

Rosh Hashanah 5776/2015

Rabbi Lester Bronstein, Bet Am Shalom, White Plains NY

“Cautionary Tale” (or “Can’t We All Just Get Along?”)

I.

I want to spend the next minutes studying a text with you, as I often do on the first morning of Rosh Hashanah. As usual, this text comes from the Babylonian Talmud. (It’s Tractate Gittin 55b to 56a if you’re scoring at home. That is the tractate that instructs us on how to be civil in conducting divorces.) This passage is not obscure by any means, and also not terribly long or difficult. Some of you may have heard me teach it several years ago on the night of Tisha b’Av, the holiday commemorating the destruction of the ancient Temple. That alone should give you a clue as to what it is about.

When I mentioned to several colleagues that this would be my sermonic starting point, they all said, “But of course. Perfect. You’re going to talk to the Jews about getting along with each other, and the tragic consequences of not doing so.” So there’s a further clue for you.

This text is known as the episode of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza. Warning: When you first hear it, you will erroneously think I am trying to draw a direct analogy from this story to our own times. I am not, and for one good reason: There is no complete analogy between anything in the Jewish historical past and our own

time. We are *sui generis*. Modern Israel is not ancient Judea; the United States of America is not ancient Rome; the religious streams of our own time are not the same as the sharply divided Jewish sects of the First Century of the Common Era; and the Jews of America and elsewhere outside of Israel today are not the Jewish Diaspora of the Greco-Roman world.

Nonetheless. Nonetheless, there are analogies of spirit. We can read this tale and recognize plenty of ourselves in it. So, by the way, could all peoples. “Kamtza and Bar Kamtza” has a universal message about the consequences of turning on one’s own; of pitting the powers-that-be against our own internal rivals to further our own agenda; of confusing our lofty ideals with our personal egos.

II.

Here is the story:

It begins with Rabbi Yochanan asking a question about a Biblical verse. [This is Rabbi Yochanan bar Nafkha, the Third Century Amora who is considered *the* teacher of all the great rabbis of the Land of Israel in that amorphous period when Jews had to figure out how to be Jewish after the Temple had been destroyed and Jewish sovereignty had been obliterated in the Land of Israel - obliterated by the Romans, but largely as a result of Jewish factions turning on one another over different views of the Jewish future and their relationship to the larger world.]

So, back to our text. Rabbi Yochanan asks: How can we illustrate the verse in Proverbs 28, “Happy is the one that is anxious always [or, fearful], but one who hardens his heart shall fall into misfortune”?

אֲשֶׁרִי אָדָם מִפְתִּיחַ תָּמִיד וּמִקְשָׁה לְבָבוֹ יִפּוֹל בְּרָעָה

Hint: Rabbi Yochanan wants to teach something intense about hardening one’s heart. But instead of parsing the verse, he launches into a story, preceded by the sweeping remark, “The destruction of Jerusalem came through a Mr. Kamtza and a Mr. Bar Kamtza.” Then he tells his story, set back in the time immediately preceding the Romans’ destruction of Jerusalem, the mid-First Century:

“It happened in this way. A certain man had a friend [named] Kamtza, and an enemy [named] Bar Kamtza. The man once made a party and said to his servant, ‘Go and bring [my friend] Kamtza.’ The servant went and brought Bar Kamtza.

“When the man who gave the party found [his enemy Bar Kamtza] there, he said, ‘See, you tell tales about me. What are you doing here? Get out.’ Said Bar Kamtza: ‘Since I am here, let me stay and I will pay you for whatever I eat and drink.’ Replied the host, ‘I will not.’ Said Bar Kamtza: ‘Then let me give you half the cost of the party.’ ‘No,’ said the other. ‘Then let me pay for the whole party.’ Still the host said no, and he took him by the arm and threw him out.

“Said Bar Kamtza, ‘Since the Rabbis were sitting there and did not stop him, this shows that they agreed with him. I will go and inform against the [Rabbis] to the [Roman] Government.’

“[Bar Kamtza] went and said to the Emperor, ‘The Jews are preparing to rebel against you.’ Said the Emperor [actually, it was probably the local representative of the Emperor]: ‘How can I tell [that they are plotting rebellion]?’ Bar Kamtza replied, ‘Send them a sacrificial offering and see whether they will offer it [on the altar].’

“So the Emperor sent Bar Kamtza back to the Rabbis with a fine calf. While on the way, Bar Kamtza made a blemish on the calf’s upper lip, or as some tell the story, it was on the white of its eye, in a place where we [Jews] count it as a disqualifying blemish but they do not.

The Rabbis were inclined to offer it in order not to offend the Roman Government [the Talmud employs the term “shl’om malchut”]. Said Rabbi Zechariah bar Abkulas to them: ‘Colleagues, people will say that blemished animals are being offered on the altar.’ So then the Rabbis proposed to kill Bar Kamtza so that he should not go and inform against them [any more], but [the same] Rabbi Zechariah bar Abkulas said to them, ‘Is one who makes a blemish on consecrated animals to be put to death?’

“Rabbi Yochanan thereupon remarked: ‘Because of the “humility” [or, temerity] of Rabbi Zechariah bar Abkulas our House has been destroyed, our Temple burnt and we ourselves exiled from our land.’”

III.

The story trails on a bit from here, but you’ve heard the main narrative. What happens here? And more important, what is the great Rabbi Yochanan teaching us (and his own generation as well) by telling us this cautionary tale?

First, he is showing us that his fellow Jews are far from the Torah’s ideal of extending hospitality, forgiveness, and generosity of spirit to one another. They cultivate so-called “enemies” among their own people, and their society is rotting away as a direct result.

Second, by using almost identical names for the friend and the enemy, Rabbi Yochanan is saying that there is not a whit of difference between the people we consider our allies and those we think are our enemies. In this case, they all have a common enemy, which is Rome. By not recognizing that they have more in common than not, they dig a dangerous hole for themselves.

Third, Bar Kamtza takes his personal affront, well, too personally. He shows that we can get so caught up in our own feelings – our personal ‘hurt’ - that we lose the important distinction between what’s good for ‘me’ and what’s good for ‘us.’ At its extreme, we bring our people to the brink of oblivion in order to satisfy our need for revenge, or power, or control, or comeuppance, or just plain ol’ self-satisfaction.

Fourth, we are foolish enough to use the great superpower as a wedge against our “enemies” among our own people. In order to gain or maintain control over the agenda of the Jewish community, Bar Kamtza is willing to turn in his fellow Jews, or set them up for embarrassment or disadvantage or political ruin by manipulating his relationship with the authorities of the superpower.

Bar Kamtza believes that the Rabbis should have at least made a feeble attempt to exert control over the bad Jewish behavior of his hated host. He probably has his own issues with the Rabbis’ interpretations of various tenets of the Torah or tradition or law. Maybe they’re too rigid and old-fashioned for his taste. Maybe they’re too progressive and modern for his sensibilities. Maybe some of both. So he lies to the Romans that these Rabbis are plotting a revolt. He knows that fear of revolt is the one weak spot in the Romans’ political armor. And he knows that the Rabbis’ hegemony is tenuous enough to be vulnerable to revolt from within the

Jewish fold. Bar Kamtza exploits both weaknesses: Roman and Jewish.

Why? Why indeed!

IV.

Why do Jewish leaders in our own time exploit those same weaknesses? Why do we create great political theater to divide the American Jewish community into “Kamtzas” and “Bar Kamtzas”? Jewish Us versus Jewish Them? Why do we try to confuse our good people into believing that no matter what they think and do and say, they are somehow being disloyal either to their Jewish family or to their nation of allegiance? Either to the wellbeing of Israel, or to the security and international standing of the United States? Either to the survivalist values of Jewish history, or the universal tenets of progressive Judaism? Or both at the same time!

Damned if they do and damned if they don't, like the panicked Rabbis in the story who can't decide between appeasing the Romans by offering their tainted sacrifice, or killing their own Jewish brother to shut him up and keep the Romans at bay? Two terrible, desperate choices, neither of them of their own creation. Shakespeare could not have concocted a better moral quagmire. Shakespeare, that is, and the Jews of our own day.

V.

We have spent many months, we Jews, and many tens of millions of dollars, taking sides First-Century-style on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action Regarding the Islamic Republic of Iran's Nuclear Program. So much is at stake. Silly for me to enumerate the issues, to tell you what's at stake. You know the science, the geopolitics, the history, the principles and values. You know the score. Good people have come down on both sides of this question. Good Israelophiles. Good self-*loving* Jews. I have my take, and you have yours.

But how have we Jews performed on managing our *inner* conflict? Our ideals versus our egos? How have we done at portraying each other to the general public? To the superpower that has gone to the mats for us time and time again [even when we keep insulting that superpower]? To the Kamtzas on “our side” of the Jewish organizational spectrum, versus our Bar Kamtza opponents on the other side? The naïve side? The careless side? The irresponsible side? The disloyal side? The weak or pigheaded or fanatical side?

How have we done? In a word, terribly. *Disgracefully*.

Rabbi Yochanan, where are you when we need you? Where is your voice of sanity? Where is your clarion call for the Jewish people to behave themselves with each other, and to stop playing games with “the authorities?”

Look, as much as we each express strong opinions about big issues, and as much as we identify very publicly with partisan organizations and positions, it should simply be against our nature not to see the value – the holiness – in the other side’s argument. We don’t have to agree with it, but we have to see it, and to beg our snarky fellow travelers to see it, too, and to be nice about it. When we sit on boards and committees where everyone seems to go right to the *ad hominem* argument, the “Bar Kamtza argument,” we have to refuse to follow along; we should refuse to discount the value of the other side’s position, even if the other side has demonized our side. We don’t have to budge, but we have to show love to our siblings. *V’ahavta l’reyacha kamocho* [“love your neighbor as yourself”].

Many of our fellow Jews will look out at the rancorous backstabbing that goes on in the Jewish world and shout, Hey, can’t we all just get along? Can’t we put away our differences and simply agree? Can’t we all pray the same versions of the prayers, and follow the same version of the tradition, and take the same views on Israeli policy, and vote for the same people to occupy the White House and the halls of Congress?

Rabbi Yochanan would tell us that that is a fool's approach. We are different in temperament from one another. We are more *and* less observant, more *and* less conservative, more *and* less progressive, more *and* less trusting of our historic friends and our traditional enemies. We are naturally different from one another, we Jews. We should be using that glorious difference to our advantage. It is our strength and our beauty. It is what gives each individual Jew the chance to range far afield in personality and still stay within our fold.

What we do *not* need to do is try to homogenize ourselves. That is not the sort of unity that will do us any good. Nor do we need to passively accept one another's differences without passionately arguing our own point of view. We are a better people when we tell each other why we believe we are right and they are wrong.

The question is, how shall we say it? How shall we argue the life-and-death rectitude of our own beliefs without destroying the dignity, the *kavod*, the *tzelem elohim*, of our brothers and sisters who we believe to be wrong?

VI.

Our Rabbi Yochanan, in telling his cautionary tale to his fellow survivors, has in mind the denouement of that tale. Toward the bottom of that same page of the Talmud, his own namesake, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, escapes Jerusalem in a

coffin. He escapes *not* to avoid the Romans, but to evade the *Jewish* zealots (led by his own nephew) who have vowed to let no Jew live who refuses to agree to fight to the death against the Roman occupiers.

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai goes *to* the Romans. He concedes to them the destruction of the Temple in exchange for the privilege of creating the beachside academy at Yavneh. That same Yavneh is [some would say] solely responsible for preserving what became Rabbinic Judaism and saving the Jewish people from oblivion. For this move, a large swath of the Jewish people considered Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai our greatest hero, and another swath thought of him as the most traitorous cop-out in our history. Had he followed his nephew, Jews and Judaism would have been wiped out in the quelling of the rebellion. But some Jews preferred that to any sort of accommodation to *them*.

Instead, the ingenious Judaism of Rabbi Yochanan the Early and Rabbi Yochanan the Late gave us, their heirs, a powerful tool: the Talmudic yin and yang - *Shakla v'tarya*, as it is known in the Aramaic of those brave Rabbis - the give and take of vigorous, respectful disagreement.

VII.

In the year to come, whether Congress ratifies the Iran treaty or tries to send it back for another round; whether AIPAC or J-Street convinces more members of

Congress to take their side; whether the Israeli right hangs on to both power and territory or yields to the center-left and a *somewhat* different approach; whether the Chief Rabbinate tightens its grip on Israel's religious life, or whether opposition forces make strides that allow us non-Orthodox more of a place at the table, and a place at the Kotel; whether the American Jewish community as a whole will renew its historic commitment to Jews in distress around the world, and to refugees and the impoverished of all nations, or whether it will turn increasingly inward and focus on itself; or whether it will learn to balance both --

In the year to come, may our disagreements *continue*; may our disputes *flourish*; may our differences stand out ever more clearly! And may we learn to love ourselves as the descendants of the Rabbi Yochanan, as the people of *shakla v'tarya*, of give and take - and give.

Rabbi Yochanan's anonymous predecessors taught in the Mishnah:

כָּל מַחְלוֹקַת שֶׁהִיא לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, סוֹפָהּ לְהִתְקַיֵּם.

Any argument argued for the sake of heaven in the end will be sustained

וְשֵׁי אֵינָהּ לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, אֵין סוֹפָהּ לְהִתְקַיֵּם.

Any argument *not* argued for the sake of heaven will in the end *not* be sustained.

אִיזוֹ הִיא מַחְלוֹקַת שֵׁי אֵינָהּ לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם,

What is an argument not for the sake of heaven? The argument of Korach and his followers.

איזו היא מחלוקת שהיא לשם שמים

What is an argument *for* the sake of heaven? The argument between the followers of Hillel and Shammai.

Hillel and Shammai are the “founding fathers” of the Judaism we know today. Hillel and Shammai never agree. Which side prevails? Often, but not always, Hillel. Which side *wins*? They both win, so long as both of them give and receive the *kavod* they are due.

If we go the way of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza we could easily cause yet another crashing down of the Jewish people. But Hillel and Shammai and ben Zakkai and Rabbi Yochanan show us the way to make it from here at least to next Rosh Hashanah in one piece. Divided in a lovers’ quarrel. *Ani l’dodi v’dodi li*: I stand over against my beloved, as does my beloved over against me. Together, we are *ezer k’negdo*, as the original human couple are described together. One over against the other, “helping” one another. Calling to one another as we do at the onset of every Shabbat, the day we idealize wholeness and peace, “*Lecha dodi, come my friend, my helper, my beloved.*”

We are a holy and ancient people. Let us agree *never* to agree, but *to* agree to be holy and decent and eternal together. Different together.

L'chu v'nelcha – Let us go together, *b'or Ado-nai*, in the light of the One who transcends all conflict. *L'chu v'nelcha* - Come, let us go into that new year, *different together*.