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## Stories with a Twist [25]

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

(A Play in Five Acts)

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

#### Act 3



#### The Story up to this Point...

#### Background to Our Story

##### Vespasian Caesar



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Gittin. Koren publishers Jerusalem (Page 314)

Vespasian served as the Roman emperor from 69–79 CE. He founded the Flavian dynasty and was responsible for the destruction of the Temple and the accompanying devastation of Judea. Vespasian's family was part of the Roman equestrian order, and he distinguished himself in battle and rose in the ranks of the Roman army, eventually being appointed to suppress the Great Revolt of the Jews in Judea. While his military operations were successful, he had yet to conquer Jerusalem when he left Judea after being declared emperor in the summer of 69 CE. He entrusted the siege and ultimate conquest of Jerusalem to his son, Titus, who later became emperor as well.

##### Nakdimon ben Guryon



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Gittin. Koren publishers Jerusalem (Page 314)

Nakdimon ben Guryon, whose Hebrew name appears to have been Boni, was one of the wealthiest men living in Jerusalem at the time of the destruction of the Second Temple. Tractate *Ta'anit* tells of the great sums of charity that he donated to the community and the miracle of the sun that was performed for him as a result.

## Ben Kalba Savua



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Gittin. Koren publishers Jerusalem (Page 314)

The family of ben Kalba Savua was one of the wealthiest and most powerful at the time of the destruction of the Second Temple and in the period following, as is known from the story of Rabbi Akiva marrying one of the daughters of this family. It is said to trace its descent back to Caleb, the son of Jephunneh. The name Kalba seems to be based on this lineage rather than the explanation given in the Gemara here.

## Ben Tzitzit HaKesat



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Gittin. Koren publishers Jerusalem (Page 314)

Ben Tzitzit HaKesat was one of the wealthiest Jews at the time of the destruction of the Second Temple. The midrash in *Bereshit Rabba* notes that a genealogical scroll was found in Jerusalem listing the house of Tzitzit HaKesat as descending from King Saul's general, Abner, the son of Ner.

## Zealots

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

Zealotry was a movement in first century Judaism, described by Josephus as one of the "four sects" at this time. The term Zealot, in Hebrew *kanai* (כַּנַּי, frequently used in plural form, כַּנַּיִם), means one who is zealous on behalf of God. The term derives from Greek ζηλωτής (*zelotes*), "emulator, zealous admirer or follower". The Zealots were a religious group and were frequently in rebellion.

The Zealots were a Jewish political movement in the 1st century which sought to incite the people of Iudaea Province to rebel against the Roman Empire and expel it from the country by force of arms during the Great Jewish Revolt (CE 66-70). When the Romans introduced the imperial cult, the Jews unsuccessfully rebelled. The Zealots continued to oppose the Romans due to Rome's intolerance of their culture and on the grounds that Israel belonged only to a Jewish king descended from King David.

Josephus's [Jewish Antiquities](#) states that there were three main Jewish sects at this time, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Essenes. The Zealots were a "fourth sect", founded by Judas of Galilee (also called Judas of Gamala) and Zadok the Pharisee in the year 6 against Quirinius' tax reform, shortly after the Roman state declared what had most recently been the territory of the tribe of Judah a Roman Province, and that they "agree in all other things with the Pharisaic notions; but they have an inviolable attachment to liberty, and say that God is to be their only Ruler and Lord." (18.1.6)

In either case, it has also been argued that the group was not so clearly marked out (before the first war of 66-70/3) as some have thought.

The Crisis under Caligula (37-41) has been proposed as the first open break between Rome and the Jews.

Two of Judas' sons, Jacob and Simon, were involved in a revolt and were executed by Tiberius Alexander, the procurator of Iudaea province from 46 to 48.

The Zealots had the leading role in the Jewish Revolt of 66. They succeeded in taking over Jerusalem, and held it until 70, when the son of Roman Emperor Vespasian, Titus, retook the city and destroyed Herod's Temple during the destruction of Jerusalem.

The Zealots objected to Roman rule and sought violently to eradicate it; Zealots engaged in violence were called the Sicarii. They raided Jewish habitations and killed Jews they considered collaborators, while also urging Jews to fight Romans and other Jews for the cause. Josephus paints a very bleak picture of their activities as they

instituted what he characterized as a murderous "reign of terror" prior to the Jewish Temple's destruction.

According to Josephus, the Zealots followed John of Gischala, who had fought the Romans in Galilee, escaped, came to Jerusalem, and then inspired the locals to a fanatical position that led to the Temple's destruction.

### In the Talmud

In the Talmud, the Zealots are also called the **Biryonim** meaning "boorish" or "wild", and are condemned for their aggression, their unwillingness to compromise to save the survivors of besieged [Jerusalem], and their blind-militarism. They are further blamed for having contributed to the demise of Jerusalem and the second Jewish Temple, and of ensuring Rome's retributions and stranglehold on Judea. According to the Babylonian Talmud, Gittin:56b, the Biryonim destroyed decades worth of food and firewood in besieged Jerusalem to force the Jews to fight the Romans out of desperation, an event that directly led to the escape of Yochanan ben Zakkai out of Jerusalem, who met Vespasian which led to the foundation of the Academy of Yavneh which produced the Mishnah.

The Zealots advocated violence against the Romans and their Sadducee Jewish collaborators, raiding for provisions and other activities that aided their cause.

### In Masada

After the destruction of Jerusalem and the Second Temple in AD 70, 960 Zealots took refuge by capturing the Roman fortress of Masada and taking no prisoners. Rome sent the Tenth Legion to attempt to retake the stronghold, but for three years they met with no success. It is estimated that they took over 1,000 casualties in the process. The Zealots continued to hold the fortress even after the Romans invented new types of siege engines. Finally, in the third year of the siege, Rome, unable to take the fortress intact, gave up and burned the walls down. When the Romans stormed in to capture the Zealots, they found that the fighters and their families had nearly all committed suicide rather than live a life of slavery.

One of their leaders, Elazar ben Yair escaped to the desert fortress of Masada and fought alongside the Sicarii Zealots until Masada was captured in 73. The Jewish Revolt was suppressed thereafter and the Zealots declined in power and finally faded into history

Today, members of some units of the Israel Defense Forces, climb Masada and declare "Masada Shall Not Fall Again", in Hebrew, at their graduation from basic training.

### Sicarii

One particularly extreme group of Zealots was also known in Latin as sicarii, meaning "daggermen" (sing. sicarius, possibly a morphological reanalysis), because of their policy of killing Jews opposed to their call for war against Rome. Probably many Zealots were sicarii simultaneously, and they may be the biryonim of the Talmud that were feared even by the Jewish sages of the Mishnah.

The main differences between the Sicarii and the Zealots were: (1) the Jerusalem Zealots never attached themselves to one particular family and never proclaimed any of their leaders king; (2) the Sicarii had their original base in Galilee, while the Zealots were concentrated in Jerusalem; and (3) the Galilean Sicarii were fighting for a social revolution, while the Jerusalem Zealots placed less stress on the social aspect.

## **The Text: Babylonian Talmud Gittin 56a**

שְׁדָרְיָה עִילֻיָּיהוּ לְאַסְפְּסִינּוּס קִיסָר אֲתָא, צָר עָלָה תְּלַת שָׁנִי. הָיוּ בָּהּ הִנְהוּ תְּלַתָּא עֲתִירִי: נִקְדִּימוֹן בֶּן גּוּרְיוֹן, וְבֶן כְּלָבָא שְׁבוּעַ, וְבֶן צִיצִית הַקָּסָת; נִקְדִּימוֹן בֶּן גּוּרְיוֹן – שְׁנִקְדָּה לֹו חֲמָה בְּעֵבֹרוֹ; בֶּן כְּלָבָא שְׁבוּעַ – שְׁכָל הַנִּכְנָס לְבֵיתוֹ כְּשֶׁהוּא רָעֵב כְּכֹלָב, יוֹצֵא כְּשֶׁהוּא שְׁבֹעַ; בֶּן צִיצִית הַקָּסָת –

שְׁהִיְתָה צִיצְתוֹ נִגְרָרֶת עַל גְּבֵי כְּסוֹתָי. אֵיכָּא דְאִמְרֵי: שְׁהִיְתָה כְּסוֹתוֹ מוֹשְׁלֶת בֵּין גְּדוּלֵי רוֹמֵי. חֲדָא אָמַר לְהוּ: אֲנָא זֵינָא לְהוּ בְּחִיטֵי וְשַׁעְרֵי, וְחֲדָא אָמַר לְהוּ: בְּדַצִּיבֵי, וְשִׁבְחוּ רַבְּנָן לְדַצִּיבֵי; דְּרַב חֲסֵדָא פֻּל אֶקְלִידֵי הָהּ מְסַר לְשִׁמְעִיָּה בַר מְדַצִּיבֵי, דְאָמַר רַב חֲסֵדָא: אֶקְלָבָא דְחִיטֵי בְּעֵי שִׁיתִין אֶקְלָבֵי דַצִּיבֵי. הָהּ לְהוּ לְמִיזֵן עֲשָׂרִים וְחֲדָא שְׂתָא. הוּוּ בְּהוּ הָהּ בְּרִיזְנֵי, אָמְרוּ לְהוּ רַבְּנָן: גִּיפּוּק וְנַעֲבִיד שְׁלָמָא בְּהַדְיָהּ, לָא שְׁבַקְיָנָהּ. אָמְרוּ לְהוּ: גִּיפּוּק וְנַעֲבִיד קַרְבָּא בְּהַדְיָהּ, אָמְרוּ לְהוּ רַבְּנָן: לָא מְסַתִּיעָא מִיְלָתָא. קָמוּ קַלְנָהּ לְהָנָהּ אֶמְבְּרֵי דְחִיטֵי וְשַׁעְרֵי, וְהָהּ כְּפָנָא.

The Roman authorities then sent Vespasian Caesar against the Jews. He came and laid siege to Jerusalem for three years. There were at that time in Jerusalem these three wealthy people: Nakdimon ben Guryon, ben Kalba Savua, and ben Tzitzit HaKesat. The Gemara explains their names: Nakdimon ben Guryon was called by that name because the sun shined [nakad] on his behalf, as it is related elsewhere (see *Ta'anit* 19b) that the sun once continued to shine in order to prevent him from suffering a substantial loss. Ben Kalba Savua was called this because anyone who entered his house when he was hungry as a dog [kelev] would leave satiated [save'a]. Ben Tzitzit HaKesat was referred to by that name because his ritual fringes [tzitzit] dragged along on blankets [keset], meaning that he would not walk in the street with his feet on the ground, but rather they would place blankets beneath him. There are those who say that his seat [kiseh] was found among the nobles of Rome.

One of them said to the leaders of the city: I will feed the residents with wheat and barley. And one of them said to leaders of the city: I will provide the residents with wine, salt, and oil. And one of them said to the leaders of the city: I will supply the residents with wood. And the Sages gave special praise to he who gave the wood, since this was an especially expensive gift. As Rav Hîsda would give all of the keys to his servant, except for the key to his shed for storing wood, which he deemed the most important of them all. As Rav Hîsda said: One storehouse of wheat requires sixty storehouses of wood for cooking and baking fuel. These three wealthy men had between them enough commodities to sustain the besieged for twenty-one years.

There were certain zealots among the people of Jerusalem. The Sages said to them: Let us go out and make peace with the Romans. But the zealots

did not allow them to do this. The zealots said to the Sages: Let us go out and engage in battle against the Romans. But the Sages said to them: You will not be successful. The zealots arose and burned down these storehouses of wheat and barley, and there was a general famine.



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

### **Comprehension Questions**

- ?** What do we learn from the fact that Vespasian besieged Jerusalem for three years?
- ?** What do we learn from the story about: Nakdimon ben Guryon, ben Kalba Savua, and ben Tzitzit HaKesat?
- ?** How are the Sages portrayed in this story?
- ?** What do the zealots achieve by burning the food supplies?

### **Analysis Questions**

- ?** It is clear that the zealots didn't agree with the Sages on how to address the challenges of the Roman siege (fighting versus surrendering). Nevertheless, the text does not condemn them for disagreeing with the Rabbis. What is it, then, that makes their behavior disgraceful?

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

- !** Watch out for the zealots in our families, our congregations, our communities, and our country!



Our story is teaching us that Zealots will not stop at anything to get their way. Zealots will not only burn supplies to achieve their goal, but they will also burn bridges, destroy relationships, families, institutions, communities, and even countries, if they don't get their way.

Beware of zealots! Get them out of your midst before they destroy everything that is dear to you and your loved ones. This seems to be the message our story wishes to convey.