

The Teaching of Rabbi Simeon the Just and its Influence on Rabban Yohanan ben Zakai's Project of Reconstruction

Yael Shlosberg

Rabban Yohanan ben Zakai was a pre-eminent sage (*tanna*) in the first generation that survived the destruction of the Second Temple. This paper considers the project of national reconstruction that he developed to contend with the new reality of Jewish life, seemingly rendered empty and meaningless without the Temple service. It then considers the alternatives that he proposed to combat the widespread sense of crisis and despair. At the epicenter of that project stands the figure of Simeon the Just (*Shimon hatsadik*), a last remnant of the Great Assembly who had lived five hundred years earlier. It was Simeon the Just who taught that “the world is founded on three pillars – Torah, service, and acts of giving (*torah, avodah, gemilut hasadim*)”; these three elements became central in Rabban Yohanan ben Zakai's vision of restoration. This paper examines the ways he integrated them in his project and used them in engendering a new mode of leadership, to be passed on to his students in the ongoing task of rebuilding Jewish existence. My reading focuses on Rabban Yohanan ben Zakai's internal dialogue with the sages of past centuries, from whom he drew inspiration to guide his own shattered generation and prevent the spiritual and social texture of the Jewish world from unraveling completely