



## TEXT STUDY 1

# Change in the Jewish Tradition<sup>26</sup>

This text study was created for use in the readiness process, but can also be used at any point to discuss the process of change. It provides a context for thinking about our resistance to change, and how this resistance might be overcome. It consists of five parts, and, if used in its entirety, can take up to ninety minutes. If time is short, one might want to skip part 2, and use only one or two of the texts in part 4.

### ***Part One:***

Read the following two texts from the Talmud:

The Land of Israel is the navel of the world, being situated at its center; Jerusalem is at the center of the Land of Israel; the Temple, at the center of Jerusalem; the Temple Hall at the center of the Temple; the Ark, at the center of the Temple Hall. And in front of the Temple Hall is the foundation stone upon which the world was founded.

Babylonian Talmud, *Sukkot* 51a

What can we learn from this text about the role of the Temple in the lives of the people?

Rabah bar Hana said: It is a distance of ten parasangs [approximately thirty miles] from Jerusalem to Jericho. The turning of the

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door hinges in the Temple Hall traveled all the way to Jericho, so that the goat in Jericho used to sneeze because of the fragrance of the incense, and the women of Jericho had no need to perfume themselves because of that fragrance. Neither did a bride in Jerusalem.

Babylonian Talmud, *Yoma* 39b

How is the second text different from the first? What additional things can we learn from the second text?

### ***Part Two:***

Psalm 137 was written in response to the destruction of the First Temple. It describes in vivid terms how people felt about the change in their lives when the Temple was destroyed.

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat, sat and wept, as we thought of Zion.

There on the poplars were hung up our lyres,  
for our captors asked us there for songs, our tormentors, for amusement, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion."

How can we sing a song of the Lord on alien soil?

If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither;

let my tongue stick to my palate if I cease to think of you, if I do not keep Jerusalem in memory even at my happiest hour.

Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem's fall; how they cried, "Strip her, strip her of her very foundations!"

Fair Babylon, you predator, a blessing on him who repays you in kind what you have inflicted on us;

a blessing on him who seizes your babies and dashes them against the rocks!

Psalm 137

With the Second Temple destroyed, what questions do you think were on people's minds?

### ***Part Three:***

As you read the following talmudic text, try to figure out why Raban Yochanan acted the way he did. What problems was he trying to solve? On what assumptions did he base his solution?

When Vespasian came to destroy Jerusalem . . . Raban Yochanan ben Zakai sent for his disciples, R. Eliezer and R. Joshua, and said to them, "My sons, arise and carry me forth from here. Make a coffin for me and I will lie in it." They did so, and R. Eliezer took hold of it at the head and R. Joshua at the foot, and they carried him until sunset when they arrived at the gates of Jerusalem.

The gatekeepers asked, "What is this?" They replied, "A dead man; do you not know that a corpse may not be kept overnight in Jerusalem?" They said, "If it is a corpse, carry it out."

They carried it out, and bore it until sunset when they arrived before Vespasian. . . .

Raban Yochanan then predicts that Vespasian will be appointed the next emperor of Rome. Shortly after that, the news arrives. In gratitude and amazement, Vespasian asks: "What shall I give you?" Yochanan replies:

"I ask for nothing but Yavneh, whither I may go and teach my disciples, where I can institute a house of prayer, and observe all the commandments prescribed in the Torah." He said to him, "Go and do all that you wish to perform."

excerpted from the Talmud, *Avot D'Rabi Natan* 4:5

Why did Raban Yochanan request an academy in Yavneh?

What assumptions was he making about the future of the Jewish people?

A HISTORICAL NOTE:

Although the text leads one to believe the synagogue replaced the Temple after its destruction, the two institutions had actually coexisted for many years. Two talmudic texts report the number of synagogues in Jerusalem at the time of the destruction of the Temple: According to *Ketubot* 105b

there were 394; and according to the Jerusalem Talmud, *Megilah* 3:1 there were 480.

What additional insight does this historical note add to our understanding of what happened?

### ***Part Four:***

After the destruction of the Temple the people had many concerns. Which concerns do these texts address?

God says, "Who has ever come into a synagogue and has not found My glory there?" "And not only that," said R. Aibu, "but if you are in a synagogue God stands by you."

Deuteronomy *Rabah*, *Ki Tavo* 7:2

"My love is like a gazelle" (Song of Songs 2:9). As the gazelle leaps from place to place and from fence to fence, and from tree to tree, so God jumps and leaps from synagogue to synagogue to bless the children of Israel.

Numbers *Rabah*, *Naso* 11:2

Abraham said to God, "If the Israelites sin before You, You might do with them as with the generations of the flood and the Tower of Babel."

God replied, "No."

Abraham said, "How can I know this?"

Then God said, "Take a heifer three years old . . ." (Genesis 15:9) [i.e., sacrifices will appease Me].

Abraham said, "That is all very well for the time when the Temple exists, but when it does not, then what will become of them?"

God said, "I have appointed for them the chapters about the sacrifices. Whenever they read them, I will reckon it to them as if they had brought the offerings before Me, and I will forgive them their sins."

Babylonian Talmud, *Megilot* 31b

God foresaw that the Temple would be destroyed, and God said, “While the Temple exists and you bring sacrifices, the Temple atones for you. When the Temple is not there, what shall atone for you? Busy yourselves with the words of the Law, for they are equivalent to sacrifices, and they will atone for you.”

*Midrash Tanchuma Achare Mot 35a*

What concerns of the people, do these texts attempt to answer?  
What can we learn from these texts about the process of making change in general, and about synagogue change in particular?

## **Glossary**

*Midrash* is the general term for a genre of rabbinic literature that interprets Biblical texts. *Midrash Tanchuma* is one of the many collections of these *midrashim* (the Hebrew plural for *midrash*), as are Numbers *Rabah* and Deuteronomy *Rabah*. These classical *midrashim* were composed between 400 and 1550 C.E., but the tradition of writing *midrash* continues to this day.

Talmud is a written compilation of the “Oral Law,” in which the rabbis explained the laws of the Torah and applied them to their own situation. Two different versions of the Talmud were produced, one in Babylonia and one in Palestine. The Talmud consists of two parts, the *Mishnah* (edited around 200 C.E.) and the *Gemara* (edited around 500 C.E.). It is divided into sixty-three tractates (volumes), of which *Sukot*, *Yoma*, *Megilot* and *Achare Mot* are four (*Avot D’Rabi Natan* is considered extra-canonical, and appended to the tractate *N’zikin*). The pagination in the Talmud has an *alef* and *bet* side for each page; thus the citation 31b is page 31, side *bet*.

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