

Talmud Selection

Gittin 55b-56a

One of the Torah portions that are permitted for study on Tishah B'Av is Tractate Gittin 55b-58a, which is comprised of narratives and Aggadic teachings about the destruction of the Second Temple. Following is an interpretative elucidation with notes, of part of this section (55b-56a).

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TALMUD BAVLI

אמר ליה – [The host] said to [Bar Kamtza]: לא – “No, I will not let you stay!” אמר ליה – [Bar Kamtza] said to him: יהיבנא לך דמי פלגא דסעודתך – “I will pay you for half your banquet.” אמר ליה – Again [the host] said to him: לא – “No!” אמר ליה – [Bar Kamtza] said to [the host]: יהיבנא לך דמי כולה סעודתך – “I will pay you for your entire banquet.” אמר ליה – [The host] said to [Bar Kamtza]: נקטיה בידיה ואוקמייה – “No!” אמר ליה – He took [Bar Kamtza] by his hand, stood him up and ejected him from the banquet. אמר – [Bar Kamtza] said to himself: הואיל והו – Since the Rabbis were seated at the banquet and did not rebuke him for the way in which he treated me, שמע מינה קא ניהא – it is evident that [what he did] was acceptable to them.^[1] איזיל – I will go and spread slander^[2] against [the Rabbis] in the royal palace. אמר ליה –

He went and told Caesar: “The Jews have rebelled against you!” אמר ליה – [Caesar] said to him: מי יומר – “Who says so?” אמר ליה – [Bar Kamtza] said to [Caesar]: שדר להו – “Send them an animal as a sacrifice and see whether they offer it in their Temple!”^[3] אמר ליה – [Caesar] went and sent a fine^[4] calf with [Bar Kamtza]. בהדי דקאטי – As he was going to Jerusalem, שדא – [Bar Kamtza] caused a blemish in [the calf’s] upper lip, ואתרי לה בדוקין שבועין – or, as some say, he caused a cataract in the eye.^[5] Either way, he ensured that the blemish was in a place where it is considered a blemish for us, i.e. for offering in the Temple, but is not considered a blemish for them, i.e. for offering outside the Temple.^[6] Although the animal was unfit to

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1. The Rabbis did not protest because they felt that doing so would be to no avail (see *Maharsha*).
2. *איזיל קורצין*, *eating kurtzin*, is an idiomatic expression for spreading slander. When a slanderer went to someone’s house to tell him some gossip they would eat a snack – known as *איזיל קורצין*, *eating kurtzin* – to symbolically confirm the tale bearer’s words. *קורצין*, *kurtzin*, is from the root *קָרַץ*, *to wink* – tale bearers wink as a means of imparting their message to its intended recipient without letting anyone else understand it (*Rashi to Lev.* 19:16).
3. A gentile may voluntarily bring offerings to be sacrificed on the Altar in the Temple, just as a Jew can (*Rashi*).
4. *Tosafos*.
5. *Rashi*. A cataract is a disqualifying

blemish (see *Rashi to Leviticus* 21:20, *Mishnah Bechoros* 38a).

A correspondent inquired of *Rashba* (*Teshuvos* 1:326, cited by *Maharatz Chayos* and *Yad David*): How is it possible to introduce a cataract in an animal’s eye? *Rashba* answers that Bar Kamtza knew how to strike the eye in such a manner as to cause a cataract to develop. He also characterizes as acceptable the correspondent’s own suggestion that Bar Kamtza substituted an animal that had a cataract for the animal sent by Caesar.

Rashi (*Bechoros* 16a ואלויבא רי”ה), in an alternative interpretation of the term *בדוקין שבועין*, translates it as *eyelids*, but *Rashi* here follows the view that it means a cataract.

6. Unlike a Jew who may offer sacrifices

As a result of the incident involving Kamtza and Bar Kamtza,^[1] Jerusalem was destroyed: דררחמיה – A certain man, who had a friend named Kamtza and an enemy named Bar Kamtza, עבר סעודתא – made a banquet. אמר ליה לשמעיה – He told his attendant: ויל אייתי לי – “Go and bring Kamtza to join me at the banquet.” אמר ליה בר – [The attendant] went and mistakenly brought him Bar Kamtza.

When [the host] arrived at the banquet and found [Bar Kamtza] sitting there, אמר ליה – he said to [Bar Kamtza]: מכדי – “Look here, that man [you] is the enemy of that man [me]. מהאי בעית – What do you want here? קום – Get up and get out!” אמר ליה – [Bar Kamtza] said to him: הואיל – “Since I am here already let me stay, ויהיבנא לך דמי מה דאכילנא, and I will pay you for whatever I eat and drink.”

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1. The names of two Jews (*Rashi*). The point of the following narrative is that the Destruction of the Temple was a result of *שנאה הוה*, *gratuitous hatred* [between one person and another]. As the Gemara, *Yoma* 9b,

states: “In [the era of] the Second Temple, the people studied Torah and performed *mitzvos*, [so] why was the Second Temple destroyed? Because there was gratuitous hatred among the people” (*Maharsha*).

שָׁדֵר עֲלוֹנֵיהוּ לְגִירוֹן קִיסָר – He^[13] sent Nero Caesar against [the Jews]. בִּי – As he approached Jerusalem, Nero made use of divinations to see if his campaign would be successful. שָׁדָא גִירָא לְמִזְרְחָ אֲתָא נָפַל בִּירוּשָׁלַיִם – He shot an arrow towards the east, and it fell in Jerusalem. לְמַעֲרָב אֲתָא – He shot one towards the west, and it fell in Jerusalem. לְאַרְבַּע רוּחוֹת הַשָּׁמַיִם אֲתָא נָפַל בִּירוּשָׁלַיִם – He shot an arrow towards each of the four directions of the compass and every time it fell in Jerusalem.^[14] – Then he asked a young boy: – “Tell

me your verse,” i.e. the verse you are currently studying.^[15] אָמַר לֵיהּ – [The boy] recited to him: ‘יִנְתְּתִי אֶת – I will take My revenge against Edom through the agency of My people Israel etc.^[16] I.e. God will ultimately punish Edom^[17] (for its treatment of the Jewish nation) through the agency of His people. – [Nero] said to himself: קוֹדֵשׁא בְּרִיךְ הוּא בְּעֵי לְחַרְוֵי – The Holy One, Blessed is He, wants to destroy His House וְבְעֵי – and then wipe His hands clean on that man [Nero].^[18] עָרַק וְאָוַל וְאִיגִייר – He ran

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itous hatred that existed among the people – see 55b note 1). As far as the Temple was concerned, Caesar would have spared it had his sacrifice been offered in it. Now that his sacrifice was refused, he reasoned that since the Temple served him no purpose, it should be destroyed (*Maharsha*).

13. It is unclear to whom this pronoun refers, for who had the authority to send Nero Caesar? *Yuchasin's* (ד"ה ר' מאיר et al.) text of the Gemara reads: גִּירוֹן שָׂר צְבָאוֹ, *Nero his general*. According to this reading, it was not Nero Caesar who was sent but a general of the same name (*Tzemach David* part 2, year 3830). *Seder HaDoros* (3829) cites a view that our reading should be understood likewise, i.e. *Nero Caesar sent* [a military commander] *against them*. (But *Tzemach David* [ibid.] cites dissenting views, according to which Nero Caesar himself led the campaign against Jerusalem.)

14. Since Jerusalem was to the east, what message was conveyed by the fact that the arrow shot towards the east fell in Jerusalem?

Maharsha answers: Nero was not close enough to the city for the arrow to reach it naturally. The arrow was amazingly carried by the wind all the way to Jerusalem.

Anaf Yosef answers: Nero was afraid that although the Jews had sinned, God, out of His love for His People, might interfere with the natural course of events to save them. The fact that the arrow shot towards Jerusalem reached its target and was not diverted by some miracle signified to Nero that God was not going to intervene on the Jews' behalf. And when the arrows shot in the other directions miraculously fell in Jerusalem, Nero divined that, on the contrary, it was God's will that Jerusalem be destroyed.

15. Having ascertained that the Destruction of Jerusalem had been decreed by God, Nero now wished to know whether he would be rewarded for fulfilling God's will in this matter. To this end, he asked a child to recite the verse he was studying (*Anaf Yosef*). [The message conveyed by such a method is a minor form of prophecy (*Smag* cited by *Beis Yosef Yoreh Deah* 179; see there and *Shulchan Aruch* ibid §4).]

16. *Ezekiel* 25:14.

17. Rome is regarded as heir to the Biblical nation of Edom.

18. *Anaf Yosef* asks: Since God had decreed that Jerusalem be destroyed (see note 14), why would Nero be punished for, in effect,

be offered in the Temple, סָבוּר רַבָּנָן – the Rabbis considered offering it, – משום שלום מלכות – for the sake of peaceful relations with the Roman government.^[7] אָמַר לְהוּ רַבִּי – R' Zechariah ben Avkulus said to them: יֵאמְרוּ בְּעַלֵּי – “But then [people] will say that blemished [animals] may be offered on the Altar!” – [The Rabbis] considered killing [Bar Kamtza] דְּלֵא לִיזִיל – so that he would not be able to go and tell Caesar that his offering had been refused.^[8] אָמַר לְהוּ רַבִּי זְכַרְיָה – R' Zechariah said to them: יֵאמְרוּ

– “But then [people] will say that one who blemishes consecrated animals is put to death!”^[9]

The Gemara comments:

– אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן – R' Yochanan said: עֲנִוּתָנוּתוֹ שֶׁל רַבִּי זְכַרְיָה בֶּן אַבְקוּלָס – The tolerance displayed by R' Zechariah ben Avkulus (in refusing to have Bar Kamtza put to death)^[10] הִחְרִיבָה אֶת הַבֵּית הַנִּיחָנוּ – destroyed our Temple, – שָׂרְפָה אֶת הַיֵּיכָלְנוּ – burned down our *Heichal*^[11] – וְהִגְלִיתָנוּ מֵאֶרְצֵנוּ – and exiled us from our land.^[12]

The narrative is resumed:

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only in the Temple, a gentile may do so either in the Temple or elsewhere. However, there is a difference between an offering brought by a gentile in the Temple and one brought elsewhere, in that a Temple offering is disqualified if it is merely blemished, whereas an outside offering is not disqualified unless it is missing a limb (see *Rashi* here and to *Avodah Zarah* 51a ר"ה חז"א).

7. It is permissible to violate even Biblical prohibitions for the sake of maintaining good relations with the government (*Magav Avraham* 656:8; cf. *Yad David*). [Presumably, the reason for this is that a negative attitude on the part of the government toward the Jewish people could very easily lead to bloodshed, a truth that history has sadly borne out many times. All prohibitions (with the exceptions of idolatry, murder and immoral acts such as adultery and incest) are permitted for the sake of saving a life.]

8. Anyone who is, justifiably, presumed to be inciting the government against his fellow Jews may be put to death (*Meiri*). [The Gemara, *Sanhedrin* 73a, states that if one sees someone about to commit a murder, one should kill the potential mur-

derer to prevent him from carrying out his designs.]

9. It is Biblically prohibited to blemish an animal designated as an offering. [This prohibition carries the penalty of lashes; it is not a capital offense.] People might [mistakenly] assume that Bar Kamtza was executed for violating this prohibition (*Rashi*).

10. *Rashi*. Alternatively: R' Zechariah, because of his humility, did not feel himself qualified to make the determination that Bar Kamtza posed a mortal danger to the Jewish nation. (This explains the use here of the word עֲנִוּתָנוּתוֹ, which usually means “his humility”) (*Geresh Yerachim*).

11. The word הַיֵּיכָל, *Heichal*, usually refers to the chamber in the Temple that housed the Menorah, the Shulchan and the Golden Altar. Sometimes it is used to denote the Temple in its entirety (see *Tosefos Yom Tov* to *Midos* 4:6).

12. In fact, the Destruction of the Temple had already been Divinely decreed. This incident was effective only in causing the Destruction to take place at that particular time (*Maharam Shif*).

Alternatively: Only the exile had already been decreed (as punishment for the gratu-

trailed behind him on cushions (*keses*); i.e. he walked only on fine fabric. איבא דאמרי – Some say that he was given this name שהיתה – because his seat cushion (*keses*) was among the nobles of Rome whenever he went there for an audience with the emperor.^[23]

The narrative is continued:

One of these three rich men said to [the Rabbis]: אבא זיניא – “I will sustain [the people] with wheat and barley.” And another one said to [the Rabbis]: ובהדיהו – “Let us go out and wage war against [the Romans].” אמרו להו רבנן – The Rabbis said to them: לא מסתייעא מילתא – “It will not be successful.”^[25] קמו – [The Ruffians] arose and burned down the storehouses of wheat, barley and wood, ונהו כפנא – and there was a famine in the city.^[26]

The Gemara relates one of the tragic effects of the famine:

מרתא בת בייטוס עתירתא דירושלים הווא – Martha the daughter of Boethus was the wealthy woman of Jerusalem. שדרתה לשלוחה ואמרה ליה – She sent out her messenger, saying to him: “Go and

To make a storehouse full of wheat into bread requires sixty storehouses of wood.

[These three men] had enough supplies to sustain the residents of Jerusalem for twenty-one years. הוה בהו ברייני – However, among [the people] were [a band of] ruffians.^[24] אמרו להו רבנן – The Rabbis said to [these ruffians]: גיפוק ונעביד שלמא בהדיהו – “Let us go out and make peace with [the Romans].” לא שבקינהו – [The ruffians] would not let them do so. אמרו להו – They said to [the Rabbis]: “Let us go out and wage war against [the Romans].” אמרו להו רבנן – The Rabbis said to them: לא מסתייעא מילתא – “It will not be successful.”^[25] קמו – [The ruffians] arose and burned down the storehouses of wheat, barley and wood, ונהו כפנא – and there was a famine in the city.^[26]

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23. According to this explanation, “Ben Tzitzis” was his real name. “Hakeses” was added in recognition of his prestigious position (*Rashi*).

24. בריינים, *baryonim* [from the root בור, empty]: empty men, with a propensity to violence (*Rashi*). Here, the reference is to the ardently nationalist group whom secular history knows as the Zealots. As the

Gemara relates presently, they advocated the overthrow of Roman rule through war, and violently resisted any attempts at reconciliation.

25. The Rabbis had a tradition to this effect from our forefather Jacob (see *Maharsha*).

26. The intent of the *baryonim* was to give the populace no choice but to wage war against the Romans.

away and converted to Judaism, and R' Meir was descended from him.

[Caesar] sent Vespasian Caesar^[19] against [the Jews]. אמתא צר עלה תלת שני – [Vespasian] came and besieged [Jerusalem] for three years. הוה בה הנהו תלתא עתירי – There were three wealthy men in [Jerusalem]: נקדימון בן גוריון – Nakdimon ben Gurion, וכן כלבא שבוע – Ben Kalba Savua, and בן ציצית הבקט – Ben Tzitzis Hakeses.

The Gemara explains these unusual

names:

נקדימון בן גוריון – Nakdimon ben Gurion was so called שנקדה לו חמה – because it once happened that the sun miraculously shone (*nakdah*) on his behalf.^[20] בן כלבא – Ben Kalba Savua was so called שבוע – because anyone who entered his house was left satisfied – יוצא כשהוא שבע (*savua*). בן ציצית הבקט – Ben Tzitzis Hakeses was so called because ציציתו נגרתה על גבי כסתות wherever he walked, his *tzitzis*^[22]

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fulfilling God's will?

A similar question was raised by the *Rishonim* in the context of the enslavement of the Jewish people in Egypt: Considering that this slavery had been Divinely ordained – as God said to Abraham (*Genesis* 15:13), ונעבדום וענו אתם, *They will enslave them and abuse them* – why were Pharaoh and the Egyptians punished?

The following is a synopsis of some of the approaches to this problem:

Rambam (*Hil. Teshuvah* 6:5): God's decree did not apply to any particular individual. Each Egyptian could have chosen not to abuse the Jews. Thus, each one who did harm a Jew was deserving of punishment.

Ramban (*Genesis* 15:13), though not disputing the premise that an individual can choose to avoid carrying out a preordained decree, disagrees with the general approach of *Rambam*. For, he argues, if God issues a decree (through a *prophet*), it is surely meritorious to obey the decree, and an individual who ignores it transgresses God's will. Rather, Pharaoh and the Egyptians were punished because they oppressed the Jews to a greater extent than mandated by the decree. Alternatively, one who fulfills such a decree for ulterior motives, rather than for the sake of Heaven, is deserving of punishment. [In the present

case, since there had been no prophetic communication, the Destruction of the Temple could not be considered the fulfillment of a Divine directive, but an act of malicious violence.]

Raavad (*Hil. Teshuvah* *ibid.*) seems to be of the opinion that once a decree has been passed, the individual who was chosen to carry it out is unable to refrain from doing so. However, God arranges that a decree of a harmful nature is performed only by one who is anyway deserving of punishment (as an alternative, *Raavad* mentions an approach similar to that of *Ramban*).

19. [At that time, Vespasian was not the emperor. He is identified here as Vespasian Caesar because ultimately he did reach this position.]

20. The sun was made to shine in the sky after the time for it to set had passed, so that Nakdimon's repayment of a loan (he had incurred on behalf of the people) would not be overdue. The full incident is recounted in *Gemara Ta'anis* 19b-20a.

21. The dog has less food available to him than any other animal (*Shabbos* 155b).

22. *Tzitzis*: the fringes worn, by Biblical command, on the corners of a four-cornered garment (see *Orach Chaim* 21:4 with *Maggen Avraham* et al.).

for?” והיינו דכתיב – This is a fulfillment of that which is written: “בספם בחוצות ישליכו” – *They will throw their silver into the streets.*^[29]

The Gemara continues with an account of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai’s dramatic escape from the ruffians, and how he successfully petitioned Ves-

pasian to spare the Torah academy in Yavneh. Vespasian was then called to Rome to become the emperor, and was replaced by Titus as head of the military campaign against Jerusalem. Titus invaded Jerusalem and desecrated the Temple. The Gemara describes the punishments that befell Titus, as well as other enemies of Israel.

bring me some fine flour.” אַדְאָזַל – *By the time he went, [the fine flour] had been sold.* אַתָּא אִיבָא – *He went back to Martha and told her:* סְמִיּוּדָא לִיבָא חִינְרְתָא אִיבָא – *“There is no more fine flour, but there is white bread.”* אַמְרָה לִיהּ – *She said to him:* זִיל אֵייתִי לִי – *“Go and bring me some white bread.”* אַדְאָזַל אִיבָא – *By the time he went, [the white bread] had been sold.* אַתָּא וְאָמַר לָהּ – *He went back to Martha and told her:* חִינְרְתָא לִיבָא – *“There is no more white bread, but there is coarse bread.”* אַמְרָה לִיהּ – *She said to him:* זִיל אֵייתִי לִי – *“Go and bring me some coarse bread.”* אַדְאָזַל אִיבָא – *By the time he went, [the coarse bread] had been sold.* אַתָּא וְאָמַר לָהּ – *He went back to Martha and told her:* גּוּשְׁקָרָא לִיבָא קִימְחָא דְשַׁעְרֵי אִיבָא – *“There is no more coarse bread, but there is barley flour.”* אַמְרָה לִיהּ – *She said to him:* זִיל אֵייתִי לִי – *“Go and bring me some barley flour.”* אַדְאָזַל אִיבָא – *By the time he went, [the barley flour] had been sold.* אַמְרָה – *Although she had taken off her shoes, she said:* “אֵיפּוֹק וְאֶחְזִי אִי מְשַׁבְּחָנָא מִיַּדִּי לְמִיבֹל – *I will go out and see if I can find anything to eat.”* אִיתִיב לָהּ פְּרִתָּא – *Some animal dung stuck to her foot, she became nauseated and died.* קָרִי עָלָהּ רַבֵּן יוֹחָנָן בֶּן זַכַּי – *In reference to her, Rabban*

Yochanan ben Zakkai cited the following verse: הַרְבֵּה בָּךְ וְהֶעֱנִיגָה אֶשֶׁר,, “*The delicate and pampered [woman] amongst you, the sole of whose foot has not tested the ground.*”^[27]

An alternative version of how she died:

גְּרוּגְרוֹת – *Some say:* אִיבָא דְאִמְרֵי – *She ate the dried figs [discarded by] R’ Tzadok, and became nauseated and died.*

The reference to R’ Tzadok is explained:

דְּרַבִּי צְדוֹק יָתִיב אַרְבָּעִין שָׁנִין בְּתַעֲנִיתָא – *R’ Tzadok fasted for forty years to avert the Destruction of Jerusalem.*^[28] He was so thin – *that when he ate anything, it could be seen from the outside.* וְכִי הֵנָּה בְּרִיא – *When he nourished himself at night after concluding a fast, since he was not able to consume solids, they brought him dried figs.* מִיּוּץ מִיֵּהוּ וְשָׂדֵי לָהּ – *He would suck out their moisture and then discard them.*

The Gemara concludes the story of Martha the daughter of Boethus: אֵס אֶפִּיקְתָּה לְכָל דְּהָבָא וְכֶסֶף – *As [Martha] was dying, she took out all her gold and silver and threw it into the street.* אַמְרָה – *She said:* הָאֵי – *What do I need this*

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29. *Ezekiel* 7:19. The verse refers to the impending Destruction of Jerusalem.

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27. *Deuteronomy* 28:56. The verse appears in the context of the prophecy that foretells the Destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

28. He responded to omens of the Destruction which were discernible forty years before it actually occurred (*Maharsha*; see *Yoma* 39b).

Thus, the cycle of events put into motion by the incident of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza culminated in the Destruction of the Temple. The Gemara (57a) concludes the account of this incident and its aftermath with the following observation:

תְּנִינָא – It was taught in a Baraisa:
אָמַר ר' אֶלְעָזָר – R' ELAZAR SAID: בָּא

וּרְאֵה כְּמָה גְדוּלָה בְּחָה שֶׁל בּוֹשָׁה – COME AND SEE HOW GREAT IS THE POWER OF SHAME!
 שְׁהָרִי סִינֵיעַ הַקִּב"ה אֶת בַּר קַמְצָא – FOR THE HOLY ONE, BLESSED IS HE, ASSISTED BAR KAMTZA in his plot to take revenge for the shame to which he had been subjected, וְהָחָרִיב אֶת בֵּיתוֹ – AND HE DESTROYED HIS TEMPLE
 וְשָׂרַף אֶת הַיְכָלוֹ – AND HE BURNED HIS HEICHAL.