

Devarim - erev Tisha B'av

July 17, 2021

If you've known me for a while, you might have figured out that I'm very bad at remembering quotes. I tend to remember, in vague terms, articles I've read, texts that I've studied, and ideas that I've learned. If I want to repeat them accurately in order to teach them, I usually need to find a citation first. On more than one occasion, I have circled back to one of you later and needed to correct or nuance something that I have taught.

So when I tell you that I remember the moment when Brandeis Professor David Hackett Fischer declared that the Boston Tea Party did NOT start the American Revolution, you should know just how much of an impact that statement made on me. It was as if everything I had learned in my high school's American History class was upended. And it is an idea that has come back to me over and over in the past 20 years, profoundly shaping who I am as a person and a rabbi.

Every action causes a reaction - and each of those reactions cause a different reaction. And at every point in the timeline, history could branch off into a new direction. Even though the Sons of Liberty dumped nearly 100,000 pounds of tea into Boston Harbor to make their anger crystal clear, it was not remotely a foregone conclusion that the night of December 16, 1773 would inevitably lead to the battle of Lexington & Concord in 1775, which would inevitably lead to a full-blown war.

In response to the Boston Tea Party, the British Parliament who, not incidentally consisted of many members who were also share-holders in the East India Company (the company that produced and sold the tea that now sat at the bottom of Boston Harbor) chose to ratchet up the confrontation, rather than ignore it. Thus, the Coercive Acts of 1774 were passed to attempt to tame the rebellious colonists.

We could go on and on, recapping the history that brought us to becoming an independent country. But I want to get us to some Torah.

At any number of spots along the timeline that led to separation between Britain and the American colonies were moments when a different decision would have produced a different outcome. It is even possible that, had tempers not flared and egos not been involved, there might have been a version of history where we prayed for the Welfare of the Queen this morning, rather than our country.

So why do I teach you this, this morning? Because I want to look at a story from the Talmud with you. But I want us to look at it through Professor Hackett Fischer's lens - that the outcome of a story is not preordained or inevitable, but rather it is our actions, or in-actions, at any point along the timeline, that can change the course of history.

The story is found in the Talmud - and the first half of it is somewhat well-known. I'll tell it, rather than read the text. There was a guy - he doesn't even get a name in this story - who had a friend named Kamtza and an enemy named Bar-Kamtza. This nameless person was throwing a party and he told his servant to invite his friend Kamtza. But the

servant got people mixed up and invited Bar-Kamtza instead. The text doesn't tell us what Bar-Kamtza thought when he received the invitation (nor what Kamtza thought when his friend was having a party without him), but when the host of the party found Bar-Kamtza there, he demanded that he leave. Bar-Kamtza, trying to spare himself the embarrassment of being kicked out of a party, offered to pay for his meal. The host turns him down. Bar-Kamtza ups the ante and says, I'll pay for ½ the feast! The host turns him down again. In a last ditch effort to be able to stay at the party, he offers to pay for the entire party. This nameless host turns him down, takes him by the hand, and escorts him off the property.

There's lots to unpack here - but before we get to that, I want to note that in the chapter of the Talmud that this story appears, the rabbis tell us that the 2nd Temple was destroyed because of Kamtza and Bar-Kamtza. As an aside, it's worth noting how easily Kamtza - a man who is not at the party and plays no role in this story, is blamed equally for the destruction of the Temple. Whereas the host is not. But it is this very story that is the cause of the destruction of the Second Temple.

[I'm going to pause to hand out some texts for you to look at. If you're on Zoom, you can find this source sheet on the homepage of our website - in the same section that had the link for this morning's zoom service.]

I know that a group conversation is more difficult for folks on Zoom - so consider this source sheet to be an assignment for Peulat Shabbat, your

Shabbat afternoon activity. We'll walk through it together, but I'll leave it to you to discuss on your own (or with me at kiddush).

It's easy to read the Rabbis' declaration that the Temple was destroyed because of Kamtza & Bar Kamtza as one of Divine Intervention. And if the story stopped there, with Bar Kamtza being thrown out of the party, it might make logical sense to assume that God saw the hatred and selfishness that was happening between human-beings, and decided that we didn't deserve the Temple.

But that's without the lesser-known second half of the story.

As you might expect, Bar-Kamtza is more than just angry - he's also humiliated. And humiliation + anger often leads to a desire for revenge, to make others feel the same burning emotions that you're feeling. In processing what happened, he realizes that the other guests at the party, the sages of the time, knew what was happening and didn't stop it. So Bar-Kamtza decided to stir up trouble for the rabbis and people who were at the party.

Bar-Kamtza goes to the emperor and tells him that the Jews have rebelled against him. The emperor wants proof, and Bar-Kamtza, using his insider understanding of how the community works, tells the emperor to send an offering and see if the Jews will sacrifice it. Refusing to do so would be a great insult to the emperor. Because, of course, the emperor has no idea that Bar-Kamtza has an agenda here, he sends Bar-Kamtza with the calf to be offered as a sacrifice. It was unblemished when it left the emperor, but Bar-Kamtza made a blemish on its lip. It was no longer fit for sacrificing in the Temple.

LOOK AT THE SOURCE SHEET TOGETHER - STARTING WITH THE END OF THE STORY

I want to conclude by bringing us back to the beginning. The American Revolution was not a foregone conclusion - even when rebels snuck onto cargo ships, stole thousands of pounds of tea, and dumped it overboard. It was not even a foregone conclusion when the shot was fired that was heard around the world. It was never a foregone conclusion, because history is merely the result of a thousand small decisions.

Just as it was not inevitable that the American Revolution would happen, it was not inevitable that the 2nd Temple would fall.

The two commentaries from Tablet Magazine, at the end of this source sheet highlight some key lessons for us. Yair Rosenberg points out that the people telling this story, in the Gemara, are the rabbis - and they own some of the blame. Rather than pinning the blame on the nameless host of the party - who, I think we would all agree, could have acted more graciously from the get-go - the rabbis blame their own. The sins that destroyed the Temple were standing idly by the blood (or humiliation) of your neighbor, and acting with a sense of rigidity and strictness, when the fate of your people was in your hands.

And Yoav Schaefer and Jacob Samuel Abolafia echo the call to be an upstander, rather than a bystander. Following blindly, for the sake of unity, is not the goal. "When unity trumps sensibility, the consequences

may be disastrous”, they write. And in this case, the consequences have left us bereft of a Temple in Jerusalem for 2000 years.

May we be better role models for future generations. Shabbat Shalom.