

Decision Making in times of National Crisis

Rabbi Yochanan said: What is the meaning of the verse, 'Happy is the man who is anxious always, but he who hardens his heart falls into misfortune' אֲשֶׁר יִאֲנָחַן (Mishlei 28:14)? The destruction of Jerusalem came through a Kamtza and a Bar Kamtza... A certain man had a friend Kamtza and an enemy Bar Kamtza. He once made a party and said to his servant, Go and bring Kamtza. The man went and brought Bar Kamtza. When the host found him there he said, "Since you are my enemy what are you doing here? Get out." Bar Kamtza said: "Since I am here, let me stay, and I will pay you for whatever I eat and drink." The host refused. "Then let me give you half the cost of the party". The host said no. "Then let me pay for the whole party." The host still refused and threw Bar Kamtza out. Bar Kamtza reasoned, "since the Rabbis were sitting there and did not stop him, they clearly agreed with him. I will go and inform against them to the Roman Government." He went and said to the Emperor, "The Jews are rebelling against you." "How can I tell? the Emperor asked. Bar Kamtza said : "Send them an offering and see whether they will offer it on the altar." So the Emperor sent Bar Kamtza with him a fine calf. While on the way he made a blemish on its upper lip, or as some say on the white of its eye (in a place where Jews count it a blemish but the Romans do not). The Rabbis were inclined to offer the sacrifice in order not to offend the Government. Said R. Zechariah b. Avkulas: "People will say that blemished animals are offered on the altar." They then proposed to kill Bar Kamtza so that he should not go and inform against them, but R. Zechariah b. Avkulas said, "Is one who makes a blemish on consecrated animals to be put to death?" R. Yochanan thereupon remarked: "Through the *Anvetanut* (over humility) of R. Zechariah b. Avkulas our House has been destroyed, our Temple burnt and we ourselves exiled from our land...."

...The Emperor then sent Vespasian who came and besieged Jerusalem for three years. In Jerusalem were three men of great wealth, Nakdimon b. Gurion, Ben Kalba Shabua and Ben Tzizit Hakeshet.... These men were in a position to keep the city for twenty-one years. The *biryoni* (thugs/ zealots) were then in the city. The Rabbis said to them: "Let us go out and make peace with the Romans." They would not let them, but on the contrary said, "Let us go out and fight them". The Rabbis said: You will not succeed. They then rose up and burnt the stores of wheat and barley so that a famine ensued...

Abba Sikra the head of the *biryonim* in Jerusalem was the son of the sister of Rabban Yohanan b. Zakai. [The latter] sent to him saying, "Come to visit me privately". When he came, he said to him, "How long are you going to carry on in this way and kill all the people with starvation?" Abba Sikra replied: "What can I do? If I say a word to them, they will kill me." Rabbi Yochanan b. Zakai said: "Devise some plan for me to escape. Perhaps I shall be able to save a little." Abba Sikra said: "Pretend to be ill, and let everyone come to inquire about you... Bring something evil smelling and put it by you so that they will say you are dead. Let then your disciples get under your bed, but no others, so that they shall not notice that you are still light, since they know that a living being is lighter than a corpse." He did so, and R. Eliezer went under the bier from one side and R. Joshua from the other. When they reached the door, some men wanted to put a lance through the bier. He said to them: "Shall the Romans say. They have pierced their Master?" They wanted to give it a push. He said to them: "Shall they say that they pushed their Master?" They opened a town gate for him and he got out.

When Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakai reached the Romans he said, "Peace to you, O King, peace to you, O King." Vespasian said: "Your life is forfeit on two counts, one because I am not a king and you call me king, and again, if I am a king, why did you not come to me before now?" He replied: "As for your saying that you are not a king, in truth you are a king, since if you were not a king Jerusalem would not be delivered into your hand".... [there is then a story of Vespasian hearing he has become Emperor] Vespasian said; "I am leaving and will send someone to take my place. You can, however, make a request of me and I will grant it." Rabbi Yochanan b. Zakai said : "Give me Yavneh and its Wise Men, and the family chain of Rabban Gamliel, and physicians to heal R. Zadok." R. Joseph, or some say R. Akiva, applied to him the verse, '[God] turns wise men backward and makes their knowledge foolish'. He [Ben Zakai] ought to have said to him; Let the Jews off this time. He, however, thought that so much would not be granted, in which case even a little would not be saved....

Who are the parties / individuals most responsible for the destruction of the Temple?
What is the meaning of the verse 'happy is the man who is anxious etc'? Who might it refer to



The Bar Kochba Rebellion & Criticisms of Ben-Zakai

Our national existence was preserved by the military valor of the Jewish zealots and its memory, [the valor of] those who fought and did not give in, who clung until the last minute to the hope of victory. Thanks to them, the name of Yochanan ben Zakai too, was kept alive, as were the Torah, the Hebrew language and culture, and the humane spirit our people has manifested (Yitzchak Tabenkin).

Ben-Zakai was the Jewish *Petain* and *quisling* (Yonatan Ratosh)

Yochanan ben Zakai was a traitor – not only did he collaborate with the enemy and contribute to the loss of the homeland, but he prepared the way for diaspora Judaism (Abba Ahimeir)

These are the eighty [thousand] battle horns which they brought into the city of Betar at the time it was captured. And there they killed men, women and children until their blood flowed into the Mediterranean Sea... For seven years the Gentiles cultivated their vineyards with the blood of Israel without requiring manure (for fertilizer). (Gittin 57a)

Rabbi Akiva, one of the greatest Sages of the Mishnah, was a supporter [lit., "an arms-bearer"] of King Ben Koziva, and would describe him as the King Mashiach. He and all the Sages of his generation considered him to be the King Mashiach until he was killed because of [his] sins (Rambam, Hilchot Melachim 11:3)

אייר זירא אייר אבהו אייר יוחנן אלו שמונים [אלף] קרני מלחמה
שנכנסו לכרך ביתר בשעה שלכדוה והרגו בה אנשים ונשים וטף עד
שהלך דמן ונפל לים הגדול. שבע שנים בצרו עובדי כוכבים את כרמיהן
מדמן של ישראל בלא זבל (גיטין נו, ע"א)

שהרי רבי עקיבה חכם גדול מחכמי משנה היה, והוא היה נושא כליו של
בן כוזבא המלך, והוא היה אומר עליו, שהוא המלך המשיח. ודימה הוא
וכל חכמי דורו שהוא המלך המשיח, עד שנהרג בעוונות;

Was Bar Kochba a hero or irresponsible adventurer?

According to my analysis, the Bar Kochba rebellion stemmed from an unrealistic assessment of historical and political circumstances. This issue of *realism* is central to the formulation of all political and strategic decisions; and the prescriptions of realism apply both to individuals and to political entities. Further, since the rebellion involved considerable *risk*, it is necessary to analyse the issue of risk-taking and speculation, and their limits. Policy always involves risk taking, with one proviso: that the national existence not be placed in ultimate jeopardy. It was precisely this proviso that was contravened by the Bar Kochba rebellion

The first condition of political wisdom is the endeavour to foresee the results of a deed that is on the agenda. By contrast, to admire the Bar Kochba Rebellion is to admire *rebelliousness and heroism detached of responsibility for their consequences*. This is the Bar Kochba syndrome...by admiring the rebellion, we Israelis enmesh ourselves in the predicament of reverencing our people's destruction and rejoicing in an act of national suicide. ...Jewish survival owes thanks to the Galilean Jews and the Diaspora Jews who did *not* participate in the rebellion.

Realism does not mean the world suddenly becomes explicable, all riddles of existence vanishing; rather it requires evaluating the factors that influence political life so as to steer one's course amidst all the complications. A realistic orientation includes an awareness of one's ability accompanied by a recognition of one's limits...realism demands that we do not rebel when success is not in the cards; by the same token, it obliges us to rebel when that is justifiable, when success and relief may be reasonably envisioned....

Having attained the State of Israel, we must be aware of the fact that we are subjects in history and beware of behaving as its objects. We must assume responsibility for what happens to our people, and we must overcome the tendency to externalize blame. Thus, we shall reassert the rabbis' position that stressed our responsibility for our own errors. (Yehoshafat Harkarbi, The Bar Kochba Syndrome: Risk and Realism in International Relations)

"The task of statesmen is to recognize the "real relationship of forces," to distinguish what is attainable from what is desirable, and to make this knowledge serve their ends. Contrary to the American slogan, failure is always an option, and in a world of constant flux success is never permanent and often proves fleeting. (Henry Kissinger, A World Restored).

But should Zionism be guided by what's realistic?

“Bar Kochba” was a hero who refused to know defeat. When in the end victory eluded him, he knew how to die. Bar Kochba was the last embodiment in world history of a bellicose, military Jewry. To evoke the name of Bar Kochba is an unmistakable sign of ambition. (Max Nordau, Muscle Jewry, 1903)

“Zionism stressed the idea that if human beings really wanted to, they could accomplish great things...this belief in the nation and renewed estimation of its will became one of the pillars of Zionist ideology (Ben Zion Dinur)

A.D Gordon like Berdyczewski, maintained that there were situations in the life of a people where practical considerations, based on ‘scientific’ or rational considerations should not be made. “if our forefathers in Hasmonean times had made their plans on the basis of exact calculations, if they had adhered to the most logical and realistic political path, they would undoubtedly have been weaker and the Hebrew people would have been doomed to extinction. Gordon says that it is our misfortune that we are too realistic and afraid to tackle any impossibility, we like to enter the game only when it's clear that we will win. (From Ehud Luz, Wrestling with an Angel)

A central question is whether there is any ideal, or belief in an ideal, or a spiritual goal that someone believes in, that he wants to achieve? If the answer is yes, and I believe it is, then without belief in such an ideal, the culture of the whole world, and our culture as the Jewish people, cannot survive. From here, comes an inevitable second question. Does this ideology include the obligation of what is known as **‘יהרג ואל יעבור’** ‘one should die rather than transgress’ or alternatively, that one should die in order to achieve it?

And if one believes in some grand idea, and is willing to sacrifice one's life for it, should the only consideration be the 100% confidence that it will be achieved? Is that “realistic thinking”? Where is the line between 100% certainty and zero when a politician or a people is fighting for its ‘spiritual life’?

And perhaps the most obvious example of this is the declaration of the State of Israel in 1948.

The only way to discuss the future is via a thorough analysis of the current situation: those values you believe in, and under what conditions you are willing to live, (and under what conditions you are unwilling); what is required from you in order to live as a free people; and what you are willing to fight for in order to achieve these aspirations. And it's for the individual to determine according to both ‘real-politic’ and concrete circumstances of that time.

(Yigal Yadin, 2nd IDF Chief of Staff 1949-52)

Adapting Values & Winning Gambles?

[The secret to success is to adapt one's values] It is painfully difficult to decide whether to abandon some of one's core values when they seem to be becoming incompatible with survival. At what point do we as individuals prefer to die than to compromise and live? Millions of people in modern times have indeed faced the decision whether, to save their own life, they would be willing to betray friends or relatives, acquiesce in a vile dictatorship, live as virtual slaves, or flee their country. Nations and societies sometimes have to make similar decisions collectively.

All such decisions involve gambles, because one often can't be certain that clinging to core values will be fatal, or (conversely) that abandoning them will ensure survival. Among five small Eastern European countries faced with the overwhelming might of Russian armies, the Estonians and Latvians and Lithuanians surrendered their independence in 1939 without a fight, the Finns fought in 1939-40 and preserved their independence, and Hungarians fought in 1956 and lost their independence. Who among us is to say which country was wiser, and who could have predicted in advance that only the Finns would win their gamble?

Perhaps a crux of success or failure as a society is to know which core values to hold on to, and which ones to discard and replace with new values, when times change...Societies and individuals that succeed may be those that have the courage to take those difficult decisions, and that have the luck to win their gambles. (Jared Diamond, Collapse)

"It is in the nature of successful policies that posterity forgets how easily things might have been otherwise." (Henry Kissinger, A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh, and the Problems of Peace, 1812-22)

"The deadly danger here is the romantic fantasy of fighting until the end...what is the end other than the destruction of all things. There's nothing heroic in going down fighting if it can be avoided. There is nothing even remotely patriotic in death or glory if the odds are firmly on the former. There is nothing inglorious in trying to shorten a war that we are clearly losing. Europe is lost. And before our forces are wiped out completely now is the time to negotiate in order to obtain the best conditions possible. (Halifax and Chamberlain to Churchill, The Darkest Hour)

"Nations that go down fighting fight again and those that surrender tamely are finished" (Churchill)

"There are times when we must have the courage to do extraordinary things—like jumping, with eyes closed, off the veranda of the Kiyomizu Temple," [a reference to a Buddhist shrine in Kyoto that juts out over a steep cliff edge.] (Japanese PM Hideki Tojo urging a leap of faith in 1941)

Decision Making in times of Crisis

When R' Yochanan ben Zakai fell ill his students went to greet him. As he saw them he began to weep. They said to him: candle of Israel, mighty hammer, for what are you crying?

He responded: if they were leading me before a king of flesh and blood, who is here today and in the grave tomorrow, whose anger and punishments are only fleeting, who I could pacify with words and bribe with money – I would cry nevertheless! But that they are leading me before the King of Kings, who is eternal, as are His punishments and who I cannot pacify with words or bribe with money! And this is not all – but there are two paths before me – one of Gan Eden and one of Gehinnom, and I do not know which one they will lead me down – should I not cry?!

וכשחלה רבי יוחנן בן זכאי, נכנסו תלמידיו לבקרו. כיון שראה אותם התחיל לבכות. אמרו לו תלמידיו: נר ישראל, עמוד הימיני, פטיש החזק, מפני מה אתה בוכה?

אמר להם: אילו לפני מלך בשר ודם היו מוליכין אותי, שהיום כאן ומחר בקבר, שאם כועס עלי - אין כעסו כעס עולם, ואם אוסרני - אין איסורו איסור עולם, ואם ממיתני - אין מיתתו מיתת עולם, ואני יכול לפייסו בדברים ולשחדו בממון - אף על פי כן הייתי בוכה; ועכשיו שמוליכים אותי לפני מלך מלכי המלכים הקדוש ברוך הוא, שהוא חי וקיים לעולם ולעולמי עולמים, שאם כועס עלי - כעסו כעס עולם, ואם אוסרני - איסורו איסור עולם, ואם ממיתני - מיתתו מיתת עולם, ואני יכול לפייסו בדברים ולא לשחדו בממון; ולא עוד, אלא שיש לפני שני דרכים, אחת של גן עדן ואחת של גיהנם, ואיני יודע באיזו מוליכים אותי - ולא אבכה! (ברכות כ"ב)

He [Ben Gurion] believed he was acting in the name of yearnings of generations of Jews; that was his lifelong belief. At this decisive moment then, he did not act like a 'computing machine' as he once said. It was not an engineer's cold calculation that impelled him, but rather a mysticism of national redemption, perhaps a faith that the declaration of independence would call up the nations hidden powers of bravery and belief and fighting spirit. Some four months later, Ben Gurion confirmed that 'there were serious reasons not to declare independence' since at the time ten American bombers could have prevented it, and the United States was capable of sending fifty of them without batting an eyelash. It was a decision made in a state of uncertainty. In such cases, he said, one chooses on the basis of 'deliberations, guesses, and feelings'... The declaration of independence was most likely, also meant to rehabilitate his own prestige, damaged by the Hagana's failure and the general's revolt. There was another reason as well – Menachem Begin threatened that if Ben Gurion did not declare independence immediately, he would do it himself. (Tom Segev, A State at Any Cost: The Life of David Ben-Gurion)

Happy is the man who is anxious always,
but he who hardens his heart falls into misfortune (Mishlei 28:14)

אֲשֶׁרִי אָדָם מִפְּחַד תְּמִיד וּמִקְשָׁה לִבּוֹ? פּוֹל בְּרָעָה.