

**Play Nice and Be Better:
The World We Can Control
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5785
October 2, 2024**

Shanah Tovah. What a year it has been, for many of us – and for the Jewish people! A crucible, a pivot point, the possible end of one era and dawn of another. It may be a long time before we truly understand what this past year will come to mean. And now... Now events are unfolding almost faster than we can absorb them. We do not know what the coming weeks, the coming days, perhaps even the coming hours will bring.

Whatever your experiences have been, I hope we can all agree with the hope, the wish, the fervent prayer... that this next year should be, somehow, in some way, better than the one that was!

Napoleon, we are told, was used to a certain amount of fanfare. On conquering a town, he gathered his new subjects together and expected to be greeted by a three-cannon salute. Usually, instructions went out ahead of him, and all the arrangements were in place by the time he arrived.

But in one town, he was greeted with the usual forced cheers – but no salute. Silence, on the mortar front.

Enraged, he hauled the town's mayor before him and demanded an explanation. Trembling, the mayor began in the following way: "Oh great

emperor. There are five reasons why we did not give you the canon salute you requested. The first of these is that... we do not have a canon..."

Napoleon held up his hand and interrupted the terrified mayor. "Okay," he said. "You can skip the other four!"

Nevertheless, we look for reasons for what happens in our lives. And the explanations we give, how we frame our story, what we come up with says as much about us as it does about the world.

In its day, in its way, the entire Talmud is an attempt to make sense of a shattered life, and a broken world. From Tractate Gittin the following story attempts to explain how God's house, the center of our spiritual life, the sacred Temple... was lost. As a way of coping, the early rabbis come up with a troubling tale of mistaken identity, and internal dissent:

Because of a Kamza and a Bar Kamza Jerusalem was destroyed. A certain man had a friend whose name was Kamza and an enemy whose name was Bar Kamza. This man hosts a party, and as it begins, he says to his servant, "Go, bring Kamza to my party!" The servant goes out but brings back Bar Kamza instead. [He brought back the host's enemy, rather than his friend.] When the host encounters Bar Kamza he says: "You! What are you doing here? You go around gossiping and telling tales about me! Get out!"

But this must have been a really important social gathering. Because Bar Kamza replies: "Look, I'm, already here. Let me stay! I'll pay you back for whatever I eat and drink."

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But the host refuses. Bar Kamza counters: “Let me give you half the cost of the party!” “No,” the host replies. Finally, Bar Kamza says: “Look, I’ll pay for the whole thing! Just let me stay!” Even this doesn’t move the host. He takes Bar Kamza by the hand... and throws him out.

[And then something fateful happens. Bar Kamza notices another group at the party – the “rabbis.” [When we refer to “the rabbis” here it means those sages who emerged around 2000 years ago, who wrote the Talmud and gave us the basic form of Judaism that we have today.](#) And, as a group, these rabbis stand back and say nothing.] Bar Kamza says to himself: Since the Rabbis were sitting there and did not stop him, they must have agreed with how I was treated.

[If that’s what they’re like] I’ll go and inform against them to the Romans. [He is so hurt and angry that he turns into a traitor.] Bar Kamza goes to the Emperor and says: “The Jews are rebelling against you!”

[Now, look, this is obviously improbable... that an aggrieved agitator from a far-off minor province would get an audience with the ruler of the known world! But the tale is trying to teach something, so don’t let facts get in the way too much!]

The skeptical Emperor responds: “How can I tell?” [Again, this is just weird. Most of the time when someone rebels against you, you know it. Someone sends a memo. A text. There is even a Declaration.]

Bar Kamza responds “Send them a gift to be offered on the altar of their Temple and see whether they accept it!”

So, the Emperor sends Bar Kamza to the rabbis in the Temple with a fine calf. But on the way, Bar Kamza makes a blemish on the animal... a wound of a sort that Jews would say renders the animal ritually unfit, but Romans, with a different standard, would not.

The Rabbis are inclined to offer the animal anyway, in order not to provoke and anger Rome. But Rabbi Zechariah ben Abkulas is a stickler for the rules. And he says: “if we do this, people will say that it is acceptable to offer a blemished animal on the altar!” So, the rabbis refuse [the gift, knowing... knowing that word will get back to the emperor, knowing he will interpret this as an insult, see it as a rebellion, and use it as an excuse to attack.]

[The story gets worse, as now the rabbis face a different dilemma. It is a question of survival. How do you treat a traitor, whose actions may cost many lives?] The rabbis then propose to kill Bar Kamza, to stop him from informing against them.

But that same old stickler, Rabbi Zechariah ben Abkulas says: “is that the right punishment for making a blemish on an animal?” [On its own terms spoiling a sacrifice does not rise to a level of a capital crime.] So they let him go, even knowing what might come next.

Rabbi Yochanan then says: by being so strict about the rules, by being technically correct at the expense of common sense, because of the rigidity of Zechariah ben Abkulas our House is destroyed, our Temple burned, and we are exiled from our land.

(Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Gittin, 55b-56a)

As I said, this is a strange story. And it is about many things. Some of it sounds silly in our setting now, like distinctions between types of bruises on a cow. Other parts raise deep issues which echo in our lives and our world to this very day: can it ever be moral to hurt someone for an act they have yet to commit? Or the cable switch question, the Trolley Problem: is it permissible to actively harm one person in order to theoretically save many more.

The story seems to warn against getting distracted by details. Dummy! See the forest through the trees. There’s a bigger picture. Being *technically correct* isn’t always the right choice! There should be a Torah beyond the Torah. Rituals aren’t there just for their own sake! Rules are tools, to take us to another place.

And. Let's go back to the beginning. Because, well, no one comes across very well here. No one was... very nice. Not the host, not the rabbis, and not the traitor. Maybe this is trying to say that if we act with more kindness, more compassion, more grace, we might not such a mess. **Play nice! Be better!**

The rabbinic move here is amazing. It's actually astonishing! We lost a war. The Temple is destroyed. Our people go into exile, not to come home, really, for almost two thousand years. Not until 1948. This was done *to us*. By others. History happens.

But the rabbis choose to look... inside! For answers, they turn towards our own actions!

[There is another irony here, too. This tale is clearly a rebuke of the rabbis. And it was preserved as a story... by those rabbis. It is, then, a self-critique.]

In the aftermath of October 7, one Israeli teacher at a yeshiva in the West Bank caused a bit of a stir. He, too, asked larger questions. He, too, decided it is a new era. Writing in the left-wing newspaper *Ha'Aretz* rather than the Orthodox press, in December of 2023, Rabbi Elchanan Nir declares:

9. Elhanan Nir, "Now We Need a New Torah," *Ha'aretz*, Dec. 29, 2023

Now like air to breathe	עֲכָשׁוּ כְּמוֹ אוֹר לְנִשְׁימָה
We need a new Torah.	אֲנַחְנוּ צְרִיכִים תּוֹרָה חֲדָשָׁה.
Now in this stifled breath and the hacked neck	עֲכָשׁוּ בְּתוֹף הָאוֹר שֶׁנִּכְמַר וְהַצְנוּאָר
We need a new Mishnah, a new Gemara, a new	שֶׁנִּמְחַק
Kabbalah, new mystical ascents	אֲנַחְנוּ צְרִיכִים מִשְׁנָה חֲדָשָׁה וְגִמְרָא
And in all the brokenness and salt and ruin, now	חֲדָשָׁה
A new Hasidism and a new Zionism	וְקַבָּלָה חֲדָשָׁה וְעֲלִיּוֹת נְשִׁמָּה חֲדָשׁוֹת
a new Rav Kook and a new Brenner,	וּבְתוֹף כָּל הַשְּׁבָר וְהַמְלַח וְהַחֲרָבָה,
a new Leah Goldberg, a new Yehave Daat	עֲכָשׁוּ
And new art and new poetry	חֲסִידוּת חֲדָשָׁה וְצִיּוֹנוּת חֲדָשָׁה
And new literature and new cinema	וְהַרְבֵּ קוּק חֲדָשׁ וּבְרֶנֶר חֲדָשׁ
And new-ancient words	וְלֵאמָּה גוֹלְדֵּבֶרְגַּח חֲדָשָׁה וַיְחַוָּה דַּעַת
And new-ancient souls from the treasure of	חֲדָשׁ
souls.	וְאִמְנוּת חֲדָשָׁה וְשִׁירָה חֲדָשָׁה
And new love out of the terrible weeping.	וְסִפְרוֹת חֲדָשָׁה וְקוֹלְנוּעַ חֲדָשׁ
For we have all been flooded by the rivers of	וּמִלִּים חֲדָשִׁים וְעֵתִיקִין
Re'im and Be'eri	וַיִּשְׁמוֹת חֲדָשׁוֹת עֵתִיקוֹת מִהַאֲוָצֵר,
And we have in us no mountain and there are no	וְאֶהְבֶּה חֲדָשָׁה מִתוֹף הַבְּכִיָּה הַנוֹרָאָה.
more Tablets	כִּי נִשְׁטַפְנוּ בְּלֵנוּ בְּנֵהֲרוֹת רַעִים וּבְאַרְיֵי
And we have no Moses and we have no strength	וְאִין בְּנוּ הָר וְאִין עוֹד לוֹחֹת
and into our hands everything now has been	וְאִין לָנוּ מֹשֶׁה וְאִין בְּנוּ כּוֹחוֹת
given.	וּבְיַדֵּינוּ עֲכָשׁוּ הַכֹּל
	גַּת.

A new Torah, and a new Mishnah. New art and new poetry. And new ancient words.

In the very traditional world he inhabits, Rabbi Nir had to, well, do some damage control? He had to reassure his students and his community that he didn't mean this literally. That this is about the power of reframing.

But the very fact that we come together this night, the fact that we are still here, that, against all odds there are still Jews in the world is breathtaking testimony to resilience and a unique destiny. This is *not* the first time we needed a new Torah. This is not the first time we needed to tell a new tale, to make sense of and meet new moments in our lives.

For us, continuity comes only with radical reinvention in the face of cataclysm and catastrophe. Disruption and response, destruction and creativity, this is the delicate dance at the heart of Jewish history.

Behold, the Babylonians, who knock down our first Temple and take us away. We are strangers in a strange land. And there, where they cart us off, we craft the Torah. Behold, the ancient Greeks, who say that everyone is the same, and we stand out, stand up, defend what makes us different and kindle a light to preserve the flame of faith. Behold Romans, who quench the fire of our altar but inspire us to offer up words instead, who force us from our land but lead us to invent the synagogue. Empires and enemies, they are no more, and, stubbornly, we remain. Behold the Spanish, the Russians, the Poles, the Germans... crisis and displacement and response and reinvention and rebirth.

This season, and this tradition call us to remember that there is a world we can control. **What happens to us is out of our hands. What happens in us is not.**

It is too soon to say what the lasting impact of this past year will be. The second chapter of this war may have begun two weeks ago; the third chapter perhaps last night. But the first chapter is not even yet over, and will not be until the hostages come home.

But from our history, we know that just as we shape our stories, our stories shape us. We are in pain. But we have power. **How we tell our tale is part of who we are yet to be.**

And there are lessons to learn. **Don't get distracted. Keep your eyes on the prize. There is a big picture. There is a larger perspective.**

And: we should live in a certain way. We should expect more of ourselves.. **Play nice. Be better. Who we are is up to us.**

Shanah Tovah.