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Yavneh

The Greatest Story
Of Organizational
Transformation Ever

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I was at a high school last month, talking about change to an economics class, and a junior had this question for me: “What, from all your reading and study, was the most successful change initiative ever undertaken?”

I looked at the girl, who could be no more than 16. And I thought, “*That’s* a good question.”

I stood there a moment pondering. What was the greatest transformation. Was it GE, Chrysler, Nokia?

Or was it something bigger, like Hitler’s recreation of Germany following Versailles, or FDR’s remaking of America and government during the Great Depression?

Or was it something that happened even longer ago than that, two thousand years ago, but whose impact is still felt today? Yes, I knew what my answer would be: Yavneh.

The story I told them is known to every Jew in the world, but non-Jews are much less aware of it. It occurred in a dusty village variously remembered as Jabneh, Yabne, Jamnia, or Yavneh, near the modern city of Rehovot, 15 miles south of Tel Aviv, and perhaps 50 miles west of Jerusalem.

Today Rehovot is a city of 100,000, known for its citrus fruit and food-packing industries, and for the Weizmann Institute for Science, named for Israel’s first president, who lived there in the 1920s.

But let's look back in time for a moment, to the year 70 A.D. A thick cloud of smoke hangs over the plains, as it will hang for months. The legions of Rome are finally acting after decades of provocation and guerrilla war by a subset of Jewish patriots known to us as Zealots.

The Zealots believed that being occupied by Rome was unacceptable, that it blocked them from their manifest destiny as God's chosen people. Therefore they fought ceaselessly and without subtlety to throw off the yoke of tyranny. In so doing they sealed their people's fate.

Rome under Emperor Titus laid siege to the holy city of Jerusalem. Sieges are never pretty affairs, and this one was hideous. People inside the walls suffered awfully, as much the victims of the Zealots as they would be of the Romans once the Zealots fell. Before many months passed, Jerusalem would be leveled so that "there was not a stone upon a stone." The Temple of Solomon, where 10,000 people gathered every day to offer sacrifice, would be looted, burned, and knocked down.

The Zealots would retreat to the mountain fortress Masada, where they resisted Rome for another year, hurling boiling oil on the soldiers below, until legions under the direction of the General Vespasian built a giant ramp up one side of the mountain. When the legions arrived at the summit in the spring of 72, the one thousand Zealots of Masada had already taken their own lives.

Amid the fog of war, things went badly for all Jews, not just the Zealots. An estimated 100,000 people were put to the sword or set ablaze throughout this excruciating period. Perhaps 90 percent of surviving Jews forcibly departed their ruined region, migrating to the area around the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

Jewish families were broken up and deported. Heads of households were executed or sold into slavery. Crops were burned and fields were ploughed under, so that starvation threatened all who stayed.

It was one of the lowest moments in a history of low moments, on a par with slavery in Egypt, the Babylonian exile, and the modern-era Holocaust.

The annihilation of Judea signaled, to many Jews, the end of the world, and certainly the end of the Jews as a concerted, organized force. Split up, deprived of their symbols, of their priesthood, and of their temple, how could they continue to be any kind of people, much less God's chosen ones? All was gone. All was lost.

Except there was Yavneh and an old man named Rabbi Johannan ben Zakkai. A Pharisee or theological moderate, ben Zakkai had been a protégé of the great teacher Hillel. He would be called a pacifist today, for he did not believe good could come from violence. And he warned Jews of the Zealots' excesses. He had vivid visions of the temple torn down and the people strewn to the four winds, leaderless and directionless.

Ben Zakkai left Jerusalem during the siege leading up to the final onslaught. The tale goes that he had to pretend to be dead to be carried out in a coffin, past the watchful eyes of the Zealot gatekeepers.

He even took a chunk of rotting meat in the box with him, to give credibility to the plan.

Once outside the gates of Jerusalem, ben Zakkai went to the tent of the general Vespasian, whom he greeted in terms that sound traitorous to us today: "*Ave domine imperator!*" ("Hail lord and emperor.") The greeting constituted a prophecy that Vespasian would soon replace Titus as emperor. That was enough to gain access to Vespasian.

Ben Zakkai pleaded in vain with Vespasian to deal leniently with the insurrection, in particular with Jews who had nothing to do with the rebellion. Blanket amnesty was not possible, he learned. But ben Zakkai was able to exact from Rome a guarantee that Jewish teachers might convene safely in an academy (*yeshiva*) set in a vineyard at Yavneh. This yeshiva would be a holding place for all that was Jewish, in a world expunged of Jews.

When he heard that the Temple had indeed been destroyed, as in his vision, ben Zakkai tore his garments, took off his phylacteries, and sat down and wept alongside his disciples. He had seen it all coming, but he was unable to stop it. His civilization and his people were in ruins.

Now, if you were a Jew in ruined Judea, what would you likely want? You would want to stay. You would want to see the Temple, priesthood, and sacrificial system restored. You would want to somehow patch the old ways back together.

Ben Zakkai knew the Romans well enough to know that none of that was possible, that his people had embarked on a new period in their history, and that drastic change was called for if they were to survive. It was a challenge that made Moses' challenge, on the reedy shores of the Red Sea, pale by comparison.

Ben Zakkai knew that the temple was gone for the foreseeable future. But from the first signs of catastrophe, he envisioned a way out. Rabbi Joshua wrote him from the ruins, "Woe unto us that this place, where the iniquities of Israel were expiated, lies in ruins!"

Rabbi ben Zakkai responded: "*We have a means of atonement that is its equal, namely the practice of benevolence, as it is written: 'For I desire loving-kindness, and not sacrifice. '*"

Read that sentence again, and you see in it the resurrection of Judaism in a new green branch. Instead of being a physical faith encumbered by stone temples, it would become what God had wanted all along, a moral faith of good deeds, with hardly any physical trappings.

The Jewish culture would transform from hardware to software, from a place of cedar and stone to a virtual civilization, a faith made portable. Everything essential to commemorating one's faith and heritage could fit on a single horse's back.

So it was that ben Zakkai organized a new Sanhedrin at Yavneh, composed not of priests, politicians and rich men, as the old Sanhedrin in Jerusalem had been, but of reverent teachers of the Law — Pharisees and rabbis.

The Pharisees alone, the "men of the center," had a program ready made for a constructive policy of spiritual recuperation, and to that task they resolutely applied themselves. The religion we know today as Judaism, and the disorganized rabbinical organization that keeps it together today, is the product of ben Zakkai's and his fellow Pharisees' invention.

For over 1,000 years Jews had lived in one place, under a common law. Now they had to start over again. What could they take with them in their new exodus across the earth?

They decided that the temple as such could no longer exist, and that the people would now build a virtual temple in each family, out of love for God and the Law.

The Temple, and with it the strong centralization of Jewry, ceased to be. Replacing it was a decentralized system of largely unregulated synagogues — local houses of prayer.

Instead of mysterious, aloof temple priests, Jews would rely on neighborhood rabbis — who worked in regular jobs and provided guidance as a father would, out of love and knowledge.

Instead of the mighty altar, there would be the humble *schulhan*, the table on which the scroll of Torah is unrolled.

Instead of animal sacrifice — a practice that would have had to end someday anyway, for Jews to be acceptable to the world — a new regimen was instituted, based on study, prayer, and mitzvahs or good works.

Instead of sympathetic magic and propitiation, Yavneh fashioned a faith based on piety and humility.

And most important — Yavneh took the groaning libraries of Jewish literature and commentary and compressed the best, most important works into one remarkable book — which we know as Torah.

The work of the school at Yavneh performed the most astonishing and successful feat of adaptation ever: the creation of a portable society, one that could be loaded up and moved whenever any place was no longer hospitable.

In one sense, the framers of this new society had an advantage over today's leaders — the destruction of Jerusalem had gotten every Jewish person's undivided attention. Few lived in denial that change was necessary, as is common where we work today.

The Jewish story doesn't end at Yavneh. In truth, that is where modern Judaism begins, as a faith of a people in transit to their destiny.

But as we stand with the fresh memory of smoke rising from our treasured temples, we need to contemplate what a people can do when they need to.

I can think of no greater achievement in the history of any people, anywhere, at any time, that compares to the wisdom and perspicacity of leaders under enormous, catastrophic stress, than what these men contrived in the arbors of Yavneh.

Michael Finley writes about topics relating to culture and change. His book with Harvey Robbins, *The New Why Teams Don't Work*, won a Booz-Allen & Hamilton Global Business Book Award. Mike has also been named one of a handful of "Masters of the Wired World" by Financial Times Press. BH SmartDocs™ are published by BrownHerron Publishing and are sold exclusively on Amazon.com (www.amazon.com/brownherron).

