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Kamtza, Bar Kamtza & the silent table

Gittin 55b:16–56a:5 | Beta teaching adaptation

THE CORE QUESTION

What does it cost when a community stays silent, or stays so careful that it cannot act?

THE ARGUMENT IN FOUR MOVES

1. Rabbi Yochanan opens with Proverbs 28:14 on fear and a hardened heart. A host means to invite his friend Kamtza; his attendant brings his enemy, Bar Kamtza.

2. Bar Kamtza offers to pay for his meal, half the feast, then all of it. The host refuses and expels him. Bar Kamtza takes the Sages' failure to protest as approval.

3. He accuses the Jews of rebellion. Caesar sends a test offering with him; Bar Kamtza blemishes it in a way that disqualifies it for the Temple altar but not for theirs.

4. The Sages consider offering it for peace, then killing the informer. Rabbi Zekharya objects to both: "people will say." Rabbi Yochanan blames his humility for destruction and exile.

WHERE THIS GOES NEXT

Continue with Gittin 56a:6–56b: the Roman campaign, burned food stores, and Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai's escape. Compare Eichah Rabbah 4:3, which explicitly places Zekharya at the feast and gives the closing verdict in Rabbi Yosei's name.

DISCUSS

1. Bar Kamtza reads silence as approval. Is his inference justified? What does the text leave unsaid?

2. When is concern about precedent wisdom, and when does it prevent a necessary decision?

3. The opening praises fear; the ending condemns humility. Who fears too little, or fears the wrong thing?

TEACHING NOTE

Rashi on Gittin 56a:5 reads humility as forbearance toward Bar Kamtza. The proposed killing is not carried out or endorsed here. Keep the host's cruelty, the informer's retaliation and the leaders' choices in view. Do not reduce the destruction to a tidy moral, or merge the Bavli with its midrashic parallel.

Source: https://www.sefaria.org/Gittin.55b.16-56a.5

Classroom thread: https://postthetalmud.com/kamtza/?mode=study&classroom=1

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