

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).

This is adapted from

THE SCHOTTENSTEIN EDITION
TALMUD BAVLI

אָמַר לִיה – [The host] said to [Bar Kamtza]: לא – “No, I will not let you stay!” אָמַר לִיה – [Bar Kamtza] said to him: יְהִיבְנָא לָךְ דְּמִי פִלְגָא דְּסַעוּדָתִיךְ – “I will pay you for half your banquet.” אָמַר לִיה – Again [the host] said to him: לא – “No!” אָמַר לִיה – [Bar Kamtza] said to [the host]: יְהִיבְנָא לָךְ דְּמִי כּוֹלָה סַעוּדָתִיךְ – “I will pay you for your entire banquet.” אָמַר לִיה – [The host] said to [Bar Kamtza]: נִקְטִיחַ בְּיָדֵיהּ וְאוֹקְמִיחַ – He took [Bar Kamtza] by his hand, stood him up and ejected him from the banquet. אָמַר לִיה – [Bar Kamtza] said to himself: הוּאִיל וְהוּוּ – Since the Rabbis were seated at the banquet and did not rebuke him for the way in which he treated me, שְׁמַע מִינֵיהּ קָא נִיחָא – it is evident that [what he did] was acceptable to them.^[1] אִיזִיל – I will go and spread slander^[2] against [the Rabbis] in the royal palace. אָמַר לִיה –

לְקִיסָר – He went and told Caesar: מְרָדוּ בְךָ יְהוּדָאִי – “The Jews have rebelled against you!” אָמַר לִיה – [Caesar] said to him: מִי יֵימַר – “Who says so?” אָמַר לִיה – [Bar Kamtza] said to [Caesar]: שְׂרָר לְהוּ – “Send them an animal as a sacrifice and see whether they offer it in their Temple!”^[3] אָזַל שְׂרָר בְּיָדֵיהּ עֵגְלָא תִלְתָּא – [Caesar] went and sent a fine^[4] calf with [Bar Kamtza]. בְּהַדְרֵי דְקָאָתִי – As he was going to Jerusalem, שְׂרָא – [Bar Kamtza] caused a blemish in [the calf’s] upper lip, וְאָמַרִי לֵהּ בְּדוּקִין שְׁבָעִין – 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, וְלִדְיָדֵיהּ לֹא מוּמָא הוּא – but is not considered a blemish for them, i.e. for offering outside the Temple.^[6] Although the animal was unfit to

NOTES

1. The Rabbis did not protest because they felt that doing so would be to no avail (see *Maharsha*).
2. *אָבִילַת קוּרְצִין*, *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 *אָבִילַת קוּרְצִין*, *eating kurtzin* – to symbolically confirm the tale bearer’s words. *קוּרְצִין*, *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* וְאִלִּיבָא, רִי”ה), in an alternative interpretation of the term *בְּדוּקִין שְׁבָעִין*, translates it as *eyelids*, but *Rashi* here follows the view that it means a cataract.

6. Unlike a Jew who may offer sacrifices

אֶקְמָצָא וְבַר קַמְצָא חָרוּב יְרוּשָׁלַיִם – As a result of the incident involving Kamtza and Bar Kamtza,^[1] Jerusalem was destroyed: דְּרַחֲמִיחַ – A certain man, וְהוּא גְבָרָא – who had a friend named Kamtza and an enemy named Bar Kamtza, עָבַד סַעוּדָתָא – made a banquet. אָמַר לִיה לְשַׁמְעִיָּה – He told his attendant: וִיל אֵייתִי לִי – “Go and bring Kamtza to join me at the banquet.” אָזַל אֵייתִי לִיה בַּר – [The attendant] went and mistakenly brought him Bar Kamtza.

אֶתָּא אֲשַׁכְחִיחַ דְּהוּהוּ יָתִיב – When [the host] arrived at the banquet and found [Bar Kamtza] sitting there, אָמַר לִיה – he said to [Bar Kamtza]: מַכְדִּי – the man [you] is the enemy of that man [me]. הָכָא – What do you want here? פּוּק – Get up and get out!” אָמַר לִיה – [Bar Kamtza] said to him: הוּאִיל – “Since I am here already let me stay, וְיְהִיבְנָא לָךְ דְּמִי מַה דְּאִכְלִינָא, וְיִשְׁתִּינָא – and I will pay you for whatever I eat and drink.”

NOTES

1. The names of two Jews (*Rashi*). The point of the following narrative is that the Destruction of the Temple was a result of שְׂנְאָא הֶנּוּם, *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 לְמוֹרְחָ אֶתָא נָפַל בִּירוּשָׁלַיִם – He shot an arrow towards the east, and it fell in Jerusalem. לְמַעַרְבֵי אֶתָא – He shot one towards the west, and it fell in Jerusalem. לְאַרְבַּע רוּחוֹת הַשָּׁמַיִם אֶתָא 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. אָמַר – [Nero] said to himself: קוֹדֵשׁא בְּרִיךְ הוּא בְּעֵי לְחַרְוֵי – The Holy One, Blessed is He, wants to destroy His House וְבְעֵי לְכַפּוֹרֵי יְדִיהּ בְּהוּא גְבָרָא – and then wipe His hands clean on that man [Nero].^[18] עָרַק וְאָוַל וְאִיגִייר – He ran

NOTES

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 צְבָאוּ, *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 בְּעֵלֵי – “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:

R' Yochanan said: אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן – The tolerance displayed by R' Zechariah ben Avkulus (in refusing to have Bar Kamtza put to death)^[10] הִחְרִיבָה אֶת – destroyed our Temple, – בֵּית הַנּוֹרָא – burned down our *Heichal*^[11] – וְהִגְלִיתָנוּ מֵאַרְצֵנוּ – and exiled us from our land.^[12]

The narrative is resumed:

NOTES

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 חו"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 עֲנוּתוֹתָיו, which usually means “his humility”) (*Geresh Yerachim*).

11. The word הֵיכָל, *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 זינא – “I will sustain [the people] with wheat and barley.” And another one said to [the Rabbis]: וברחמך ובדמלחא – “I will supply them with wine, salt and oil.” And another one said to [the Rabbis]: בדציבי – “I will supply them with wood.” The Rabbis gave special praise to the one who promised wood. His pledge was the most generous inasmuch as wood is required in greater quantity than other staples; as borne out by the following: דרב חסדא כל אקלידי הוה מסר לשמעיה – Rav Chisda entrusted all his keys to his attendant בר מדציבי – except for the key to the storehouse of wood. דאמר רב חסדא – For Rav Chisda said: – אכלבא דחיטי בעי שיתין אכלבי דציבי –

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 בריוני – 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, והוה בכפנא – 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: – זיל איתוי לי סמיךא –

NOTES

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

24. ברייוני, *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, ונפק מינה רבי מאיר – 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.

– 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 בשווא רעב – as hungry as a dog (*kalba*)^[21] – left satisfied – יוצא בשווא שבוע (*savua*). בן ציצית הבקט – Ben Tzitzis Hakeses was so called שיהיתה – because ציציתו נגרתה על גבי כסתות wherever he walked, his *tzitzis*^[22]

NOTES

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 דכתב – 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.” אַדְאָל – אִינְדִּבֵּן – By the time he went, [the fine flour] had been sold. אֶתָּא אִינְדִּבֵּן לָהּ – He went back to Martha and told her: סְמִידָא לִיכָא חִינְרְתָא אִיכָא – “There is no more fine flour, but there is white bread.” אֶמְרָה לִיהּ – אֶמְרָה לִיהּ – “Go and bring me some white bread.” אִיכָא דְאֶמְרִי – אִיכָא דְרַבִּי צְדוֹק אֶבְלָה – She ate the dried figs [discarded by] R’ Tzadok, חִינְרְתָא לִיכָא – גּוֹשְׁקְרָא אִיכָא – “There is no more white bread, but there is coarse bread.” אֶמְרָה לִיהּ – אֶמְרָה לִיהּ – “Go and bring me some coarse bread.” אִינְדִּבֵּן – אֶתָּא אִינְדִּבֵּן לָהּ – He went back to Martha and told her: גּוֹשְׁקְרָא לִיכָא קִמְחָא דְשַׁעְרֵי אִיכָא – “There is no more coarse bread, but there is barley flour.” אֶמְרָה לִיהּ – אֶמְרָה לִיהּ – “Go and bring me some barley flour.” אִינְדִּבֵּן – אֶתָּא אִינְדִּבֵּן לָהּ – He went back to Martha and told her: הִנֵּה שְׁלִיפָא מְסַאָנָא אֶמְרָה – Although she had taken off her shoes, she said: “אִיכָא דְרַבִּי צְדוֹק אֶבְלָה – אִיכָא דְרַבִּי צְדוֹק אֶבְלָה – “I will go out and see if I can find anything to eat.” אִיכָא דְרַבִּי צְדוֹק אֶבְלָה – אִיכָא דְרַבִּי צְדוֹק אֶבְלָה – Some animal dung stuck to her foot, she became nauseated and died. קְרִי עֲלֵהּ רֶבֶן יוֹחָנָן בֶּן זְכַאי – In reference to her, Rabban

Yochanan ben Zakkai cited the following verse: הַרְבֵּה בָּךְ וְהַעֲנוּגָה אֲשֶׁר לָא נִסְתָּה בָּךְ רַגְלָהּ” – *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 – אִיכָא דְרַבִּי צְדוֹק אֶבְלָה – She ate the dried figs [discarded by] R’ Tzadok, וְאִינְדִּבֵּן לָהּ – became nauseated and died.

The reference to R’ Tzadok is explained:

דְּרַבִּי צְדוֹק יָתִיב אַרְבַּעִין שָׁנִין בְּתַעֲנִיתָא – R’ Tzadok fasted for forty years – דְּלֹא לִיְחָרֵב יְרוּשָׁלַיִם – to avert the Destruction of Jerusalem.^[28] He was so thin – בִּי הִנֵּה אֶבְלָה מִיָּד – that when he ate anything, הִנֵּה מִיְתָחוּזֵי מֵאֲבָרָי – it could be seen from the outside. – וְכִי הִנֵּה בְרִיא – When he nourished himself at night after concluding a fast, since he was not able to consume solids, מֵיִיץ מִיִּיהוּ וְשָׂדֵי לָהּ – they brought him dried figs. – מֵיִיץ מִיִּיהוּ וְשָׂדֵי לָהּ – He would suck out their moisture and then discard them.

The Gemara concludes the story of Martha the daughter of Boethus: – אֶתָּא אִינְדִּבֵּן לָהּ – As [Martha] was dying, אֶתָּא אִינְדִּבֵּן לָהּ – she took out all her gold and silver – אֶתָּא אִינְדִּבֵּן לָהּ – and threw it into the street. – אֶתָּא אִינְדִּבֵּן לָהּ – She said: – “What do I need this

NOTES

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

NOTES

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, וְהִחְרִיב אֶת בֵּיתוֹ – AND HE DESTROYED HIS TEMPLE
 וְשָׂרַף אֶת הַיְכָלוֹ – AND HE BURNED HIS HEICHAL.