

...And Who Is To Blame

What we can learn from the Talmudic tale of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza.

BY ARNOLD S. GLUCK

Who is to blame? We all want to know. Name the misfortune and the temptation to identify a guilty party is almost irresistible. The story before us seems to satisfy this desire straight away. Who is responsible for the destruction of Jerusalem? Kamtza and Bar Kamtza!

But on an historical level, this claim is preposterous. The Romans destroyed the Temple and sacked Jerusalem. Unquestionably, the Romans were at fault. So why does the Talmud blame Kamtza and Bar Kamtza?

Clearly, the rabbis understood the downside of playing the blame game. If the Romans bear sole responsibility, the Jewish people become nothing more than victims. The Romans were strong, we were weak, and they had their way with us. Now what? Where does that leave us? What can we do? Where do we go from there? We have been rendered passive.

Elsewhere the Talmud states, "When you see that troubles have come upon you, examine your deeds" (Berachot 5a). This may sound like blaming the victim, but sometimes we will discover that we are indeed responsible for our woes, in whole or in part. And if we are not at fault, the exercise of examining our deeds empowers us to learn and to grow from painful experiences. As the saying goes, "If life hands you lemons, make sweet lemonade."

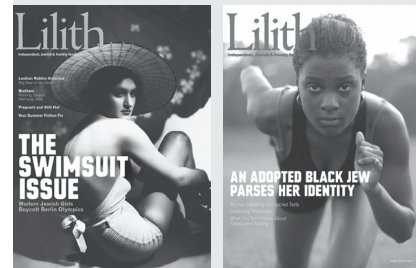
Does it then follow that both Kamtza and Bar Kamtza were responsible? No. The story says nothing about Kamtza except that he was the friend of "a certain man" who tried to invite him to a party. Kamtza did nothing wrong. Bar Kamtza also seems innocent at first. He accepts an invitation from his enemy thinking it is an olive branch, an opportunity to make peace. When he arrives the host sees him and explodes with rage, demanding that Bar Kamtza leave and humiliating him in the presence of great rabbis who remain silent. Bar Kamtza then becomes so enraged that he betrays his own people to the Romans.

Who is at fault? Everyone involved! (Kamtza, who never appears in the story, is the sole exception.) The "certain man" who arranged the party, Bar Kamtza, the attending rabbis who said nothing—all of them contributed to the debacle, and any one of them could have stopped it. Who is at fault? The better question may be, "What is at fault?" And the answer would be toxic anger and indifference.

The Talmud speaks purposely of "a certain man" because he could be any person in any time or place. This universal tale reminds us of the destructive power of anger and insensitivity, and how we can learn and grow even from our worst defeats. □

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