The Talmud on the Temple


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Roman numerals are my own for this handout.

I. Imagining the destroyers’ perspective:

*Gittin 56b* (Soncino, 20,859–29,863):

i) Vespasian sent Titus who said, Where is their God, the rock in whom they trusted? This was the wicked Titus who blasphemed and insulted Heaven. What did he do? He took a harlot by the hand and entered the Holy of Holies and spread out a scroll of the Law and committed a sin on it. He then took a sword and slashed the curtain. Miraculously blood spurted out, and he thought that he had slain himself, as it says, Thine adversaries have roared in the midst of thine assembly, they have set up their ensigns for signs [Ps. 74:4].

ii) Onekelos son of Kolonikos was the son of Titus's sister. He had a mind to convert himself to Judaism. He went and raised Titus from the dead by magical arts, and asked him; "Who is in most repute in the [next] world?" He replied: Israel. What then, [Onekelos] said, about joining them? [Titus] said: Their observances are burdensome and you will not be able to carry them out. Go and attack them in [the living] world and you will be at the top as it is written, "Her adversaries are become her head . . ."; whoever harasses Israel becomes her head" [Lam. 1:5]. [Onekelos] asked him: What is your punishment [in the next world]? He replied: What I decreed [on Jerusalem] for myself. Every day my ashes are collected and sentence is passed on me and I am burnt and my ashes are scattered over the seven seas. (Soncino, 20,862–20,863)

II. “Why was this allowed to happen?”

*Shabbat 119b* (Socino, 3,571–3,575):

iii) R. Abbahu said: Jerusalem was destroyed only because the reading of the shema morning and evening was neglected, for it is said, Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink; and it is written, And the hard and the lute, the timbrel and pipe, and wine, are in their feasts, but they regard not the work of the Lord; and it is written, before my people are gone into captivity, for lack of knowledge [Isa. 5:11–13].

iv) R. Hamnuna said: Jerusalem was destroyed only once they neglected children’s schooling; for it is said, Pour [My wrath] out because of the children in the street. Why pour it out? Because the child is in the street [Jer. 6:11].
v) ‘Ulla said: Jerusalem was destroyed only because they [who lived there] were not ashamed of each other, for it is written, Were they ashamed when they committed abomination? Nay, they were not at all ashamed [Jer. 6:15].

vi) R. Isaac said: Jerusalem was destroyed only because the small and the great were made equal, for it is said, And it shall be, like people like priest; which is followed by, The earth shall be utterly emptied [Isa. 24:2f.].

vii) R. Amram son of R. Simeon b. Abba said in R. Simeon b. Abba's name in R. Hanina's name: Jerusalem was destroyed only because they did not rebuke each other: for it is said, Her princes are become like harts that find no pasture [Lam. 1:6]. Just as the hart of one is at the side of the other's tail, so Israel of that generation hid their faces in the earth ["ostrich" image], and did not rebuke each other.

viii) Rab Judah said: Jerusalem was destroyed only because scholars were despised therein: for it is said, but they mocked the messengers of God, and despised his words, and scoffed at his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against his people, until there was no remedy [2 Chron. 36:16]. What does "Until there was no remedy" intimate? Said Rab Judah in Rab's name: He who despises a scholar has no remedy for his wounds.

ix) . . . Resh Lakish said in the name of R. Judah the Prince: School children may not be made to neglect [their studies] even for the building of the Temple. Resh Lakish also said to R. Judah the Prince: I have this tradition from my fathers – others state, from your fathers: Every town in which there are no school children shall be destroyed.

x) Raba said: Jerusalem was destroyed only because men of faith/trustworthy men ceased therein: for it is said, Run ye to and fro in the streets of Jerusalem, and see now, and know, and seek in the broad places thereof, if ye can find a man, if there be any that doeth justly, that seeketh faithfulness, and I will pardon her [ = Jerusalem; Jer. 5:1]. But is that so? For R. Kattina said: Even at the time of Jerusalem’s downfall men of faith did not cease therein . . . [Isa. 3:6].

**Yoma 9a (Socino, 8,302–8,303):**

xi) Rabba b. Bar Hana said: What is the meaning of the passage [Prov. 10:27]? "The fear of the Lord prolongeth days" refers to the first Sanctuary, which remained standing for 410 years and in which only 18 high priests served. "But the years of the wicked shall be shortened" refers to the second Sanctuary, which abided for 420 years and at which more than 300 served.

**Yoma 9b (Socino 8,309–8,310):**

xii) Why was the first Sanctuary destroyed? Because of three things which prevailed there: idolatry, immorality, and bloodshed? [Isa. 28:20, 3:16; 2 Kg. 21:16; Micah 3:11]. But why was the second Sanctuary destroyed, seeing that in its time they were occupying themselves with Torah, [observing its] precepts, and the practice of charity? Because therein prevailed hatred without cause [sinat chinam]. That teaches you that groundless hatred is considered equally serious as the three sins of idolatry, immorality, and bloodshed together.
**Baba Metzi’a 30b** (Sociono, 25,034–25,035):

xiii) “That they shall do” – This means [do] beyond the requirements of the law. For R. Johanan said: Jerusalem was destroyed only because they gave judgements therein accordance with Biblical law. Were they then to have judged in accordance with untrained arbitrators? – But says thus: because they based their judgments [strictly] upon Biblical law, and did not go beyond the requirements of the law.

III. Mourning and recovery

**Berakoth 2b** (Soncino, 10):

xiv) R. Isaac b. Samuel says in the name of Rab: The night has three watches, and at each watch the Holy One, blessed be He, sits and roars like a lion and says: Woe to the children, on account of whose sins I destroyed My house and burnt My temple and exiled them among the nations of the world."

**Sotah 49a** (Soncino, 20,159 – 20,161):

xv) **Mishnah:** During the war with Vespasian, they decreed against crowns worn by bridegrooms and against the [wedding] drum. During the war of Quietus they decreed against crowns worn by brides and that nobody should teach his son Greek. During the final war [Bar Kokhba] they decreed that a bride should not go out in a palanquin in the midst of the city, but our rabbis decreed that a bride may go out in a palanquin in the midst of the city . . . R. Phineas b. Jair says: When the [Second] Temple was destroyed, scholars and noblemen were ashamed and covered their head, men of deed were disregarded, and strongmen and sophists grew powerful. Nobody enquires [of them], nobody prays [for them], and nobody asks. Upon whom is it for us to rely? Upon our Father who is in heaven. R. Eliezer the Great says: From the day the Temple was destroyed, the sages began to be by schoolteachers, schoolteachers like synagogue attendants, synagogue attendants like common people, and the common people became more and more debased . . .