

From the Rabbi's Desk  
Rabbi Manes Kogan  
Hillcrest Jewish Center  
183-02 Union Turnpike, Flushing, NY 11366  
[rabbikogan@hillcrestjc.org](mailto:rabbikogan@hillcrestjc.org)

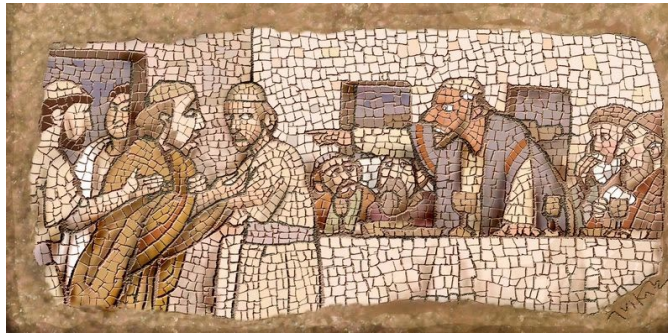
## Stories with a Twist [23]

### Jerusalem Was Destroyed on Account of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza

(A Play in Five Acts)

(Insights into Babylonian Talmud Gittin 55b – 56b)

#### Act 1



#### Background to Our Story

##### Wanton Hatred



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Yoma. Koren publishers Jerusalem (9b – Page 38)

"...why was the Second Temple destroyed? It was destroyed due to the fact that there was wanton hatred during that period. This comes to teach you that the sin of wanton hatred is equivalent to the three severe transgressions: Idol worship, forbidden sexual relations and bloodshed.

##### Roman Emperors and Governors

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman\\_emperor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_emperor)

The Roman Emperor was the ruler of the Roman State during the imperial period (starting at about 27 BC). The Romans had no single term for the office: Latin titles such as imperator (from which English emperor ultimately derives), [augustus](#), caesar and princeps were all associated with it. In practice, the Emperor was supreme ruler of Rome and supreme commander of the Roman legions. In theory, however, Rome remained a republic, the res publica, and the Emperor's status was merely that of primus inter pares—first among equals. This legal fiction became increasingly meaningless as the Emperors consolidated their power.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman\\_governor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_governor)

A Roman governor was an official either elected or appointed to be the chief administrator of Roman law throughout one or more of the many provinces constituting the Roman Empire. The generic term in Roman legal language was *Rector provinciae*, regardless of the specific titles, which also reflect the province's intrinsic and strategic status, and corresponding differences in authority.

### **Jewish Informers (Mosrim)**

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mesirah>

Mesirah (or mesira [Hebrew:to turn over](#)) is the action in which one Jew reports the conduct of another Jew to a non-rabbinic authority in a manner and under the circumstances forbidden by [rabbinic](#) Law. This may not necessarily apply to reporting legitimate crimes to responsible authority, but does apply to turning over a Jew to an abusive authority, or to a legitimate one who would punish the criminal in ways seen as excessive by Jewish community, though "excessive" punishment by non-Jews may be permissible if a precept of the [Torah](#) has been violated.

The term for an individual who commits *mesirah* is *moser* (**מוסר**). A person who repeatedly violates this law by informing on his fellow Jews is considered subject to "Din Moser" (law of the informer), which is analogous to "[Din rodef](#)" in that both prescribe death for the offender, and according to some, in some circumstances the offender may be killed without warning.



[Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Gittin Koren publishers Jerusalem, Page 313.](#)

With regard to those who slander Jews to the government, it is a mitzva to eradicate them and to cause them to descend to the pit of destruction (Rambam *Sefer HaMadda, Hilkhhot Avoda Zara*, 11:1).

### **שבת ע"ז עמ' ב' ד"ה קמצא (רש"י)**

קמצא - ארבה, ולי נראה: קמצא - [גמלה]

### **Blemished Animals for Sacrifices**



[Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Gittin Koren publishers Jerusalem, Page 313.](#)

If the lip of an animal is damaged or cracked, it is considered to be blemished and may not be sacrificed as an offering. The same applies to an animal that has a white dot in the middle of its pupil, referred to as *dak* in the Torah (Rambam *Sefer Avoda, Hilkhhot Biat HaMikdash* 7:5, 7).

### **Rabbi Zekharya ben Avkolas**



[Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Gittin Koren publishers Jerusalem, Page 313.](#)

Very little is known about this Sage, and only one *halakha*, in tractate *Shabbat*, is recorded in his name. Yet, based on what is written here and in collections of *midrashim*, he appears to have been one of most prominent Sages of his generation. Some identify him with Zekharya ben Amfadolas, who is mentioned by Josephus as one of the Sages close to the leaders of the rebellion.

## **The Text: Babylonian Talmud Gittin 55b-56b**

Introduction

The destruction of Jerusalem came through a Kamtza and a Bar Kamtza; the destruction of Tur Malka came through a cock and a hen; the destruction of Bethar came through the shaft of a leather.

אֶקְמָצָא וְבַר קָמְצָא חָרוּב יְרוּשָׁלַיִם; דֶּהֱוּא גְבָרָא, דְּרַחֲמִיהּ קָמְצָא וּבַעַל דְּבַיְהּ בַר קָמְצָא, עֲבַד סְעוּדָתָא, אָמַר לִיהּ לְשִׁמְעִיהּ: זִיל אֵייתִי לִי קָמְצָא, אֲזִיל אֵייתִי לִיהּ בַר קָמְצָא.

אָתָּא אֲשַׁפְחִיהּ דֶּהוּהּ יְתִיב, אָמַר לִיהּ: מְקַדִּי הֵהוּא גְבָרָא בְּעַל דְּבַבָּא דֶּהֱוּא גְבָרָא הוּא מְאִי בְּעִית הֵכָא? קוּם פּוּק! אָמַר לִיהּ: הוּאִיל וְאַתָּאִי שְׂבָקוּ, וְיִהִיבְנָא לָךְ דְּמִי מַה דְּאֲכִילְנָא וְשְׁתִּינָא. אָמַר לִיהּ: לָא. אָמַר לִיהּ: יִהִיבְנָא לָךְ דְּמִי פּוּלָה סְעוּדָתִיךָ! אָמַר לִיהּ: לָא. נְקֻטִיָּה בִידֵיךָ וְאַקְמִיָּה וְאַפְקִיָּה. אָמַר: הוּאִיל וְהוּוּ יְתָבִי רַבְּנִן וְלֹא מַחוּ בֵיהּ, שְׁמַע מִינָהּ קָא נִיחָא לְהוּ, אִיזִיל אִיכּוּל בְּהוּ קוּרְצָא בִּי מְלָכָא.

אֲזִיל אָמַר לִיהּ לְקִיסָר: מְרַדּוּ בָּךְ יְהוּדָאִי! אָמַר לִיהּ: מִי יִימַר? אָמַר לִיהּ: שְׂדַר לְהוּ קוּרְבָנָא, תּוֹזִית אִי מְקַרְבִּין לִיהּ. אֲזִיל שְׂדַר בִּידֵיהּ עֲגָלָא תַלְתָּא. בְּהַדֵּי דְקָאֲתִי שְׂדָא בֵּיהּ מוּמָא בְּגִיב שְׁפַתִּים, וְאַמְרִי לָהּ בְּדוּקִין שְׂבָעִין, דּוּקְתָא דְלִדְיוֹן הִנֵּה מוּמָא וְלִדְיָדָהּ לָאוּ מוּמָא הוּא. סְבוּר רַבְּנִן לְקִרְוִיָּה מְשׁוּם שְׁלוֹם מְלָכוֹת, אָמַר לְהוּ רַבִּי זְכַרְיָה בֶּן אֲבָקוּלָס, יֹאמְרוּ: בְּעַלֵּי מוּמִין קְרִיבִין לְגַבֵּי מִזְבֵּחַ! סְבוּר לְמִיקְטָלִיָּה, דְּלֹא לִיזִיל וְלִימָא, אָמַר לְהוּ רַבִּי זְכַרְיָה, יֹאמְרוּ: מַטִּיל מוּם בְּקַדְשִׁים יִהְרַג! אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן: עַנּוּתָנּוּתוֹ שֶׁל רַבִּי זְכַרְיָה בֶּן אֲבָקוּלָס הִחְרִיבָה אֶת בֵּיתָנוּ, וְשָׂרְפָה אֶת הַיְכָלָנוּ, וְהִגְלִיתָנוּ מֵאַרְצֵנוּ.

### Scene Number 1

Jerusalem was destroyed on account of Kamtza and bar Kamtza.

This is as there was a certain man whose friend was named Kamtza and whose enemy was named bar Kamtza. He made a feast and said to his servant: Go bring me Kamtza. The servant went and mistakenly brought him bar Kamtza.

The man who was hosting the feast came and found bar Kamtza sitting at the feast.

The host said to bar Kamtza. That man is the enemy of that man, that is, you are my enemy. What then do you want here? Arise and leave.

Bar Kamtza said to him: Since I have already come, let me stay and I will give you money for whatever I eat and drink. The host said to him: No.

Bar Kamtza said to him: I will give you money for half of the feast. The host said to him: No.

Bar Kamtza then said to him: I will give you money for the entire feast; just let me stay. The host said to him: No. Finally, the host took bar Kamtza by his hand, stood him up, and took him out.

## **Scene Number 2**

After having been cast out from the feast, bar Kamtza said to himself: Since the Sages were sitting there and did not protest the actions of the host, although they saw how he humiliated me, learn from it that they were content with what he did. I will therefore go and inform against them to the king.

## **Scene Number 3**

He went and said to the emperor: The Jews have rebelled against you. The emperor said to him: Who says that this is the case? Bar Kamtza said to him: Go and test them; send them an offering to be brought in honor of the government, and see whether they will sacrifice it. The emperor went and sent with him a choice three-year-old calf. While bar Kamtza was coming with the calf to the Temple, he made a blemish on the calf 's upper lip, and some say he made the blemish on its eyelids, a place where according to us, Jewish law, it is a blemish, but according to them, gentile rules for their offerings, it is not a blemish. Therefore, when bar Kamtza brought the animal to the Temple, the priests would not sacrifice it on the altar since it was blemished, but they also could not explain this satisfactorily to the gentile authorities, who did not consider it to be blemished.

## **Scene Number 4**

The Sages thought to sacrifice the animal as an offering due to the imperative to maintain peace with the government. Rabbi Zekharya ben Avkolas said to them: If the priests do that, people will say that blemished animals may be sacrificed as offerings on the altar. The Sages said: If we do not sacrifice it, then we must prevent bar Kamtza from reporting this to the emperor. The Sages thought to kill him so that he would not go and speak against them. Rabbi Zekharya said to them: If you kill him, people will say that one who makes a blemish on sacrificial animals is to be killed. As a result, they did nothing and consequently the war between the Jews and the Romans began.

## **Scene Number 5**

Rabbi Yoĥanan says: The excessive humility of Rabbi Zekharya ben Avkolas destroyed our Temple, burned our Sanctuary, and exiled us from our land.



**Explaining the Story** What's going on in our story? (The sequence of events)

### Comprehension Questions

- ?** Why did the servant bring Bar Kamtza instead of Kamtza to his masters' party?
- ?** Do you think Bar Kamtza knew that the host hated him? If yes, why did he attend the party?
- ?** How do we know that the host really hated Bar Kamtza?
- ?** Bar Kamtza said (to himself): "Since the Sages were sitting and did not protest the actions of the host, learn from it that they were content with what he did." Do you agree with his conclusion?
- ?** Why did bar Kamtza inform against the Jews to the king?
- ?** What could be the consequences of informing against the Jews to the king?
- ?** How is the emperor portrayed?
- ?** How can the Sages justify killing Bar Kamtza?

### Analysis Questions

- ?** What is remarkable about the introduction statement of our story: "*The destruction of Jerusalem came through a Kamtza and a Bar Kamtza; the destruction of Tur Malka came through a cock and a hen; the destruction of Bethar came through the shaft of leather?*"
- ?** "...there was a certain man whose friend was named Kamtza and whose enemy was named bar Kamtza." What calls your attention to this statement?
- ?** Why do you think the Sages did not intervene when the host expelled Bar Kamtza? What does it say about the community led by these Sages?

**?** Why do you think the Sages went along with the objections of Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkolas?

### **“The Twist” – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from the Text**

**!** History is shaped by trivialities! (A cock and a hen can destroy a city) - Minutia is what makes a difference in the world!

**!** We don't know the name of the host and it is not important. It could be anyone!

**!** You may have very good reasons to feel hatred. The big question is: how do you react? What do you do with your hatred?

**!** What turns a small mistake into a big one?

1. The anonymous host gets carried away by his anger! Beware of anger!  
2. Once anger is on the table, it gets out of control. The person who is subjected to humiliation gets out of control! Anger is just one letter short of danger.

3. **!** Anything could happen when leaders get intimidated by power, money, and by what others are going to say.

**!** When religious leaders remain silent in the face of injustice, they acquiesce to the injustice.

**!** The scrupulousness of Rabbi Zekharya ben Avkolas: When piety becomes stupidity...



Our story, one of the most famous and fascinating stories in the Babylonian Talmud, is usually quoted to illustrate the consequences of wanton hatred. In addition to making a point for love and forgiveness, this story helps us reflect on the place of leadership in general and religious leadership in particular, the unforeseeable outcome of anger and revenge, the active role that bystanders play in the injustices of this world, and how lack of action can be, many times, worse than a poor action.

המום הקטן הוא כמו ההבדל בין "קמצא" ל"בר קמצא". למה שפתיים או עפעפיים?  
חז"ל מרמזים למה שאמר בר קמצא בהתחלה – שחכמים ישבו שם ולא מחו, הוא  
הולך ומלשין לקיסר. כל המנהיגות הרוחנית שתקה ולא עשתה כלום. זאת מנהיגות  
שאינה ראויה. יש אומרים שהמום הוא בעפעפיים – עוצמים עיניים ולא רואים  
שמישהו אחר נמצא בצרה.

אם החכמים היו מוחים – בר קמצא היה נרגע לא היה מלשין לקיסר.

בבית המקדש יכלו להקריב קרבן פגום או להרוג את השליח. "ענוותנותו של ר'  
זכריה בן אבקולס" הביאה את החורבן. למה זה שלילי? רש"י אומר סבלנותו  
ד"ה ענוותנותו: "סבלנותו שסבל את זה ולא הרגו".

יש מי שאומר צדיקות יתר. למען התורה הוא מחריב את ההיכל. הולך ראש בקיר  
בלי לראות את המציאות, שיש מקום לעשות שינוי. פחדנות – מה יגידו?