well. The term “good eye” is usually understood as generosity. However, the Abarbanel (in his “*Nachlas Avos*” commentary) explains that here it refers to an attention to detail, much the way that we use the expression in English today. Rabbi Eliezer extolled the value of having a “good eye” for the details of Torah. Only through doing so could we ensure that the tradition would be passed down comprehensively and accurately.

Rabban Yochanan — according to the first opinion in the Mishna — felt that this character trait was the most

important one to embrace in a post-Churban world. If the Torah was not preserved with total accuracy, the post-Churban society would essentially be broken off from the great tradition dating back to Sinai, and Judaism itself would be compromised.

### **Creating Deep Relationships**

Rabban Yochanan praises Rabbi Yehoshua with the words, “Happy is the woman who gave birth to him!” On one level, this addresses a unique aspect of Rabbi Yehoshua’s biography: His mother brought him, as an infant, to the beis medrash, so that he could hear the sounds of Torah learning at a tender age (*Yerushalmi Yevamos* 1:6). “Happy is the woman who gave birth to him” is thus a tribute to the role Rabbi Yehoshua’s mother played in his early development.

Beyond that, the phrase describes someone who makes a positive impression on those who interact with him, as per the statement in *Yoma* 86a: “When one studies Torah and interacts pleasantly with people, people say about him, ‘Happy is his father who taught him Torah!’” A review of the stories told about Rabbi Yehoshua indicate that he was a master of managing relationships. He gently and sensitively guided those Jews who wanted to mourn excessively after the Beis HaMikdash was destroyed (*Bava Basra* 60b); he calmed Jews who wished to rebel against the Romans after they reneged on a promise to rebuild the Beis HaMikdash (*Bereishis Rabba* 64:10); he had deep relationships with government officials, including the Emperor Vespasian (*Shabbos* 119a, *Sanhedrin* 90b) and used those contacts to help nullify decrees against the Jewish people (*Shabbos* 127b).

When he passed away, it was said that “wise counsel has departed from Israel (*Yerushalmi Sota* 9:16).”

Rabban Yochanan recognized that the rebuilt Jewish society needed to cultivate deep relationships within Jewish society (leaders and followers, teachers and students) and without (the Jewish community with the non-Jewish world). Rabbi Yehoshua, who saw the best path in life as linked to the concept of the “good companion,” exemplified this trait.

### **A Just Society**

Beyond forging deep relationships, it is equally — or perhaps even more — important to conduct our casual relationships with honesty and integrity. We can sometimes be a wonderful friend, but a poor neighbor. Rabbi Yose sees the need to create positive neighborly relationships as the key to a proper life and a righteous society; we should not merely be a “good companion” but a “good neighbor.” This is truly the cornerstone of a just society. As a “pious man,” Rabbi Yose sought to go beyond the letter of the law in dealing with others (see the commentary of Rav Ovadya of Bartanura). This trait was necessary for creating a community that would strive to do what was right for all its members.

### **Genuine Fear of Heaven**

Rabbi Shimon is described as one who “fears sin.” As the commentaries point out, this does not simply mean that he acted out of fear of punishment; we learned earlier (*Avos* 2:6) that even an ignoramus can achieve fear of divine punishment. Rabbi Shimon cultivated a sense of true piety, in which he feared not

punishment but the inherent damage to the soul that sin creates. A Jewish society without this deep piety would be a society of externals, lacking a spiritual core — and such a society can not last. It would fall victim to the same forces that led to the Churban itself.

Someone possessing this deep piety has the foresight to realize that actions that may seem pleasurable and beneficial in the short term are often spiritual poison in the long term. Someone who lacks this foresight fails to realize that his very life is a loan, so to speak, from the Almighty; sinning represents accepting the loan of life but defaulting on payment. The payment demanded for the loan of life is devoting oneself to perfection of the soul.

### **Creativity and Profundity in Torah Learning**

Rabbi Elazar ben Arach was an “ever-flowing spring,” someone who had the ability to bring an unusual amount of creativity and profundity to his Torah learning. As the Abarbanel points out, this personal quality of Rabbi Elazar’s is evident in his description of the ideal path to the good: A good *leiv*. *Leiv* is usually translated as “heart,” but the Abarbanel suggests that it is better translated, at least in this context, as “mind.” The creative and original Rabbi Elazar saw a good mind — a powerhouse of thought — as the key to achieving that which is good in life. Having a good mind is not simply a result of having been fortunate enough

to be born smart. A good mind is the result of careful cultivation of our inborn creativity and originality. The inspiration needs to be accompanied by perspiration in order to keep the mind ever creatively fresh.

According to Abba Shaul, Rabban Yochanan saw Rabbi Elazar’s creative powers as outweighing the unique contributions of the other great sages. He certainly saw the cultivation of the “good mind” as encompassing all the other ingredients in bringing a person — or a community — to the ultimate good. Why is this so? How does a “good mind” include all the other elements?

**Life is constantly changing. There will always be a new set of challenges and issues that need to be addressed.**

I believe the answer lies in what Rabban Yochanan had learned through his own experiences. Life is constantly changing — for the individual, as well as for the community. There will always be a new set of challenges and issues that need to be addressed. All the concepts mentioned by the other sages are essential — but life always requires a creative mind to know how to apply those concepts in an ever-changing reality. Without the “ever-flowing spring,” the ability to creatively think

of new solutions to new problems, the wonderful concepts articulated and personified by the other sages will remain wonderful concepts, lacking the wherewithal to be implemented when circumstances change.

Rabban Yochanan lived through one of the most difficult times in Jewish history, one where the entire landscape of Jewish life had changed radically. Yet with Rabban Yochanan’s own “good mind” — his creative ability to transplant the timeless values of Torah to a new environment — he was able to ensure the continuity of the tradition and the community that revered it. Rabban Yochanan recognized that the “good mind” was the foundation of enabling all the other values to flourish.

Although our current circumstances are far less traumatic than those experienced by the generation that saw the Beis HaMikdash destroyed, we have also seen much that was familiar to us upended. We struggle to keep the values of Torah afloat in a frightening new reality that is unlike anything any of us have experienced. In these difficult times, as we desperately seek to establish our own “New Normal,” we do well to contemplate all the elements that Rabban Yochanan saw as essential for rebuilding. Most important, we appreciate the role of creative thinking, the ability to see new ways to preserve the familiar and desirable in a disconcerting new environment. That ability to cultivate the “good *leiv*” ultimately is the foundation of everything.



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