

Babylonian Talmud Gittin 55b-56a Discussion
Rosh Hashanah Evening 5772
Jewish Congregation of Brookville

We face so many problems and dilemmas—in our country, in Israel, in the world. And so this evening I want to speak about how we debate these problems.

Great problems require great answers. And great answers require great debates. Yet we appear unable to engage in honest debates, debates where ideas are truly engaged. We label those with whom we disagree as enemies, rather than opponents.

I admit. These are confusing times. We do indeed have enemies. There are those who are bent on our destruction and should be labeled enemy. But not everyone we disagree with is our enemy. Not everyone we dislike is our enemy. A political opponent is not our enemy. Orthodox Jews are not our enemies. Even believing Muslims are not our enemies.

This evening I want to explore a text that talks about *sinat chinam*, baseless hatred. The Talmud suggests that this was the basis for the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. Our Rabbis were obviously very distraught about this destruction. Curiously they looked within for its cause. They did a *cheshbon hanefesh*, an accounting of the soul. They looked for things that they could have done wrong. They asked, “Where did we go wrong? How did we go astray? How did we allow our house to be destroyed?”

By the way there was in fact so much civil strife between Jews at that time that Josephus makes the outrageous claim that more Jews were killed by other Jews than Romans. I suspect that he was exaggerating because he wished to gain favor with the Romans. Nonetheless the rabbis discuss *sinat chinam* as the primary reason why the Temple was destroyed.

This text is one answer. I am not sure if the story is even true, or if it was imagined. But it suggests how we brought down our own Temple. It suggests how we were responsible for this tragedy. We should look at this as a cautionary tale for our own times.

We begin the text from Babylonian Talmud Gittin 55b-56a.

1. The destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 C.E. came through a Kamza and a Bar Kamza in this way. A certain man had a friend named Kamza and an enemy named Bar Kamza. The man once threw a party and said to his servant: Go and invite Kamza. The servant went and instead invited Bar Kamza.

2. When the man saw Bar Kamza at his party he said to him: You gossip about me; what are you doing here? Get out! Bar Kamza replied: Since I am already here, let me stay,

and I will pay you for whatever I eat and drink. The man said: No way! Bar Kamza said: Then let me give you half the cost of the party. The man again said no. Bar Kamza said: Then let me pay for the whole party. The man still said no. And he took Bar Kamza by the hand and threw him out.

3. Said Bar Kamza: Since the Rabbis were sitting there and did not stop the man this shows that they agreed with what he did.

4. Bar Kamza said to himself: I will go and inform against them to the Government. He went and said to the Emperor: The Jews are rebelling against you. The Emperor said: How can I be sure? Bar Kamza said to him: Send them an offering and see whether they will sacrifice it. So the Emperor sent with him a fine calf. On the way he made a blemish on its upper lip, or as some say on the white of its eye, in a place where the Jews count it as a blemish, but the Romans do not.

5. The Rabbis were inclined to sacrifice the offering in order not to offend the Government. Said Rabbi Zechariah ben Abkulas to them: People will then say that blemished animals are offered on the altar.

6. They then proposed to kill Bar Kamza so that he would not go and inform against them again. But Rabbi Zechariah ben Abkulas said to them: Is one who makes a blemish on consecrated animals to be put to death?

7. Rabbi Yohanan thereupon remarked: Through the scrupulousness of Rabbi Zechariah ben Abkulas our House was destroyed, our Temple burned and we were exiled from our land.

As we conclude this discussion, we ask, “How many opportunities were missed to avoid catastrophe? Was Bar Kamza really his enemy? Or was it like our times when every opponent is labeled an enemy?”

There is great danger when we label all those we disagree with as enemies, when we say every Muslim is Al Qaeda, every German is a Nazi, every Palestinian Hamas. We must beware of such tendencies. We must do battle against our enemies, and argue with our opponents. Moreover we must argue with love and respect.

We could as well bring about our destruction by allowing the situation to get away from us. Look at this story as a cautionary tale. Bar Kamza could have allowed his anger not to get the better of him. The party giver as well could have allowed his anger not to get the better of him. He could have looked away and allowed his so called enemy to stay. The rabbis could have stopped the destruction from happening at the party by rushing to interfere. The rabbis could have looked away from their ritual commitments for the sake of peace.

The lesson is that small, seemingly insignificant actions can have catastrophic consequences. It is remarkable how willing the rabbis were to explore their own faults. It is extraordinary how willing they were to lay blame at their own feet. They said, "Look at what we did. Look at how we brought this upon ourselves."

Let us learn from this text. Let us resolve never to allow disagreements, or dislikes, to become destructions.

Rabbi Steven Moskowitz
www.rabbimoskowitz.com