

Today, I will describe the backgrounds and personalities of rabbis that served in the Sanhedrin between the years 70 and 1. Those rabbis are shown in this flow chart. I will concentrate on the chart's middle four rabbis. They were contemporaries of Roman emperors that are listed in chronological order in this flow chart.

The years 70-135 mark a special time period in Jewish history. Year 70 is when the Romans, under Vespasian and his son Titus, before they became emperors, pillaged Israel, massacred its Jews, and destroyed Jerusalem. Year 135 is when the Romans, under Emperor Hadrian, crushed the Jewish revolt under Bar Kokhba and massacred most of the Jews in the southern half of Israel.

### **SANHEDRIN**

In the year 70, the Sanhedrin was relocated from Jerusalem, which was destroyed that year, to the city of Yavne along the Mediterranean coast. In Yavne, the Sanhedrin instituted rules for tikun olam, such as the obligation for every father to teach his child to read and to teach his child a trade, and that if the father is unable educate his child, then the obligation falls on the community.

### **RABBI YOCHANAN BEN ZAKAI (RYBZ)**

In Yavne, the nasi (president) of the Sanhedrin was Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai (RYBZ), who was a student of Hillel. RYBZ's students were prestigious rabbis in their own right -- the most famous of which Rabban Gamliel (RG), Rabbi Eliezer (RE), Rabbi Yehoshua (RY), and Rabbi Akiva (RA), that are shown in this chart. You may remember the story of RYBZ being smuggled out of Jerusalem in a coffin by 2 of his students; those 2 students were RE and RY.

### **RABBAN GAMLIEL (RG)**

When RYBZ retired, RG took over as nasi (president) of the Sanhedrin and its associated yeshivah. RG was known for his insistence on unity and conformity. He enforced a policy that for every halachic question that arises, the rabbis should argue it out, then vote on it, and from then on everyone must follow the decision of the majority. RG might have learned the importance of unity from the war with the Romans, in which the Jewish defeat could have been averted had the Jews been united. RG was a disciplinarian. He instituted a restrictive admissions policy for his yeshivah, so that not all students who applied were accepted. One of RG's most quoted pieces of advice was "Be careful when dealing with politicians, because they befriend you only as long as you serve their interests."

RG's sister married RE (which is why I drew a dashed line between RG and RE).

### **RABBI ELIEZER (RE)**

RE had a different outlook on life than RG. RE tended to do what he thought was right and not conform to the majority; he was a non-conformist. That put him at odds with his brother-in-law RG (who demanded conformity). And that got RE excommunicated, by his own brother-in-law RG. But excommunication didn't seem to harm RE's reputation. RE simply left RG's yeshivah and founded his own yeshivah in the village of Lod, along the coast, and ended up being one of the most quoted rabbis in the Talmud.

RE's stubbornness is illustrated by the following story in the Talmud: A female philanthropist asked RE a question about Torah. RE declined to answer her, because he held it is wrong to teach women Torah. The lady was offended, and stopped donating the RE's yeshivah. When RE was informed that his yeshivah lost funding because of his comment, instead of apologizing, RE proclaimed he would be willing to lose even more funding rather than do something wrong by teaching a woman Torah.

Christianity was in its infancy during this period. Christianity started out as a sect of orthodox Judaism. An early fundamental core of Christians (called "Ebionites") were orthodox Jews who believed that Jesus was the long-awaited meshiach and not divine, and were friendly with the rabbis. In fact, RE is quoted in the Talmud as saying that a Christian acquaintance of his told him a dvar Torah that he liked.

### **RABBI YEHOSHUA (RY)**

When the Temple was still standing, RY lived in Jerusalem as a rabbi. He was a Levite and sang in the Levite choir in the Temple.

Unlike RG and RE, RY was poor, despite being a revered rabbinical authority. RY supported himself by working as a blacksmith. RY had a more personable caring personality than RG and RE. For example, he is quoted in the Talmud as encouraging husbands to spend more quality time with their wives, and encouraging wives to be warm to their husbands, and warning people against being inappropriately righteous.

RY seems to always disagree with whatever RE says. Whenever the Talmud cites an opinion of RE, you know it will be followed by RY disagreeing with it. The funniest argument between RY and RE in the Talmud is regarding rain falling from the sky. The Talmud asked how water got up there in the first place. RE inferred from a statement in Torah that water in the sky comes from evaporated sea water. RY disagreed, saying if that were true, rain would taste salty like seawater.

RY was known for his humility and aversion to confrontation. This is illustrated by the following story in the Talmud. RG attended a lecture by RE. In the lecture, RE stated that we must recite Maariv every day. RE asked "Does

anyone in this class disagree with this concept?" No one raised their hand. RG said "RY, stand up. Do YOU know anyone who disagrees with my ruling?" RY said "No". Then RG asked "Then why did this student here tell me earlier that you told him that you disagree with this concept?" RY essentially answered "You're right. You caught me telling a white lie." Then RG continued lecturing without telling RY he could sit back down. So RY was left in the embarrassing position of standing up like a fool through the rest of the lecture. RY's colleagues were so offended by RG's treatment of RY, especially since RY was a venerated rabbi and this was the 3rd time RG demeaned RY, that they fired RG from his deanship. And appointed an 18-year old (Rabbi Eliezer ben Azaria who later became a famous rabbi, and is mentioned in the Passover Hagadah) in his place. When the 18-year-old became dean, he rescinded the yeshivah's restrictive admission requirements that RG had instituted, and admitted whoever wanted to enroll. This led to a large increase in yeshivah's enrollment. Later, after RG apologized to RY, the students reinstated RG as dean. RG must have been embarrassed to find that he was replaced by an 18-year-old, and the yeshivah actually grew in his absence.

RY left RG's yeshiva, and founded a yeshivah of his own, in the village of Beki'in near the coast.

### **RABBI AKIVA (RA)**

RA started out as a poor shepherd for a rich boss. Akiva was illiterate and, by his own admission, hated rabbis. He married his boss' daughter. At her insistence, he started learning how to read, at the age of 40. He later enrolled in RG's yeshivah, and studied under RG, RE and RY. He became a great rabbi, and started his own yeshivah in Bnai Brak along the coast, which attracted over 10K students. RA became more popular than his own teachers (RG, RE, RY) in terms of number of students he attracted.

RA was one of the few rabbis who supported the Bar Kokhba revolt against Rome. RA even believed Bar Kokhba was the long-awaited meshiach. After Bar Kokhba's defeat, RA was caught by the Romans and tortured to death.

### **EXAMPLE ARGUMENT BETWEEN THE RABBIS**

The Talmud recounts the following disagreement between the four rabbis (Meseches Brachos 28b): RG commissioned a rabbi (Shimon Hapekuli) to compose a prayer, which we now-a-days call Shmoneh Esrai. RG (the disciplinarian) asserted that each Jewish man must recite the entire Shmoneh Esrai very day. RA was more lenient. Shmoneh Esrai is a long prayer; and RA asserted that if you have trouble reciting the entire Shmoneh Esrai, you may replace it with an abridged version (summary) of it. RY (the more personable rabbi) asserted you may replace Shmoneh Esrai with an abridged version of it even if you don't have trouble reciting the entire thing. RE (the non-conformist) indicated Shmoneh Esrai should not have been instituted. RE indicated that Shmoneh Esrai is a prayer that **pleads** for things, such as for forgiveness, good health, a good year, etc., and rattling off the same prayer, day after day, that someone else instructed you to say, is not a pleading that comes from the heart. RE thought you **should** plead to Gd, but using your own words that come from your own heart

### **PUBLIC RELATIONS MISSIONS TO ROMAN**

During this time period, the Sanhedrin worked hard to maintain good relations with Rome. For that purpose, the Sanhedrin periodically sent RG, RE and RY to Syria to visit the Roman governor and to Rome to visit the Roman emperor.

### **REMAINING RABBIS**

RA's most notable student was Rabbi Meir.

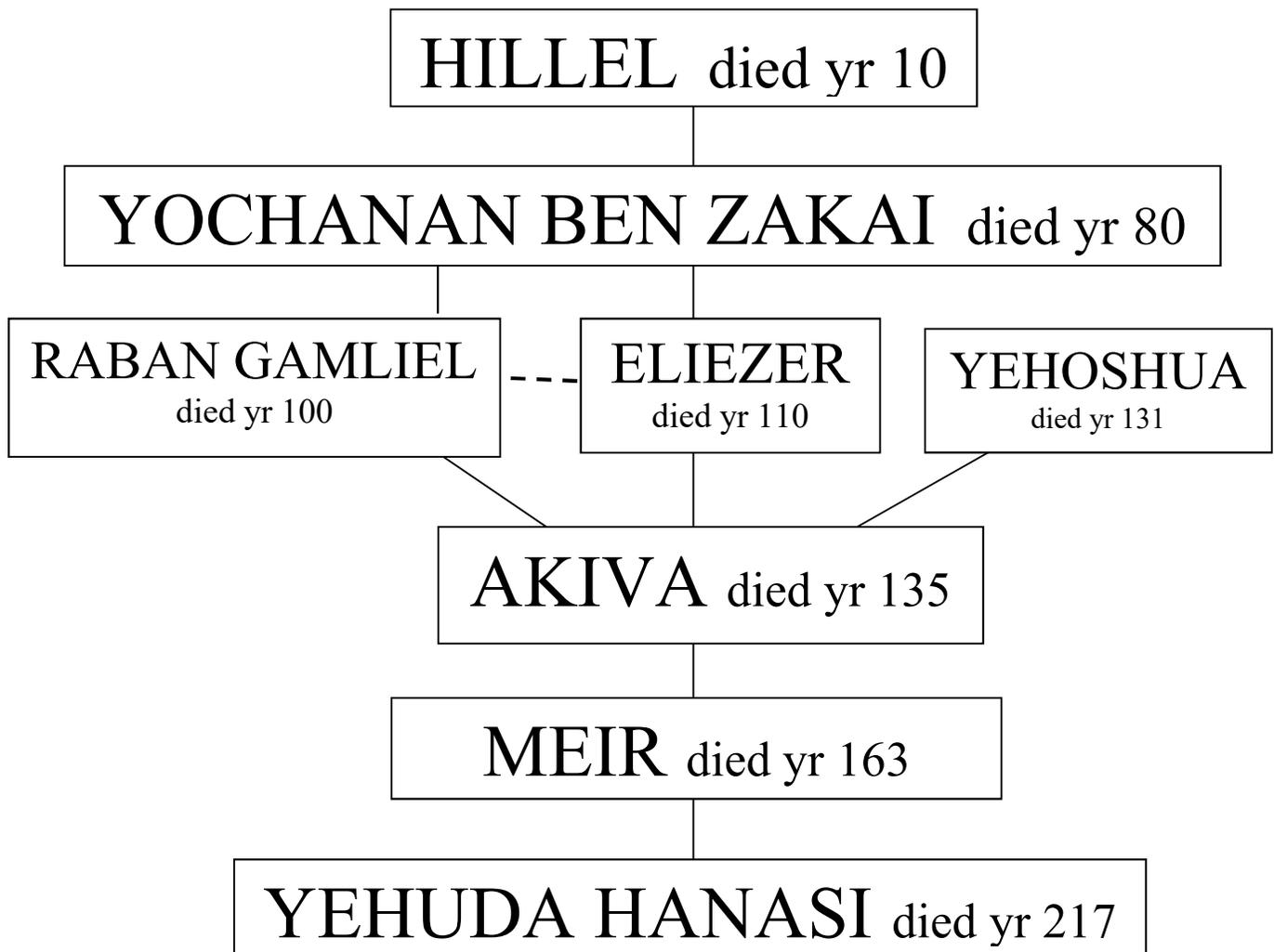
Rabbi Meir's most notable student was Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi, who compiled the Mishna in the year 200. The Mishna is a compilation of arguments between rabbis who lived between the years 0 and 200. All rabbis quoted in the Mishna and in the Passover Hagadah lived within the 5 generations shown in this diagram – they were either the rabbis named in this diagram or colleagues of these rabbis.

Amazingly, many gentiles throughout the Roman empire were becoming **attracted** to orthodox Judaism, especially in Rome, and especially the intellectual class. Emperor Hadrian died 3 years after he annihilated the Jews in the Bar Kokhba revolt. He was succeeded by Emperor Antoninus. Emperor Antoninus had no problem with Jews, and rescinded the anti-Jewish edicts that Hadrian instituted.

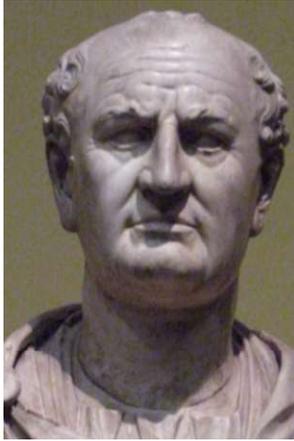
The next emperor was also named Antoninus. And he actually idolized Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi.

### **CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this speech is to familiarize you about the background and personality of each of these major rabbis of the Sanhedrin. So that when you see these rabbis being mentioned in the Talmud and Passover Hagadah, you will not think of them as just indistinguishable talking heads, but instead understand their individual backgrounds and personalities that influenced their beliefs.



VESPASIAN ruled 69-79



TRAJAN ruled 98-117



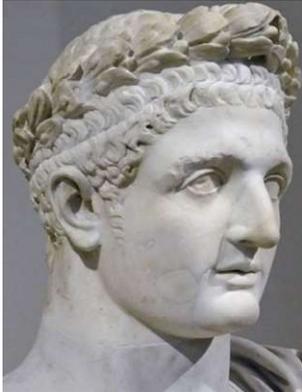
TITUS ruled 79-81



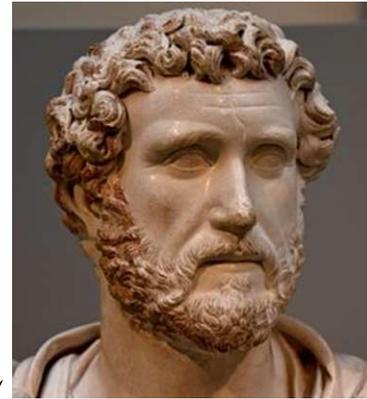
HADRIAN ruled 117-138



DOMITIAN ruled 81-96



ANTONINUS PIUS ruled 138-161



NERVA ruled 96-98



MARCUS AURELIUS ANTONINUS ruled 161-180

