



# Revolt and Renewal: Jewish Leadership & the Ancient Struggle for Zion

The Maccabees | Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai

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The Maccabees**

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Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai**

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## Dateline: Judea, Eretz Yisrael, 167 BCE

*How did ancient Jewish leaders respond to the persecution of the Jewish people? When did they fight for Jewish independence, and when did they accept that Jewish independence was temporarily impossible?*

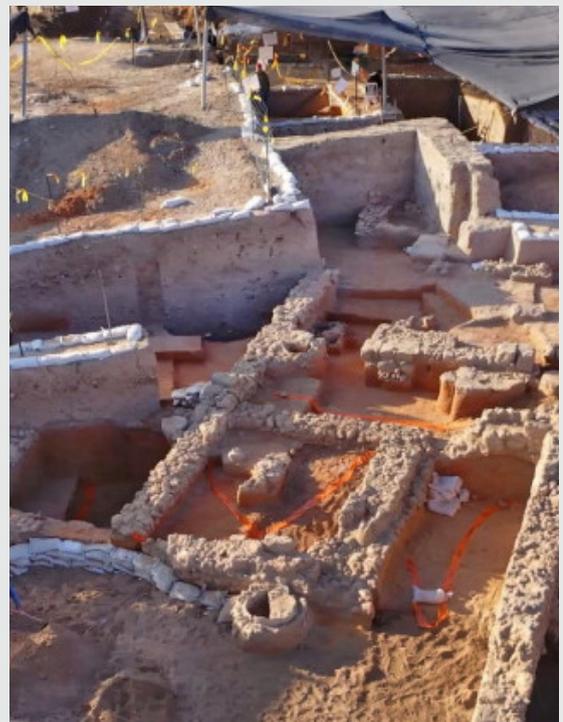
*In Class 3, we will examine two dramatic moments in Jewish history. In 167 BCE, Mattisyahu and his sons the Maccabees successfully revolted against the Seleucid Greeks, who occupied the Land of Israel and sought to eliminate the Jewish way of life. Victorious on the battlefield, the Maccabees purified the Temple in Jerusalem and restored Jewish sovereignty over Israel. Herzl (and many other Zionists) looked to them for inspiration: “The Maccabeans will rise again!”*

*Yet just a few centuries later, in 70 CE, the Romans surrounded Jerusalem. With little hope for Jewish victory, the great sage Yochanan Ben Zakkai pretended to be dead and secretly fled the scene in a coffin. He negotiated with his Roman oppressors, ensuring that a sacred remnant of the Jewish people—the scholars in the city of Yavneh—would sustain the Jewish way of life in an era of political powerlessness.*

*Both Mattisyahu and Ben Zakkai were great Jewish leaders who wanted to ensure the continuity of the Jewish people. Yet they acted in very different ways. The Maccabeans fought their persecutors; Ben Zakkai negotiated with them. What is the legacy of these different leaders and different strategies?*

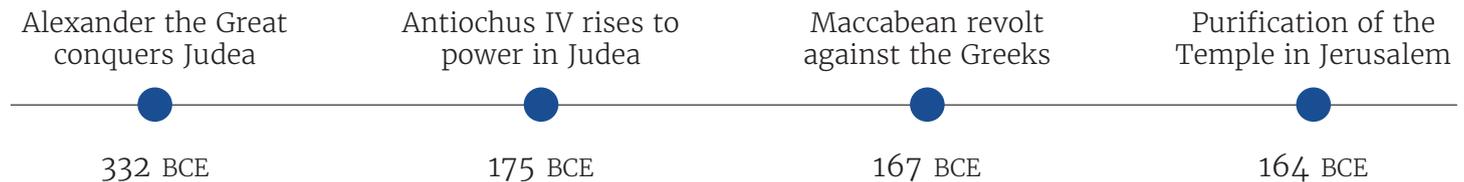


*A depiction of Judah the Maccabee*



*An excavation of the ancient city of Yavneh*

# Historical Spotlights: The Maccabees



## 332 - 175 BCE | Greek Rule in the Land of Israel



When Alexander the Great conquered the Land of Israel in 322 BCE, his empire ended Jewish political autonomy. The Seleucid Greek rulers were initially tolerant of Judaism as they spread Hellenism (Greek culture) throughout the land. But with the rise of a new Greek king named Antiochus IV in 175 BCE, the Greeks tried to eliminate Jewish distinctiveness. Antiochus banned circumcision, Shabbat observance, and other traditional Jewish practices. The Greeks killed any Jews who refused to obey these oppressive edicts. Many Jews became “Hellenized,” abandoning their Jewish identity to avoid punishment and death.

## 167 BCE | The Revolt of Mattisyahu Ben Yochanan and the Maccabees



The Kohen (priest) Mattisyahu Ben Yochanan and his sons were outraged by the brutality of the Seleucid Greeks and their endless violations of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. They were also disgusted by the Jews who abandoned Judaism and adopted Greek culture. In 167 BCE, after watching a Jew sacrifice a pig to a Seleucid Greek idol, Mattisyahu called for a revolt, and his sons (the Maccabees) fought to restore Jewish independence and Jewish dignity. After months of bloody struggle, they were victorious. The Maccabees purified the Temple, reestablished Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel, and created the Hasmonean dynasty.

# Words that Shaped Jewish Destiny

## Key Texts and Discussion Questions

### Source 1: From I Maccabees 1–4

#### Introduction

*The Book of I Maccabees recounts the Jewish military victories of the Maccabees over the Seleucid Greeks, including the events at the heart of the Chanukah story. Written in Hebrew by a Jewish eyewitness, the text became a favorite source for modern Zionists. The Maccabees embodied Jewish courage in the face of Israel's enemies. They fought to maintain Jewish life in the ancient Land of Israel. They revolted against Jewish persecution and oppression—and they won.*

#### Persecution: The Rise of Antiochus IV

King Antiochus wrote to his whole kingdom, that all should be one (Hellenized) people, and everyone should obey his laws: Many of the Israelites agreed to adopt Hellenism, and sacrificed to idols, and broke the Sabbath. For the king had sent letters to Jerusalem and the cities of Judea and forbade Jewish sacrifices in the Temple, and commanded Jews to break the Sabbath and holidays: And that they should also leave their children uncircumcised. To the end they might forget the Jewish law. And whosoever would not do according to the commandment of the king, he said, he should die. This drove the Israelites into secret places, wherever they could flee for safety.

The Greeks set up an idol upon the altar [in the Temple]...And whoever was found with any [Jewish book] or if any observed the Jewish laws, the king's commandment was that they should put him to death... At which time according to the commandment they put to death certain women that had their children circumcised....

#### Discussion Questions



1. When Antiochus IV outlawed Jewish life, the Jewish people had different options: Abandon Jewish identity and become like the Greeks? Go into hiding? Observe Jewish law even at the risk of death? Military revolt? What was the right choice? Were all these choices realistic?

However, many in Israel were fully resolved not to eat any unclean thing. They would rather die, so that they might not be defiled with unclean meats, and that they might not desecrate the holy Torah: so they died. And there was very great wrath upon Israel.

### **The Choice: “Whoever is for G-d and Torah, Let Him Follow Me!”**

In those days arose Mattathias (Mattisyahu) the son of John (Yochanan), the son of Simeon, a priest of the sons of Joarib, from Jerusalem, and dwelt in Modi'in. And he had five sons, Joannan, called Gaddi: Simon; called Thassi: Judah, who was called Maccabeus: Eleazar, called Avaran: and Jonathan, whose surname was Apphus. And when Mattathias saw the terrible desecrations that were committed by the Greeks in Judea and Jerusalem... Mattathias and his sons tore their clothes, put on sackcloth [rags], and mourned.

In the meanwhile, the king's officer came into the city Modi'in, to make the Jews sacrifice to idols. Many Jews gathered, Mattathias and his sons came together. The king's officers said to Mattathias, “You are a ruler, and an honorable and great man in this city, and strengthened with sons. Now you come first, and make a sacrifice to the idol and fulfill the king's commandment. Your family will be considered friends of the king, and you and your children shall be honored with many rewards.”

Then Mattathias answered with a loud voice: “G-d forbid that we should break the Jewish law. We will not listen to the king's words to go against our religion.” Now when Mattathias had finished speaking, a Jew came forward and worshipped the Greek idol. When Mattathias saw this, he was inflamed with zeal and fury and he ran and killed that Jew. He also killed the king's officer and destroyed the idol.

And Mattathias cried throughout the city with a loud voice, saying, “Whoever is for G-d and the Torah, let him follow me!” So he and his sons fled into the mountains and began a revolt against the Greeks. Many Jews joined

### **Discussion Questions**



2. Why did the Greek officers believe that Mattathias would follow the king's orders to sacrifice to idols and abandon Jewish law?

3. Why did Mattathias kill the Jew who worshipped the Greek idol? What message did this bold action send—both to the Greek rulers and to his fellow Jewish citizens?

4. If you had witnessed these events—and heard Mattathias's call that “whoever is for G-d and Torah, let him follow me!”—what would you have done?

the fight and followed them, bringing their children, and their wives.

### The Revolt: “Give Your Lives for the Torah of Your Fathers”

The king’s officers pursued the Maccabees in great number and made war against them on the Sabbath day. And one of the Jews said to another, “If we do not fight for our lives and laws against the heathen (Greeks) on the Sabbath, they will quickly defeat us.” At that time therefore they decreed, saying, “Whoever shall come to make battle with us on the Sabbath day, we will fight against him.”

Then Mattathias and his friends fought and destroyed the altars: And whatever children they found within the coast of Israel uncircumcised, those they circumcised valiantly. Now when the time drew near that Mattathias should die, he said unto his sons, “Be zealous for the Jewish law, and give your lives for the Torah of your fathers...And he died in the hundred forty and sixth year, and his sons buried him in the sepulchres with his fathers at Modi’in, and all Israel made great lamentation for him. Then his son Judah rose up in his stead, and they fought with cheerfulness the battle of Israel.

### Victory: “Behold, Our Enemies are Defeated”

Now when king Antiochus heard these things, he was full of fury [and continued to fight in order to crush the Jewish revolt].

The Israelites fasted that day, and put on sackcloth [rags], and put ashes upon their heads, and tore their clothes... And Judah said, “Arm yourselves, and be valiant men... For it is better for us to die in battle, than to behold the calamities of our people and our Temple. Nevertheless, as the will of G-d is in heaven, so let him do so...Fear

#### Discussion Questions



5. Why did the Greeks attack the Jewish people on the Sabbath day? And why did the Maccabees decide to fight back on their holy Sabbath?

6. With a battle raging, why did Mattathias take time to circumcise the uncircumcised sons of Israel? Why was this so important?

7. Before he dies, Mattathias tells his sons: “Give your lives for the Torah of your fathers.” What is the meaning of Mattathias’s last message?

#### Discussion Questions



9. Judah declares to his men: “It is better for us to die in battle, than to behold the calamities of our people and our Temple.” Do you agree with his message? Is idolatry and indignity worse than death?

not their multitude, do not be afraid of their assault. Remember how our fathers were delivered in the Red Sea, when Pharaoh pursued them with an army..." Thus Israel had a great deliverance that day.

Then said Judah and his brethren, "Behold, our enemies are defeated: let us go up to cleanse and dedicate the Temple." ... Then they took whole stones according to the law, and built a new altar... And made up the sanctuary, and the things that were within the temple... They made new holy vessels.

Then all the people fell upon their faces, worshiping and praising the G-d of heaven, who had given them good success... There was very great gladness among the people...

10. Why was the Maccabean revolt successful? Human courage or divine will?

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11. Why was it so important to "cleanse and dedicate the Temple" as the first Jewish act after defeating their Greek enemies?

# Historical Spotlights: Ben Zakkai



## 63 BCE | The Romans Conquer Jerusalem



Nearly a century after the successful Maccabean revolt against the Greeks, the strength of the Hasmonean kings (the descendants of the Maccabees) weakened. In 63 BCE, the Romans conquered Jerusalem, ending Jewish sovereignty. In the face of Roman oppression, some Jews pledged to fight for political independence, while others believed accepting Roman rule was the only option. Conflict soon erupted among different Jewish factions.

## 66 CE | The Jewish Revolt



These conflicts exploded into a full-scale revolt in 66 CE, led by Jewish Zealots who were determined to fight the Romans, even unto death. The Romans, led by Vespasian (later Caesar), responded with a brutal siege of Jerusalem. The Jews fought valiantly, managing to inflict many casualties on the Romans, but the revolt was ultimately doomed. Disease, starvation, and death spread throughout the city. The Jewish Zealots burned stores of food, believing that worsening the crisis would force reluctant Jews to join the fight against the Romans.

## 69 CE | Yochanan Ben Zakkai Negotiates with Vespasian



The rabbis in Jerusalem judged that the Jewish revolt would be defeated. Faced with political annihilation, Yochanan Ben Zakkai was determined to preserve the continuity of Jewish life and wisdom even in the face of destruction and exile. He negotiated a deal with the Roman general Vespasian: the Romans would allow a small number of rabbis and their students to escape from Jerusalem and establish a small colony in the city of Yavneh, creating a base of Jewish learning and leadership for the future.

## 70 CE | The Destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem



Jerusalem was conquered by the Romans in 70 CE, and the Second Temple was destroyed shortly thereafter. Thousands of Jews died or were exiled from the Land of Israel. Yet the rabbis of Yavneh continued to preserve a Jewish light in the darkness, developing new modes of Jewish life and Jewish law that kept G-d's covenant with the Israelites alive.

# Words that Shaped Jewish Destiny

## Key Texts and Discussion Questions

### Source 2: The Story of Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai – Talmud Gittin 56a–56b

#### Introduction

*After the Romans conquered Jerusalem, Jewish life under Roman rule slowly deteriorated. In defiance of Roman persecution, a group of Jewish Zealots eventually revolted against Rome in 66 CE. In response, the Romans began a vicious siege around the city of Jerusalem. The conditions were horrific. Thousands of Jews died.*

*When it became clear to the rabbinic leadership of Jerusalem that the Jewish revolt would fail, the great sage Yochanan Ben Zakkai was determined to save a remnant of Jewish leadership that could one day, in the future, form the basis of a Jewish rebirth. The Talmud (in Gittin 56a–56b) recounts the brutal struggle and dramatic negotiations between Ben Zakkai and Vespasian, the Roman general and future emperor.*

#### The Zealots Revolt Against the Romans

The Romans sent Vespasian (later Caesar) against the Jews. He came and laid siege to Jerusalem for three years...

There were certain Zealots among the people of Jerusalem. The Sages said to them: “Let us go out and make peace with the Romans.” But the Zealots did not allow them to do this. The Zealots said to the Sages: “Let us go out and engage in battle against the Romans.” But the Sages said to them: “You will not be successful. It would be better for you to wait until the siege is broken.” In order to force the residents of Jerusalem to engage in battle, the Zealots arose and burned down these storehouses of wheat and barley, and there was a general famine...

#### Discussion Questions



1. The Sages and the Zealots offer two very different strategies for dealing with the Roman siege of Jerusalem: “make peace” or “engage in battle.” Which strategy is right? Does everything depend on the likelihood of victory, or is fighting against all odds sometimes the right thing to do?

The Gemara relates: Abba Sikkara was the leader of the Zealots of Jerusalem and the son of the sister of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai. Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai sent a message to him: “Come to me in secret.” He came, and Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai said to him: “Until when will you do this and kill everyone through starvation?” Abba Sikkara said to him: “What can I do, for if I say something to them [the Zealots], they will kill me.” Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai said to him: “Show me a method so that I will be able to leave the city, and it is possible that through this there will be some small salvation...”

Abba Sikkara said to him: “This is what you should do: Pretend to be sick, and have everyone come and ask about your welfare, so that word will spread about your sick condition. Afterward, bring something that smells bad and place it near you, so that people will say that you have died and are decomposing. And then, have your students enter to bring you to burial, and let no one else come in so that the Zealots do not notice that you are still light. As the Zealots know that a living person is lighter than a dead person...”

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai did this... The guards then opened the gate and he was taken out...

When Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai reached the Roman camp, he said [to Vespasian]: Greetings to you, the king; greetings to you, the king. Vespasian said to him: You are liable for two death penalties, one because I am not a king and yet you call me king, and furthermore, if I am a king, why didn't you come to me until now? Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai said to him: As for what you said about yourself: I am not a king, in truth, you are a king, if not now, then in the future....

As they were talking, a messenger arrived from Rome, and said to Vespasian: Rise, for the emperor has died, and the noblemen of Rome plan to appoint you as their leader and make you the next emperor....

Vespasian then said to Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai: I will

2. In choosing a course of action, what does Ben Zakkai value most highly?

be going to Rome to accept my new position, and I will send someone else in my place to continue besieging the city and waging war against it. But before I leave, ask something of me that I can give you...

Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai said to Vespasian: "Give me Yavneh and its rabbis, and do not destroy it, and spare the dynasty of Rabban Gamliel and do not kill them as if they were rebels"...Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai made only a small request, in the hope that he would receive at least that much.

### תלמוד בבלי מסכת גיטין דף נו-נו:

שְׁדָרְיָה עִילּוּיָהוּ לְאַסְפְּסִינּוּס קִיסָר אֶתָּא צָר עָלָה תְּלַת שָׁנִי

הוּוּ בְהוּ הִנְהוּ בְרִיוֹנִי אָמְרוּ לְהוּ רַבְּנָן גִּיפּוּק וְנַעֲבִיד שְׁלָמָא בְּהַדְיָהוּ לָא  
שְׁבִקְיָנְהוּ אָמְרוּ לְהוּ גִיפּוּק וְנַעֲבִיד קַרְבָּא בְּהַדְיָהוּ אָמְרוּ לְהוּ רַבְּנָן לָא  
מִסְתִּיעָא מִלְתָּא קָמוּ קִלְגָּהוּ לְהִנְהוּ אִמְבְּרִי דְחִיטִי

וּשְׁעָרֵי וְהוּהוּ כְּפָנָא

אָבָא סְקָרָא רִישׁ בְּרִיוֹנִי דִירוּשְׁלַיִם בַּר אֶחְתִּיָּה דְרַבִּין יוֹחָנָן בֶּן זַכַּי הִנְהוּ  
שְׁלַח לִיה תָּא בְּצִינְעָא לְגַבְאֵי אֶתָּא אָמַר לִיה עַד אֵימַת עֲבָדִיתוּ הֵכִי  
וְקִטְלִיתוּ לִיה לְעִלְמָא בְּכַפְנָא אָמַר לִיה מַאי אֵינְעִבִיד דָּאֵי אִמְיָנָא לְהוּ מִיָּדֵי  
קִטְלוּ לִי אָמַר לִיה חֲזִי לִי תַקְנָתָא לְדִידֵי דְאִיפּוּק אֶפְשֶׁר דְּהוּי הַצֵּלָה פּוּרְתָא

אָמַר לִיה נְקוּט נְפִשָׁךְ בְּקִצְרֵי וְלִיתוּ כּוּלֵי עִלְמָא וְלִישְׁיָלוּ בָּךְ וְאִינְתִי מִיָּדֵי  
סְרָא וְאִגְנִי גַבְּךָ וְלִימְרוּ דְנַח נְפִשָׁךְ וְלִיעֲזִיבּוּ בָּךְ תַּלְמִידָךְ וְלֵא לִיעוּל בָּךְ  
אִינְיֵשׁ אַחֲרִינָא דְלֵא לְרַגְשׁוֹן בָּךְ דְּקִלִּיל אֶת דְּאִינְהוּ יְדַעֵי דְחִינְיָא קִלִּיל מִמִּתָּא  
עֲבִיד הֵכִי... דְחַפּוּ פְתַחוּ לִיה בָּבָא נְפִק...

כִּי מָטָא לְהֶתֶם אָמַר שְׁלָמָא עֲלֶךְ מְלָכָא שְׁלָמָא עֲלֶךְ מְלָכָא אָמַר לִיה  
מִחֲזִיבְתָּ תְרִי (קִטְלָא) [קִטְלֵי] חֲדָא דְלֵאוּ מְלָכָא אָנָּא וְקָא קִרִית לִי מְלָכָא  
וְתוּ אֵי מְלָכָא אָנָּא עַד הָאִידְנָא אִמְאֵי לָא אֶתִית לְגַבְאֵי אָמַר לִיה דְקִאֲמַרְתָּ  
לָאוּ מְלָכָא אָנָּא אִיבְרָא מְלָכָא אֶת...

אֲדַהֲכִי אֶתָּא פְרִיסְתָּקָא עֲלִיָּה מְרוּמֵי אָמַר לִיה קוּם דְמִית לִיה קִיסָר וְאָמְרֵי  
הִנְהוּ חֲשִיבֵי דְרוּמֵי לְאוֹתֵיבָךְ...

אָמַר לִיה מִיזֵל אֲזִילְנָא וְאִינְשׁ אַחֲרִינָא מְשַׁדְרָנָא אֶלָּא בְּעֵי מִינְאֵי מִיָּדֵי  
דְאַתָּן לָךְ

אָמַר לִיה תָּן לִי יְבִנָּה וְחֲכָמִיָּה וְשׁוֹשִׁילְתָּא דְרַבִּין גְּמְלִיאֵל וְאַסּוּתָא... כּוּלֵי  
הָאֵי לָא עֲבִיד וְהַצֵּלָה פּוּרְתָא נְמִי לָא הוּי

3. Ben Zakkai was a great rabbinic leader who impressed Vespasian. Why did he ask only for "Yavneh and its rabbis"? Why did he make "only a small request, in the hope that he would receive at least that much"?

4. Was Ben Zakkai a Jewish hero?

# Final Thoughts

This session presents two very different responses to anti-Jewish persecution: fight back or flee? Revolt or negotiate?

The Maccabean revolt of 167 BCE was a glorious moment of triumph that restored Jewish rule to the Land of Israel. Its brave Jewish leaders defended Jewish dignity against Greek persecution. The Maccabees became an inspiration to the modern Zionist leaders, like Herzl, who aimed to follow their courageous example.

The revolt of the Jewish Zealots against the Romans in 66 CE was different: the results were disastrous, ending in division, defeat, and the destruction of the Second Temple. In that moment of crisis, Yochanan Ben Zakkai was determined to preserve the Jewish way of life. Yet instead of taking up arms, he negotiated with his Roman oppressors and secured the city of Yavneh.

What can we learn from these two very different models of Jewish leadership: the Maccabean strategy and the Yavneh strategy? Which leader do we admire more: Mattisyahu or Ben Zakkai? Is it better to accept the loss of political independence in the name of survival? Or should one fight for political freedom at all costs, even in the face of a more powerful oppressor?



*An illustration of the Maccabean revolt*

## Going Deeper: Additional Resources

- “The Halachic Legacy of Maccabean Warfare” by Rabbi Shlomo Brody in *The Jerusalem Post* | <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/the-halachic-legacy-of-maccabean-warfare-611464>.
- “What Zionism Owes Yavneh” by Rabbi Meir Soloveichik in *Commentary* | <https://www.commentary.org/articles/meir-soloveichik/zionism-sanhedrin-yavneh/>