

Weekly Teaching

July 13, 2018

“Because of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza Jerusalem was destroyed.” (Talmud—Gittin 55b)

The story is told in the Talmud that a man named Bar Kamtza mistakenly received Kamtza’s invitation to a celebration, and was then shamefully expelled when he attended.

The party was being thrown by Kamtza’s friend, and it was always intended to be a self-contained celebration of their own clique.

This “closed-invite” party was a paradigm for the Jewish society of the times, a completely splintered community.

According to rabbinic doctrine the sin of the “closed group” was that they act like a “closed fist”; while clenched the closed fist protects what’s within, and also threatens the “other”.

The story of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza is, however, more expansive.

After Bar Kamtza was publicly humiliated, he went to the Roman authorities and slandered the Jews.

His intention was to seek vengeance against the rabbis who were present at the party and stood idly by while he was put to shame.

The Talmud records Bar Kamtza’s logic: “If the rabbis were there and did not object, it must be that they were pleased with what happened.”

Because of this he went to the Roman authorities and said that the “Jews are rebelling against you.”

According to the *midrash*, the Roman Emperor sent a calf to the rabbis of Jerusalem so that they should offer as a sacrifice on his behalf.

Bar Kamtza inflicted a slight wound in the animal—either a slit in the eyelid or a cut on the lip—thus invalidating the sacrifice.

The Jews had always said the Temple was intended to be a “House of Prayer for all nations”, but the ritual imperfection resulted in the Emperor’s animal being rejected for sacrifice, and this was read by Rome as an overt rejection of the Emperor himself.

The Kamtza/Bar Kamtza story was the illustration of how it was that Jew vs. Jew was why God allowed for the destruction of our Temple and Jerusalem.

Senseless hatred and corrupt leadership within the Jewish world made for the “perfect storm” that resulted in Jewish tragedy.

If any of the variables had changed, what a different result could have occurred:

- The celebration could have been open to all in its origin
- Bar Kamtza, although mistakenly invited, could have been made to feel welcome anyhow
- The rabbis present could have intervened on Bar Kamtza’s behalf
- Bar Kamtza could have more appropriately channeled his righteous anger
- Rome could have been approached as to why the sacrifice couldn’t be offered, and a viable solution could have been offered
- And, of course, Rome itself could have lived by a higher moral standard than what its own history represented

Today's world is filled with division. The "closed fist" is the default posture.

This Tisha B'Av let us pray and reflect with hands open, and arms wide spread.

Perhaps this simple body posture will align with our future words and actions, and a greater Peace for all can be ushered into our world.

Shabbat Shalom,

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