

Was the Destruction of the 2nd Temple Inevitable?

Rabbi Rachel Silverman

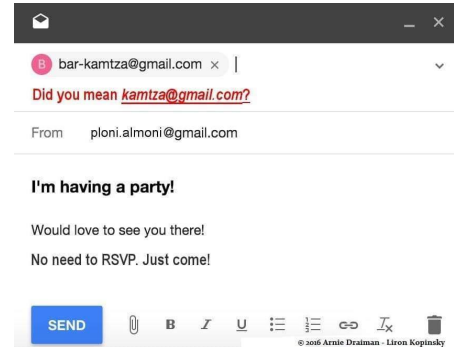
Thought Questions are from David Schwartz's sourcesheet: <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/331946.4?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>

Thought Questions for each section:

1. Who is at fault here?
2. At what points could the story have been changed?
3. Did anybody make a good decision?
4. What lessons about leadership can be learned from this?

Gittin 55b:17-56a:1

The Gemara explains: **Jerusalem was destroyed on account of Kamtza and bar Kamtza.** This is **as** there was **a certain man whose friend** was named **Kamtza and whose enemy** was named **bar Kamtza.** He once **made** a large **feast** and **said to his servant: Go bring me** my friend **Kamtza.** The servant **went** and mistakenly **brought him** his enemy **bar Kamtza.** The man who was hosting the feast **came and found** bar Kamtza **sitting** at the feast. The host **said to** bar Kamtza. **That man is the enemy of that man,** that is, you are my enemy. **What then do you want here? Arise and leave.** Bar Kamtza **said to him: Since I have** already **come, let me stay and I will give you money** for **whatever I eat and drink.** Just do not embarrass me by sending me out. The host **said to him: No,** you must leave. Bar Kamtza **said to him: I will give you money for half of the feast;** just do not send me away. The host **said to him: No,** you must leave. Bar Kamtza then **said to him: I will give you money for the entire feast;** just let me stay. The host **said to him: No,** you must leave. Finally, the host **took** bar Kamtza **by his hand, stood him up, and took him out.**



Thought Question:

Should the other guests have done anything? If so, why might they have not done so?

Gittin 56a:2-3

After having been cast out from the feast, bar Kamtza **said** to himself: **Since the Sages were sitting there and did not protest** the actions of the host, although they saw how he humiliated me, **learn from it that they were content** with what he did. **I will therefore go and inform against them to the king. He went and said to the emperor: The Jews have rebelled against you.** The emperor **said to him: Who says** that this is the case? Bar Kamtza **said to him:** Go and test them; **send them an offering** to be brought in honor of the government, and **see whether they will sacrifice it.** The emperor **went and sent with him** a choice **three-year-old calf. While** bar Kamtza **was coming** with the calf to the Temple, **he made a blemish on** the calf's **upper lip. And some say** he made the blemish **on its eyelids, a place where according to us, i.e., halakha, it is a blemish, but according to them,** gentile rules for their offerings, **it is not a blemish.** Therefore, when bar Kamtza brought the animal to the Temple, the priests would not sacrifice it on the altar since it was blemished, but they also could not explain this satisfactorily to the gentile authorities, who did not consider it to be blemished.

אמר הואיל והוו יתבי רבנן ולא מחו ביה ש"מ קא ניחא להו איזיל איכול בהו קורצא בי מלכא אזל אמר ליה לקיסר מרדו בך יהודאי א"ל מי יימר א"ל שדר להו קורבנא חזית אי מקרבין ליה אזל שדר בידיה עגלא תלתא בהדי דקאתי שדא ביה מומא בניב שפתים ואמרי לה בדוקין שבעין דוכתא דלדין הוה מומא ולדידהו לאו מומא הוא

Thought Questions:

1. What does this text say about our obligation to speak up about injustices in our times now? Do we need to witness a situation to be a "bystander"?
2. According to Rabbi Ed Feinstein, this story shows that "the fate of a community lies in the texture of the fabric of its relationships". How is that relevant today?

Gittin 56a:4-5

The blemish notwithstanding, **the Sages thought to sacrifice** the animal as an offering **due to** the imperative to maintain **peace** with the **government**. **Rabbi Zekharya ben Avkolas said to them:** If the priests do that, people **will say** that **blemished** animals **may be sacrificed** as offerings **on the altar**. The Sages said: If we do not sacrifice it, then we must prevent bar Kamtza from reporting this to the emperor. The Sages **thought to kill him so that he would not go and speak** against them. **Rabbi Zekharya said to them:** If you kill him, people **will say** that **one who makes a blemish on sacrificial** animals **is to be killed**. As a result, they did nothing, bar Kamtza's slander was accepted by the authorities, and consequently the war between the Jews and the Romans began. **Rabbi Yoḥanan says: The excessive humility of Rabbi Zekharya ben Avkolas destroyed our Temple, burned our Sanctuary, and exiled us from our land.**

סבור רבנן לקרוביה משום שלום מלכות אמר להו רבי זכריה בן אבקולס יאמרו בעלי מומין קריבין לגבי מזבח סבור למיקטליה דלא ליזיל ולימא אמר להו רבי זכריה יאמרו מטיל מום בקדשים יהרג אמר רבי יוחנן ענוותנותו של רבי זכריה בן אבקולס החריבה את ביתנו ושרפה את היכלנו והגליתנו מארצנו

Thought Questions:

1. Is there such a thing as being overly ethical?
2. Kamtza appears to have nothing to do with this story, since he never even got the invitation, yet his name is on the story. Are there modern parallels?
3. Rabbi Zechariah seems to be a perfectionist. What would he say are the benefits of this approach? What would Rabbi Yochanan say are the dangers of perfectionism?
4. Another way of looking at Rabbi Zechariah is that he is religiously cautious. When might that be a valuable trait? When might it be important to override that tendency?
5. Elsewhere in the Talmud, the Rabbis say that the Second Temple was destroyed because of "sinat chinam", baseless hatred (Yoma 9b:8). Do you see that at work in this story? If so, where? Either way, what would it look like if "baseless love" were being employed in this story?
6. Why would this be a story that the Rabbis told about themselves?

Gittin 57a:5

To conclude the story of Kamtza and bar Kamtza and the destruction of Jerusalem, the Gemara cites a *baraita*. It **is taught: Rabbi Elazar says: Come and see how great is the power of shame, for the Holy One, Blessed be God, assisted bar Kamtza**, who had been humiliated, **and** due to this humiliation and shame **God destroyed God's Temple and burned God's Sanctuary.**

גיטין נ"ז א:ה'

תניא אמר רבי אלעזר בא וראה כמה גדולה כחה של
בושה שהרי סייע הקב"ה את בר קמצא והחריב את
ביתו ושרף את היכלו:
