



## Reprogramming Tisha b'Av: The Rabbi and the Hacker

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by Rabbi Mishael Zion

*In the still of night, two students carry the body of their beloved Teacher through the streets. The city – besieged, burned, starved, crazed – has turned in against itself, and seems to be on an unstoppable downwards spiral to destruction. Zealots guard the gates, preventing anyone from leaving – exit is betrayal. Feigning death is the key to redemption. Once outside the walls, the Teacher brushes aside the ruse of his demise and goes off to establish a new city, in which he will teach his students how to take things apart and put them together again. Old rituals will receive new meaning. Tradition will be deconstructed and rebuilt in an unrecognizable way.*

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The Bronfman Fellowships summer – which started this week for the 27th time – is an experience in storytelling: a few basic stories that aspire to infuse the 26 North American Bronfman Fellows with fresh metaphors, new horizons and novel pathways through which to understand themselves and their surroundings. One of the best such stories is the tale of Rabbi Yohanan Ben Zakkai leaving Jerusalem in the heat of the revolt against the Romans.

As always on Bronfman, this is not a history lesson, rather an exploration of human responses to life, an investigation into the ways people and communities create and innovate in the face of crisis. On Tisha b'Av we remember and lament the destructions, those at the hands of our enemies and those at our own hands. But it is also a time to revisit the moment when a leader stepped out and stepped up, the “Ben Zakkai moment” of Tisha b'Av.

A “Ben Zakkai moment” is the moment in which one realizes that the new reality is not a mere obstacle to overcome, but rather an opportunity to re-think the categories around which our lives have been organized. Ben Zakkai uses the crises to catalyze a paradigm shift. In his case it required a break and a betrayal of old institutions and allegiances, and even collaboration with enemy forces. Ben Zakkai’s about-face panned out, earning him a place of honor in the pantheon of Jewish leadership.

We’re living in a time in which old institutions – corporate, communal and professional institutions – are crumbling and losing their relevance, while new technologies and fields of knowledge are retaking the stage, establishing a world of fluidity. “Yavnehs” are springing up

all around us. It's a time of Ben Zakkais. But specifically as this time we need not only those with the courage to step out, but also the ones with the resources to reconstruct.

Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai is often considered the founder of Talmudic thinking, raising the generation of students that created the "Torah of the Mouth" needed to keep the "Written Torah" vibrant and relevant in a post-Temple world. In Yavneh he worked to redefine the most basic categories of Judaism in a post-Temple reality.

As we seek to inspire today's Ben Zakkais, the image of computer programmers and hackers come to mind. Though the term often elicits images of anarchists, as is the case with recent news coverage, the "Hacker ethic" seems to me a great definition of what Talmudic thinkers also strove to be about. Steven Levy in his book describes it as follows:

"Hackers believe that essential lessons can be learned about the systems – about the world – from taking things apart, seeing how they work, and using this knowledge to create new and even more interesting things. This is especially true when a hacker wants to fix something that (from his point of view) is broken and needs improvement."

Hackers who are only about destroying and disrupting betray this ethic. But students who are taught only to succeed at tests and miss out on the joy of taking things apart for its own sake – will lack the skills to create the new and interesting things that we are in need of today.

As for Bronfman Fellows – it's the spark in their eye they get when taking something apart and creating something new – which often sets them apart. For me, that's the spark of a Talmudic frame of mind, the spark which Yohanan Ben Zakkai lit in his students so many centuries ago.

*Rabbi Mishael Zion is Director of Education at the Bronfman Fellowships, where he oversees the education of new fellows in the Israeli and American fellowships, as well as works with the global alumni community of nearly 1,000. In 2013 he was named as one of 10 "Rabbis to Watch" by The Daily Beast/Newsweek and blogs regularly at Text and the City.*