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LOVING THE VILLAGE PEST

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Emil W. Herman אבנ"ל
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PINCHAS LOVING THE VILLAGE PEST

From time to time, Israel is pushed into making prisoner exchanges. Most of the time, Israel gets dead bodies in exchange for live terrorists.

This immediately triggers a discussion on whether exchanging prisoners for soldiers' bodies is a good idea or whether it merely whets the appetite of Israel's enemies to execute more soldiers.

We are now in the period of the Three Weeks, the time during which the Jews mourn the Destruction of the Holy Temples.

This period has also historically marked times when the Jewish People were faced with difficult decisions when it was hard to know what was the right thing to do.

There is a famous Talmudic story about the Destruction era. The Talmud (Tractate Gittin 55b) tells us how "Jerusalem was destroyed because of Kamtza and Bar-Kamtza." The story goes that there was a wealthy man in Jerusalem who threw a lavish party, a beautiful dinner, and gave his butler a list of guests to be invited. Among these guests was one individual by the name of Kamtza. Now, the butler was really busy with inviting all the community bigwigs, and he made a mistake: Instead of inviting Kamtza, he accidentally invited someone else with a very similar name: Bar-Kamtza.

The problem was, Bar-Kamtza was embroiled in some kind of feud with the host.

So when Bar-Kamtza got an invitation, he was happy: He thought that the rich host wants to make up with him and turn over a new leaf.

So, filled with enthusiasm, he comes to the party and sits down at one of the tables. Now, into the social hall comes the beaming host. He starts going from table to table, toasting his guests. Suddenly he sees his enemy Bar-Kamtza sitting at his party. The host gets mad and says to Bar-Kamtza: "Aren't you my enemy? What are you doing here? Get out of here!" Bar-Kamtza says, "Once I've come and I'm already here, let me stay. I'll pay you whatever my meal costs."

"No!" says the host. "Get out!"

Bar-Kamtza is humiliated. He offers to pay for half the entire party so long as the host won't embarrass him in public. The host again refuses: "Get out!" So Bar-Kamtza goes even farther: He offers to pay the costs of the entire party.

But the host can't even accept this. The Talmud tells us that "He took his hand, stood him up and ejected him"—he simply threw him out in front of everybody.

The Sages of Israel and all of Jerusalem's VIPs were at that party. But no one said anything. Not one protested. Nobody said a word.

The Talmud continues: "Bar-Kamtza said to himself, 'Since the Sages sat at the party and saw what happened and didn't protest, it means that they're fine with this—I'll go and inform on them to the Caesar.'"

In his rage, Bar-Kamtza decided to take revenge against the entire Jewish People.

According to the Talmud, "Bar-Kamtza visited the Caesar and told him, 'The Jews have rebelled against you!' " You have a revolt on your hands. The Caesar asked Bar-Kamtza, "What's your proof? How do you know?" So Bar-Kamtza told him, "Send them an animal to be sacrificed in their Temple and see if they sacrifice it." And so the Caesar sent Bar-Kamtza with a three-year-old calf.

On the way to Jerusalem, Bar-Kamtza inflicted a wound on the calf. Now, according to Jewish law, only an unblemished animal may be sacrificed in the Temple. But Bar-Kamtza put a small cut on the animal's eyelid which most people wouldn't consider a blemish in the first place.

Understandably, once Bar-Kamtza got to the Temple, a heated debate broke out in the Sanhedrin, the Jewish supreme court, about what to do.

The Sages argued that the sacrifice must be brought for purposes of keeping the peace. Yes, ordinarily such a sacrifice would not be accepted. But now, it could ignite a threat to our very lives—who knows how the Caesar will react if he hears that his sacrifice was rejected?

One of the Sages present was a scholar named Zecharya Ben-Avkulas. Apparently, he was one of the Sanhedrin's elders whom everyone respected. Now, Rabbi Zecharya joined the debate and argued that it's forbidden to bring the sacrifice because then people will think that blemished animals are being sacrificed on the altar, which is an affront to G-d.

Some of the Sages present offered another suggestion to resolve the problem.

The fear was that Bar-Kamtza would inform on his own people to the Caesar that the sacrifice was not brought. Now, in Judaism there is such a thing as a moser—an informer. If an individual is known to be snitching on his fellow Jews to the authorities (and we're speaking of historically anti-Semitic authorities), the fact that he informs places his fellow Jews in clear and present danger—they would be killed. No fair trial. No justice.

In such cases, Jewish law rules that a moser is considered an aggressor and that it is permitted to kill him without any prior investigation. As Maimonides writes in his injury laws, "It is permitted to kill the moser anywhere and even in our time... it is a mitzvah to kill him, and whoever kills him first gets the mitzvah."

In light of that, there were Sages who considered killing Bar-Kamtza to prevent him from reporting to the Caesar that the sacrifice was not brought. But Rabbi Zecharya said to them, "People will think that someone who blemishes a sacrifice gets executed!" He did not allow them to execute Bar-Kamtza.

Ultimately, the Sanhedrin listened to Rabbi Zecharya. They didn't offer the sacrifice and didn't execute Bar-Kamtza. Indeed, Bar-Kamtza went and informed on his fellow Jews, resulting in the Destruction of the Second Temple.

Concluding the saga, the Talmud says, "Rabbi Yochanan said: 'The humbleness of Rabbi Zecharya Ben-Avkulas destroyed our House and burned our Hall and exiled us from our Land.' "

I heard this story when I was a kid in cheder, but I didn't understand Rabbi Yochanan's reaction to the story.

Firstly, what does it mean by Rabbi Zecharya's "humility?" What was his humility? It seems just the opposite! He stood his ground with all his might and didn't allow his colleagues to act against Jewish law by sacrificing a blemished animal on the altar. It would have made more sense for Rabbi Yochanan to say, "Rabbi Zecharya's zealotness."

Secondly and most importantly, blaming the entire Destruction and exile on Rabbi Zecharya seems a little too much. He only appears at the end of the story, so what do you want from him? He wasn't the one who made Bar-Kamtza mad. At worst, he was perhaps a bit too rigid; maybe he indirectly caused the Destruction. But to place all the blame upon him is completely out of proportion—didn't the Sages themselves say

that the Destruction of the Second Temple occurred because of baseless hatred? So why blame Rabbi Zecharya for all the trouble?

But this week, I found a very interesting Midrash that sheds light on the entire saga.

In Midrash Eicha Rabasi, Chap. 4, a very important detail is added: “Rabbi Zecharya Ben-Avkulas was there and he could have protested, but he did not.”

The Midrash is referring not to the deliberations in the Sanhedrin but rather, to the party we mentioned before. The leading and most prominent Sage at the party, who could have protested yet did not, was Rabbi Zecharya Ben-Avkulas.

Now we can understand what Rabbi Yochanan is saying. The “humility” of Rabbi Zecharya refers to the fact that Rabbi Zecharya didn’t stand up and speak out when Bar-Kamtza was kicked out of the party in shame. That is what destroyed the Beis Hamikdash, caused the Exile, and drove Bar-Kamtza to inform on his fellow Jews to the Caesar. Rabbi Zecharya knew good and well how to defend the protocol of the Beis Hamikdash and stand strong against anyone who would violate its laws—but at the party with Jerusalem’s movers and shakers, he suddenly became “humble.”

So now, let’s try to understand who Bar-Kamtza was.

If he were alive today, I’d describe him as a nudnik: The guy who comes to a party and no one wants him there, and who starts to loudly argue when he is politely asked to step out. Every normal person would leave immediately when he or she even gets a sense of not being wanted at some party. But the nudnik is the one guy who stays around to get on your nerves even if you hint to him ten times that he’s not welcome.

What’s more, no one comes to his defense. You know why? Because no one wants him at their table. At any party with reserved seating, everyone is worried that this guy will end up sitting next to him.

But I must report that here in our shul, we have a regular who always approaches me before any of our big events to ask me, “Could you please seat me next to the person no one wants to sit next to? I’d be happy to sit next to him.”

In a bigger sense, the Jewish People is considered by the world to be the nudnik. No country or state wants him at their table. Throughout much of our history, no country wanted us on its soil and even today, hardly any country wants to come to Israel’s defense and stand by her side.

Judaism believes that what you put into the universe is what it gives back to you. So instead of recoiling in disgust and horror at the nudnik the next time he shows up at a family wedding or Bar Mitzvah, let's try to seat him next to us instead. Then, in turn, G-d will see to it that the world will be happy to embrace "the nudnik," the People of Israel and the Land of Israel.

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