

THEY CALLED HIM A TRAITOR

*From "The Prisoner and other Tales of Faith" by Rabbi Salomon Alter Halpern,
published by Y Feldheim, 39 Tachkemoni Street, Jerusalem,
and reprinted with the kind permission of the Author.*

Through the tall, narrow windows the moon shone on a tastefully furnished room. The lamps on their brass stands were unlit, though the room was occupied. Three men sat on damask-covered couches around a low table, on which lay an open scroll. Another man was leaning against the wall near the heavily barred door. Their languid attitudes made them appear old and tired and their faces were emaciated, but their sparse black beards showed that they were still young and the occasional eagerness that came into their low-voiced discussion proved that their spirit was not broken.

They wore the long white robes of Torah scholars, but over these they had belted heavy swords, and other weapons were leaning against the walls. In besieged Yerushalaim, torn by internal strife, even Rabbis had to be ready for self-defence.

Suddenly, at a signal from the guard at the door, they fell silent and listened tensely. Slow, cautious footsteps were approaching. Then came a tapping at the door. The man on guard went to a window and whispered through it: "Who is there?" The others drew their swords and took up positions near the door.

A whispered answer came from the outside: "Let me in; I must speak to the Rabbi."

"Who are you," repeated the guard, "and why do you come at night?"

"My business is urgent and secret," answered the man outside. "I cannot tell you my name, but tell Rabbi Yochanon ben Zakkai that the boy whom he used to carry to the Beis HaMedrash is outside."

"Wait, then," answered the guard. He went to a door leading from the room and knocked. When a grey-haired Rabbi opened the door, he said: "Rabbi Eliezer, will you tell our Master that a stranger wants to see him urgently. He describes himself as the boy whom the Rabbi used to carry to the Beis HaMedrash."

Rabbi Eliezer replied: "The Rabbi sent for him. Let him in, carefully, and let no one speak of this visit."

One man, his sword raised, posted himself next to the door whilst another unbarred it and opened it half way.

A tall broad-shouldered man came in. His face was hidden in his dark cloak, but his bearing was that of a military man. The door was barred again. The stranger

THEY CALLED HIM A TRAITOR

surrendered a dagger, and submitted to a search for hidden weapons. Rabbi Eliezer conducted him into the inner room.

He struck a flint and after a few moments had lit one of the lamps. Its light revealed a white-bearded Rabbi reclining on one of the couches. His body was shrivelled but his face, now showing an expression of deep seriousness, was neither old nor young; it seemed to shine with an inner light.

Rabbi Eliezer left them. Rabbi Yochonon motioned the stranger to a seat but he remained standing, towering above him. He removed his cloak, revealing himself to be Abba Sikra, the Commander of the Zealots.

“Peace, Abba Sikra,” said the Rabbi, “and I wish it were really peace ...”

“It is a just war we are fighting,” declared the Commander, “a war for our freedom!”

The Rabbi answered quietly: “It is a war that should have been avoided. In time, Rome would have replaced Governor Florus. And whatever we suffered from him is as nothing compared with what we are suffering now. As for the future ...”

Abba Sikra drew himself up. “Is it my fault that the storehouses caught fire? If we had them we could laugh at the enemy.”

Rabbi Yochonon looked at him steadily. Abba Sikra dropped his eyes. He knew well enough whose fault it was, and that those responsible were still under his command.

The Rabbi went on: “Meanwhile, thousands are dying from hunger. Do you still expect to win?”

A note of triumph came into the Commander’s voice as he retorted: “Is that a way for the Head of the Sanhedrin to speak? Does it not say, ‘Nothing prevents G-d from helping, with many or with few?’”

“Nothing does, if He sees fit to help,” replied the Rabbi, unruffled. “But is it a just war? When this war started we had not been attacked nor was there an attempt to prevent us from keeping the Torah. Your party calls it a war of liberation, but what do your friends mean by “liberty”? Freedom to worship G-d, or power and worldly honours? As for the people, they are not even fighting for that. They were incited by your party’s slogans, against the Council of the Rabbis — and now they are kept in the City by sheer terror. They would not give their lives for “independence.” They have existed under Rome for more than a hundred years and so have stronger countries. Greece, and Egypt and Gaul and Britain — none of them makes a fight for “independence” now.

“No, you know it is not reliance on G-d that keeps your friends in the fight. It is obstinacy, or fear of the Romans’ punishment. I ask you: do you, by your earthly way of thinking, really expect to drive off these crack legions with your untrained, starved men?”

THEY CALLED HIM A TRAITOR

The Commander did not answer.

“It is still not too late,” continued the Rabbi. “Vespasian is still calling on us to surrender and promising to spare the City and the Beis HaMikdash. It is true, he will now impose punishment, but that will be little to what will happen if we hold out. You always talk of ‘dying for the people.’ What is better in a hopeless situation: that the leaders of the rebellion should risk execution and the people live — or that, G-d forbid, all should perish?”

Abba Sikra sat down and hung his head. After a full minute he said tonelessly: “It’s no use. If I suggest surrender now, even my own men will kill me as a traitor. It has gone too far. G-d help us.”

There was silence.

A chill hung over the room; in the distance one heard a woman weeping. It seemed as if Zion was bewailing her sons.

Thus they sat. The woe of all the ages was on them. The long, bitter *Gollus* was descending upon the People of Israel.

They were silent for a long while. Then the Rabbi raised himself, his expression one of unutterable sadness, his eyes looking into the distance. He was speaking in a low voice, as if speaking to himself. “It has come, then. The prophecies are being fulfilled. The Destruction. The Slavery. The terrible, long wandering. The age of darkness. The martyrdom of the body, the martyrdom of the soul. The poor scattered flock, the poor, beloved children of our People ...” He wept quietly.

After a time, he began in a firmer voice: “The remnant shall return; that too is prophesied. The Torah will not be forgotten; that too is said. When Rome has fallen and Athens been forgotten, we shall still be the witnesses of G-d!”

Abba Sikra could not understand it. The man was sad, sad unto death, yet a strength was welling up in his words. His own despair gave way to a strange feeling of hope. It seemed mad, yet he felt this mad hopefulness was a thousand times more sane than the obstinate determination in his own camp. He suddenly saw that the Rabbis had not been traitors, nor had they been blind to the sufferings that had stung him into fighting. If only they could have marched together ...

In a new, strong voice, the Rabbi was speaking. “This is a time for action, not for talk. And you must help me. I must go to Vespasian. Command your men to let me go!”

“But he will kill you!” cried the Commander. Then he remembered that the Rabbi was at this moment on the blacklist of the Sikarin, Abba Sikra’s own dread secret society; that his own military court would have condemned him as “a friend of the Romans” if they had not feared the population, and he hung his head.

Rabbi Yochonon smiled. “But what is death in a great cause?” he said, his intonation suggesting the oft-repeated slogan of the Zealots.

THEY CALLED HIM A TRAITOR

“But what do you hope to achieve?” asked Abba Sikra. “Do you think he will call off a war of the People and Senate of Rome on the plea and prayer of one man?”

“Alas,” said the Rabbi, “I would give my life a hundred times if I could achieve that. But perhaps he will spare the Rabbis and their Talmidim. And if the root survives, the tree will grow again.”

“I don’t think you will even get to see him,” replied Abba Sikra. “The Romans will arrest you as soon as you step foot outside Yerushalaim and crucify you like those.” He pointed, as if he could show the Rabbi the bodies of the deserters hanging from hundreds of crosses on the hills around the City.

“Besides,” he continued, “my guards will never allow you to leave. I can’t make exceptions, least of all with a man like you. No one passes out of this city alive.” He was silent for a moment.

“No one alive ...” he repeated, in deep thought. Then he bent forward and began to whisper to the Rabbi.

Half an hour later he left, and the Rabbi had a whispered conversation with his Talmid, Rabbi Eliezer.

In the morning, Rabbi Eliezer informed the others that the Rabbi was in pain. The news spread quickly. There was a rumour that he had the plague. All day, people crowded in front of the house. Only Talmidim and friends were allowed to see the Rabbi, from the door of his room. All over the town people forgot their own desperate position and prayed for the Rabbi’s recovery.

The next morning, no one was admitted. “The Rabbi is still asleep,” was the answer to all callers. But the rumours were spreading.

About noon the noise of hammering was heard in the house. This confirmed the rumours. The crowd wept and moaned. A voice cried out: “Rabbi, why have you left us?” The cry was taken up: “What will become of us?”

Then Rabbi Eliezer appeared in the doorway, his garment torn. He held his hand up for silence, then he proclaimed: “Rabbi Yochanon ben Zakkai has asked for the following things:

“He shall be taken out of the City without delay. No mourning meetings shall be held. No one but Rabbi Yehoshua and myself shall carry the coffin or even approach it. Other pupils will form a square round the coffin at a distance of four cubits to ensure that no one approaches.

“His bed and all other articles in his room shall be burned; the Holy Scrolls shall be buried. The room shall then be locked. The pupils who have stayed in his house shall remain there for thirty days.

“I ask you to obey his wishes, and now to clear a space in front of the house.”

THEY CALLED HIM A TRAITOR

A murmur went through the crowd: “The plague!” Soon there was a clear space in front of the house.

The coffin was carried by the two Rabbis, Eliezer and Yehoshua. Around it walked a group of other Talmidim; in front and behind went the weeping crowds. The sun was setting when they reached the Water Gate, on the south-east of the City. Slowly the coffin came to the front. The guards stopped them. “Where are you going?” demanded the sergeant of the Zealots on duty.

“To bury Rabbi Yochanon ben Zakkai,” replied Rabbi Eliezer. “You know that by the law a dead body must not be kept overnight in Yerushalaim.”

The sergeant consulted his captain: “How do we know he is really dead? Shall I pierce the coffin with a javelin?” They went on conferring. The crowd began to murmur.

Suddenly there were salutes. Abba Sikra had appeared on the scene. The problem was submitted to him.

“No,” he said. “We cannot do that. This crowd will get out of hand if we stab their beloved Rabbi.”

“Let us shake the coffin, then, and see if he moves,” suggested the captain.

“No,” said the Commander, “any kind of disrespect will provoke a riot. They will say that we feared him in life, and took revenge on his dead body. It is likely enough that he is dead. He was old and weak; younger people have succumbed.”

He turned to the two Rabbis. “You will be sent out as soon as it is dark. Keep in the shadow of the wall as long as possible, and make no noise. If the enemy spots you, surrender or flee — but don’t lead them here. If you should come back safely, come to this gate and give this special password.” He whispered to them: “Resurrection.”

When dusk had merged into darkness and the sentries on the gate tower had reported a clear field, the gate was opened a fraction, the two Rabbis passed through, and it was barred again behind them.

They went in the direction of the family vaults, but as soon as they were invisible from the wall, they changed course. They went down the Kiddron Valley and made for the Roman lines.

Soon they were challenged by the Roman outposts. They surrendered quietly and upon their demand they were led to the Centurion’s tent, still carrying the coffin. The officer came out to look at them by torchlight. He was still holding the goblet from which he had been drinking.

“Well, well!” he joked, “the Jews are learning what to expect. Now they come dressed in their shrouds and bring their own coffins. But we need *two* coffins! Or are you thin enough already to go in together?”

THEY CALLED HIM A TRAITOR

“Sir,” replied Rabbi Eliezer, respectfully but without fear, “we come to announce the surrender of Rabbi Yochanon ben Zakkai. The Rabbi humbly begs an audience with the General.”

“Ah,” said the officer, “that is different. John Zaccaeus! We have reports of him. Leader of the Synhedrion and a friend of Rome. Wants to negotiate, I suppose. I’ll see what I can do. Where is he now?”

“The Rabbi is with us, here,” said Rabbi Eliezer, making a move towards the coffin.

The officer was speechless for a second. Then he erupted: “Are you still mocking us, confounded rebels? Surrendering after he is dead! We will torture you for this!”

“Sir!” replied Rabbi Eliezer. “Rabbi Yochanon is alive. With your permission I shall open the coffin.”

Understanding dawned on the Centurion. He burst out laughing: “Ha ha! So that’s the answer to the riddle! The joke is on the Jews this time! Capital, capital! The Trojan horse in reverse! Bring him out, bring him out! I must report this at once! The General likes a good story at the banquet.”

The Rabbis opened the coffin and helped Rabbi Yochanon out. He was a little out of breath, but otherwise unharmed. He bowed to the officer and said simply, “Sir, I am in your hands.”

The captives were escorted to the General’s pavilion, the Centurion hurrying ahead.

Vespasian was feasting with his friends and staff-officers in front of his pavilion. He was still laughing at the officer’s story when the captives were brought up. He ordered Rabbi Yochanon to be brought to him at once.

The Rabbi bowed low, then proclaimed: “Peace unto you, O Emperor!”

Vespasian was taken aback, but after a moment he answered sternly: “You have doubly incurred the death penalty. Once for addressing me as Emperor when you know well that Nero is the Emperor. And again for remaining with the rebels and not surrendering till now.”

Rabbi Yochanon did not flinch. “Indeed and indeed,” he repeated, “you are the Emperor. Our Prophets have said that the Temple will fall into the hands of a ruler, not a mere general. Since the City is about to fall, you must be the Emperor. As for my not surrendering before, I wish I could have come before, not only to surrender myself, but to bring you the surrender of the City and end this tragic war. But the Zealots amongst us have seized power and prevent anyone from leaving the town. They will not let us surrender.”

Vespasian, visibly flattered but unwilling to show it, answered incisively, in the manner of a public orator: “As for the first, it only proves that your Prophets can be wrong. As for the second, it is no excuse. If a snake is coiled round a jug of honey, we

THEY CALLED HIM A TRAITOR

must kill the snake even though we break the jug. If you can't control your brigands, you must suffer for them."

Before Rabbi Yochonon could think of a retort, there was a commotion. Trumpets were blown, a troop of horses were heard racing through the camp. In a moment they arrived. A dust-covered officer jumped off his foaming horse and came up to Vespasian, handing him a despatch. Without waiting till he had read it, he turned to the assembly and called out: "Vespasian has been proclaimed Emperor. Long live Emperor Vespasian!"

All joined in the shout, and it was quite a time before Vespasian remembered his prisoner. When he addressed him again it was with some awe: "Your Prophets were right after all! I can't understand how a people with such wisdom should get into such foolish mischief. But since you have augured well for me your life shall be spared."

On an impulse he said: "Ask me a favour before I depart for Rome," then added with a note of warning: "But don't make it too big, you know, or you will get nothing."

Rabbi Yochonon answered gravely: "Your Majesty, I have three things to ask, small to you, but dear to my heart. Firstly, give me the town of Jamnia, or Yavneh as we call it, and let me build a college there where the remnant of our sages shall study and pray. Secondly, spare the family of our religious leader, our Nossi; they had no share in the rebellion. Thirdly, grant me doctors for my friend Rabbi Tzaddok, who for the past forty years has been fasting and praying that this catastrophe should be averted. Now he is unable to take solid food and he is very weak. These are the favours I ask. May it please your Majesty to grant them."

"Is that all?" asked the Emperor, in high spirits. "I thought you would never stop. You are a proper Phoenician for bargaining. But never mind; today I shall not refuse you."

He turned to his second-in-command: "See that these men have free conduct, and give them what they asked."

The prisoners were led away, and given a tent for the night.

Vespasian kept his word. Rabbi Yochonon ben Zakkai lived to hear the terrible news of the fall of Yerushalaim; he wept and mourned the destruction of the Beis HaMikdash and the frightful sufferings of the Jewish People. But he lived to re-establish a Sanhedrin and Yeshiva at Yavneh, he himself acting as Nossi until Rabbi Gamliel, the son of the murdered Nossi Rabbi Shimon, was fit to take over.

Yavneh became the spiritual centre of the remnant of Israel. In Yavneh was begun the work of arranging the Oral Torah in the form that became the Mishnah. In Yavneh it was ensured that Israel should not perish from the face of the earth.

The root had been saved so that the tree could grow again.