

Piety or Privilege? A Talmudic View of the Fall of the Second Commonwealth

Rabbi Yohanan said: "What is an application of the verse 'Happy is the man who is constantly fearful, but he that hardens his heart shall fall into trouble' (PROVERBS 28:14)?"

That Jerusalem was destroyed on account of Kamza and Bar Kamza, Tur Malkah was destroyed on account of a rooster and a hen, and Beitar was destroyed on account of an axle of a carriage (GITTIN 55B).

THE TALMUD QUOTES Rabbi Yohanan's¹ statement attributing the root causes of three major catastrophes that took place during the second commonwealth to trivial events and goes on to recount the details of each story. Upon reflection on these narratives, it is clear that in Rabbi Yohanan's view these events are bound by more than just their trivial causes. Rabbi Yohanan is putting forward what he believes to be the major religious problem that led to the destructions of major Jewish centers of that era. As this problem is not explicitly stated, it is left to the reader to find the common thread that binds these three stories together. In doing so one is made aware of the negative trait to which Rabbi Yohanan was so strongly opposed so much that he declared it as the cause of these catastrophes. Which begs the question: What can be so bad that it warranted such destruction?² Let us begin with the first story that is referenced, that of Kamza and Bar Kamza.

Kamza's Party

The first event mentioned is the destruction of Jerusalem that was caused by "Kamza and Bar Kamza." The Talmud (Gittin 55b-56a) elaborates:

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Jerusalem was destroyed on account of Kamza and Bar Kamza:

There was a certain man who had a friend named Kamza and a rival named Bar Kamza. When that man made party he said to his servant "Go and bring Kamza." The servant went and brought Bar Kamza.

When that man found Bar Kamza sitting there he said, "Since there is one man is a rival of another man, why did he come here? Get out".

Bar Kamza answered, "Since I am already here, let me stay and I will pay you for what I eat and drink".

The man responded, "No."

Bar Kamza said, "Let me pay for half of your party."

The man responded, "No."

Bar Kamza said, "Let me pay for your entire party."

The man responded "No," grabbed Bar Kamza, stood him up, and threw him out.

Bar Kamza said, "Since the Rabbis sat there and did not rebuke him, they must have approved. I will spread a libel against them to the government."

The above narrative, which consists of the first half of the Kamza and Bar Kamza story, provides examples of a number of morally improper behaviors. A number of these behaviors are singled out elsewhere in the Talmud as being causes of the destruction of Jerusalem or the Second Temple.

Let us begin with the actions of the unnamed man who threw the party. We are not given any information as to who will be attending this party, besides the orders given to the servant to invite a man named Kamza.³ The servant errs by bringing a man named Bar Kamza, who was his host's rival, in place of the friend Kamza. The similarity between the names of the host's friend and enemy is striking.⁴ On a narrative level the similar names perform a utilitarian function for the story's plot as they supply the cause for the servant's confusion regarding who should receive the invitation. On a literary level, the similarity in name point to the absurdity of the story. "Jerusalem was destroyed on account of Kamza and Bar Kamza" alludes to the idea that the difference between Jerusalem being destroyed and its remaining the Jewish capital was only a matter of two measly letters.^{vi} If the story, as suggested by Maharsha, is dovetailed with another statement of Rabbi Yohanan that the "Second Temple was destroyed . . . because causeless hatred was commonplace" (Yoma 9b), then the lack of adequate cause of hatred in this case is emphasized by pointing to the resemblance of the two men's names. Had our host overlooked such a small difference, then

Jerusalem would have been spared. Thus the first connection between the destruction of Jerusalem and the behavior at the party is made, that of “causeless hatred.”

Another improper behavior that is exhibited by the host is alluded to by his curious lack of a name, being referred to solely as “A certain man.” Not only is his name not given by the narrative, but he himself does not state his own name, as he said when he went to expel Bar Kamza from the party, “Since there is one man who is a rival of another man, why did he come here?” The host’s motivation for talking in such a roundabout way is not made explicit, but there are two possibilities as to his impetus. Either he did not wish to utter Bar Kamza’s name out of disgust for his rival, or he did not want to mention his own name in connection with what he was saying as a way of distancing himself from the despicable act that he was undertaking. Either way, his avoidance of using names is directly connected with his sense of self worth, so it is fitting that he was recorded for posterity as a “nobody.” This is similar to the book of Ruth, where we also find an anonymous character, that of Ploni Almoni, or Such A One Who Is Not Mentioned.⁶ Ploni was offered the option of marrying the indigent widow Ruth, yet chose not to since he was concerned that his “legacy would be harmed.”⁷ In the end, his decision not to act justly out of concern for his legacy caused his name to be left out of the book that was written to celebrate the very woman who he slighted, and thus he lost out on leaving an eternal legacy. In the words of Hillel the Elder “One who seeks fame loses his fame” (Avot 1:13). The lesson is clear; One who focuses on himself without regard to others, deserves to be forgotten entirely.

Another behavior that the Talmud explicitly mentions here is the severity of embarrassing one’s fellow man by stating “Rabbi Elazar said, ‘Come and see how serious it is to embarrass another man, for God supported Bar Kamza and destroyed His House and burnt His Temple’” (Gittin 57a).

Other problematic behaviors in the story are attributed elsewhere. It is only a number of lines into the narrative that the reader is made aware that the rabbis were at the party as well, from Bar Kamza’s comment that “Since the rabbis were sitting there and did not stop him, this shows that they agreed with him.” Up until now, the narrative ignored these distinguished guests, not even bothering to mention them. Based on what was established above, the reason is clear. The rabbis at the party did not deserve to be called rabbis, or to merit any name for that matter, for they tacitly took part in the humiliation of Bar Kamza. Thus the Talmud does not originally refer to them at all for, in the Talmud’s view, they were not acting in accordance

with that accolade.⁹ They are only called rabbis in the voice of the humiliated Bar Kamza, and there somewhat pejoratively.¹⁰ In the Talmudic tradition Kamza's extrapolation that "since the Rabbis sat there and did not rebuke him, they must have approved" is completely justified for

Anyone who has the ability to rebuke his household and does not is held responsible for the sins of his household. Anyone who has the ability to rebuke his fellow citizens and does not is held responsible for the sins of his fellow citizens. Anyone who has the ability to rebuke the entire world and does not is held responsible for the sins of the entire world" (Shabbat 54b).

The passive bystander to evil is held accountable as if he had been the perpetrator.¹¹

Though these behaviors demonstrate some of the major moral problems of the generation of the destruction of Jerusalem, it is unlikely that Rabbi Yohanan in the introduction to this narrative was referring to any one of them. For though these behaviors play important roles in this first narrative they are absent from the tales of Tur Malkah and Beitar, two events that Rabbi Yohanan connects to the tale of Kamza and Bar Kamza. To find another reason that may be applicable, we must continue with the Talmud's narrative.

Caesar's Sacrifice

Bar Kamza went to the Caesar and said, "The Jews are rebelling against you."

The Caesar asked, "How can I tell?"

Bar Kamza answered, "Send them a sacrifice and see if they bring it." So the Caesar sent him with a fine calf.

On the way, Bar Kamza wounded the calf on its upper lip or, as some say, on the white of its eye, in a place that for Jews it is considered a wound but for non-Jews it is not. The Rabbis had decided to sacrifice it in order to maintain peaceful relations with the Government, when Rabbi Zekharia ben Avkulas said to them, "People will now say that wounded animals are sacrificed on the altar."

The rabbis then decided to kill Bar Kamza so that he should not go and inform against them, when Rabbi Zekharia ben Avkulas said to them, "Do we sentence someone to death for merely wounding a consecrated animal?"

Rabbi Yohanan said, "Through the humility of Rabbi Zekharia ben

Avkulas our House has been destroyed, our Temple burnt, and we ourselves exiled from our land.” (Gittin 56a)

Bar Kamza approaches the Caesar¹² with a libel of a Jewish rebellion, with a plan to back up his claim. The Caesar is to send an animal to the Temple and if the Jews refuse to sacrifice it, that will serve as proof of their perfidy. The Caesar agrees with the plan, and gives a calf¹³ to Kamza to deliver to the Temple. On the trip to the Temple, Bar Kamza injures the animal either on its upper lip or in the white of the eye,¹⁴ thereby making it ritually unfit for sacrifice. That the wound was in a place that “for Jews it is considered a wound but for non-Jews it is not” can either be referring to the different standards that Jewish Law applies to sacrifices offered by Jews in the Temple to those offered by non-Jews on private altars (as traditional commentators have it),¹⁵ or to contemporary Roman sacrificial norms. Either way, in the Caesar’s view the Jews would not have cause to reject his sacrifice. The consensus among the rabbis was to sacrifice the calf due to the obvious danger involved. However there was one dissenting opinion, that of Rabbi Zekharia ben Avkulas.¹⁶ Rabbi Zekharia opposed the sacrifice, irrespective of the risks involved, since it technically violated the Law and “People will say that blemished animals are offered on the altar”. Now that the option of sacrificing the calf was rejected, the rabbis thought of another way to avoid the wrath of the Caesar. They would kill Bar Kamza, thus eliminating the only witness to their rejection of the calf and thereby neutralize the threat. Once again, there was a lone dissenter. “Rabbi Zekharia ben Avkulas said to them, ‘Is one who makes a blemish on consecrated animals to be put to death?’” Regardless of the threat that Bar Kamza presented to the Jewish people, taking his life would be a technical violation of the law, and therefore must not be done.¹⁷ The rabbis again heeded his words, and the sacrifice was not brought. The Talmud then brings another statement by Rabbi Yohanan, that “Through the humility (ענותו) of Rabbi Zekharia ben Avkulas our House has been destroyed, our Temple burnt and we ourselves exiled from our land.”

It is quite difficult to understand Rabbi Yohanan’s statement. The first difficulty is the severity with which Rabbi Zekharia is attacked. Even if he did err in his halakhic reasoning, is this adequate grounds to blame him for the one of the greatest catastrophes in Jewish history? The second problem is simply understanding the meaning of Rabbi Yohanan’s words. He faults Rabbi Zekharia’s “humility” as the root cause of the problem. However in the Talmudic corpus humility is always seen as a positive virtue.¹⁸ One approach to the latter problem is to interpret the word

“ענוותנותו” in ways other than its traditional understanding as humility, such as Rashi who interprets “ענוותנותו” as “סבלנותו” meaning patience or long-sufferingness, referring to his holding back from killing the despicable Bar Kamza. Others follow this path of reinterpretation with Soncino¹⁹ translating “ענוותנותו” as “scrupulousness” and Artscroll opting for “tolerance.” Still, understood in its usual sense the phrase remains problematic.²⁰ Another possibility is that the “humility of Rabbi Zekharya” was not exhibited now, but rather earlier in the story. Some commentators²¹ reference a parallel account of the party which is brought in Midrash Eikha²² that tells that at the party “Rabbi Zekharia ben Avkulas was present and could have prevented the host from treating Bar Kamza in this manner, but he did not intervene”. Thus, Rabbi Zekharia’s “humility” of not speaking up to the host and ordering him to do the proper thing started the chain of events that led to the Temple’s destruction.²³

Whichever interpretation one chooses,²⁴ this case and the other cases in our introductory statement that included the destructions of Tur Malkah and Beitar seem to be lacking a common theme. By looking at the narratives of these other events, perhaps we can find what is at the heart of this first one.

A Rooster and a Hen

Tur Malka was destroyed on account of a rooster and a hen:
For it was their custom that when a groom and bride went out a rooster and a hen was brought in front of them as if to say “May you be fruitful and multiply like fowls.”

One day a Roman military unit was passing by and took the animals from the wedding party. The Jews then attacked and beat the soldiers.

The soldiers said to the Caesar, “The Jews are rebelling!” so the Caesar marched to fight them (Gittin 57a).

This second tale of destruction also begins with an emphasis of the triviality its cause. It is unclear exactly when, or even where, this destruction took place.²⁵ Its cause, however, is attributed to “a rooster and a hen,” or more accurately, the reaction that people had to the theft of a rooster and a hen.

The residents of Tur Malkah had a tradition that a rooster and a hen were brought before a bride and groom as a fertility blessing.²⁶ When a passing Roman military unit took the fowls away the residents responded with violence, starting an armed confrontation that resulted in their annihilation.

The first difficulty in the narrative is the implicit criticism of the

Jewish reaction to the Roman actions. For while the reaction may seem disproportionately zealous to the interference with a local custom that is mandated neither by the Torah nor by the rabbis, there are voices in the Talmudic tradition that not only approve, but actually proscribe, such behavior. In Sanhedrin (74a-b), Raba bar Rav Yizhak explains that Rav Dimi's dictum that in a time of state sponsored religious persecution one must be willing to be killed even for the observance of a "minor commandment" proscribes that in such a time one must be willing to die rather than "change one's shoe strap," which does not seem to be any more of a biblically or rabbinically based observance.²⁷ Even if one does not accept this as the accepted halakha,²⁸ the actions of the residents of Tur Malkah here are at the very least a valid approach. If they understood that they were commanded to sacrifice their lives for this observance, certainly they had the right (or obligation) to fight the Romans to maintain it.²⁹ A technical answer to this difficulty could be that the phrase used to describe the Roman's actions. "Passing by and took the animals" does not connote that this took place as part of a premeditated systematic religious persecution, rather a spontaneous act of thuggery, thereby putting the applicability of the of Raba's position into question in this circumstance. Still, the harsh words of the Talmud seem, at this point in the narrative, to be somewhat unwarranted.

Caesar's Crown

The narrative now continues with the ensuing battle:

A certain Bar Droma, who was able to jump a mil, came and slaughtered the Romans.

The Caesar then took off his crown, placed it on the ground, and said, "Sovereign of the Entire World! May it please You not to hand over both myself and my kingdom into the hands of one man."

Bar Droma was thwarted due to his own utterance as he said, "God, You have abandoned us, for You do not come out with our armies!"xxx (Psalms 60:12) But didn't David also say this? David was saying it rhetorically.

Bar Droma then went to the bathroom, a snake came, and his insides dropped out and he died.

In the time of need for the residents of Tur Malkah, a hero comes to the rescue. A man called Bar Droma,³¹ who is able to jump a Roman mile³² in a single bound and uses his abilities to wreak havoc on the Roman

army.³³ Just as things seem to be going well for the residents of Tur Malkah, we are presented with the contrasting prayers of the Roman Caesar and the hero of the Tur Malkah cause. While the Caesar humbles himself before the “Sovereign of the Entire World” by laying his crown on the ground in a display of his subservient role before God, the warrior on the side of Tur Malkah accuses God of not doing more for him saying “God, You have abandoned us, for You do not come out with our armies!”³⁴ In presenting this display of arrogance and entitlement by the leader of the Jews and contrasting it with the appropriate humility displayed by the leader of the heathens, the Talmud is clarifying the reason for its criticism of the Jews of Tur Malkah. Being the part of the “treasured people” (Deuteronomy 7:6) does not entitle one to do as he chooses, even in the name of religion, and expect that God will immediately come to his defense. Rather it is a charge to “Walk humbly with God” (Mikha 6:8) and then, and only then, will God come to their assistance. Miraculous intervention is not given, it is earned. This was not understood by the residents of Tur Malkah. Their motivation in attacking the Romans was not to sanctify God’s name, rather rose from a sense of entitlement, the same sense that led Bar Droma to accuse God of not doing enough for his people. God, hearing these two contrasting prayers, paid heed to the more worthy one, and Bar Droma was killed.³⁵ The end of the narrative makes this point even more strongly.

The Caesar then said, “Since a miracle has occurred for my sake, this time I will leave the Jews alone. He left them alone and went on his way.

The Jews then began to dance, eat, drink, and lit so many candles that the impress of a seal could be seen from a *mil* away.

The Caesar then said, “Are the Jews celebrating on account of me?” and he again marched to fight them.

Rabbi Assi has said, “Three hundred thousand men with drawn swords went into Tur Malkah and slaughtered for three days and three nights, while on the other side of the city there were parties and celebrations, and each side was unaware of the other.”

The narrative concludes along the same lines. The Caesar, in appreciation to God for hearing his prayers, decides to spare His people. The residents of Tur Malkah, showing a complete lack of recognition of God’s role in the drama, respond by throwing parties without attaching religious significance to the circumstances. Their desire to party not only displayed their lack of sensitivity to God’s role in their lives, but soon displayed their lack of sensitivity to their own townspeople as well. For “Three hundred thousand men with drawn swords went in to Tur Malkah and slaughtered for three

days and three nights, while on the other side of the city there were parties and celebrations, and each side was unaware of the other.”

The Downfall of Beitar

The third story that is referred to in the baraita follows the same lines (Gittin 57a).

Beitar was destroyed on account of an axle of a carriage:

For it was their custom that when a boy was born a cedar tree was planted and when a girl was born a pine tree was planted, and when they got married the trees were cut down the branches and make the wedding canopy.

One day the Caesar's daughter was passing when the shaft of her litter broke, so her servants cut down some branches from a cedar tree and brought it to her. The Jews then attacked and beat the servants. The servants said to the Caesar, "The Jews are rebelling!" so the Caesar marched to fight them.

The parallels to the previous narrative including a unique local custom, inadvertent violation of that custom by a passing Roman, and a reaction by the local populace based on righteous indignation rather than humility and self examination are obvious. Unfortunately the results were similar as well, for "when the city of Betar was taken, men, women and children were slain until their blood ran into the great sea" (ibid.).³⁷

The Destruction of Jerusalem

Now we can understand what about the story of "Kamza and Bar Kamza" and "the humility of Rabbi Zekharia ben Avkulas" caused the destruction of Jerusalem. The rabbis were correct in their opinion that traditional halachic norms, such as the prohibition against sacrificing a wounded animal or adhering to traditional standards of jurisprudence, could be subverted in such an emergency situation. As Maharatz Hayets explains

It was permissible according to the law to bring a wounded animal as a sacrifice in this case since there was a present danger for the people of Israel . . . for "There is a time to act for God by repealing the Torah".³⁸ From this it can be seen that in the view of our sages it was not correct when Rabbi Zekharia ben Avkulas said "People will say that blemished animals are offered on the altar," since according to the law it was permissible [to bring the sacrifice] for the sake of maintaining peaceful relations with the gov-

ernment. Also, had they killed Bar Kamza they would also have acted in accordance with the law since he threatened all of the people of Israel and if “one comes to kill you, you must rise up and kill him first.”

Why then did Rabbi Zekharia disagree? Furthermore, why did the other rabbis not overrule his objection?³⁸ For Rabbi Zekharia’s argument was that the gathered rabbis were unworthy of apparently subjugating the halakha in such a fashion. If God’s Law normally demands certain standards regarding the bringing of sacrifices or application of the death penalty, who are men of flesh and blood to choose not to apply it. Again, Maharatz Hayetz,

On account of the great humility of Rabbi Zekharia ben Avkulas he did not awaken the strength within his soul to enact this ruling in practice, as he was worried that he would be suspected of acting not in accordance with the halakha. He did not see himself as sufficiently great to establish the practical of halakha and support a temporary enactment based on his own deduction for he thought that only the such a thing can be done by the greatest scholars of the generation, and he was not worthy to do such a great thing which is [usually] not in accordance with the Torah. . . . Because of this the Talmud uses the term “his humility,” referring to the fact that he did not want to rely on his own logic, and this was the cause of the destruction of the Temple.³⁹

On the surface, Rabbi Zekharia’s declarations of humility and piety are difficult to rebut, hence the rabbis embraced his position irrespective of his comparatively low standing. However, in reality Rabbi Zekharia’s position was anything but humble. His removing the burden of the situation from man resulted in demanding salvation from God. As the stories of Tur Malkah and Beitar portray, it is not man’s place to make such demands, for only God knows if we are worthy of His protective intervention. Man must navigate his own troubles according to what is logical according to human standards, not dictate the priorities of the Divinity. In the words of the Talmud elsewhere “a judge can only adjudicate what his eyes can see” (Bava Batra 131a, Sanhedrin 6b, Nidda 20b) and “One does not rely on a miracle” (Pesahim 64b, Kiddushin 39b).

Halakhah demands sensibility. Though we believe than God can save us at any time that He wills it, we must live with the sense that we may not be worthy of such miraculous intervention, irrespective of how justified in it we may feel. “Jerusalem was destroyed on account of Kamza and Bar Kamza, Tur Malkah was destroyed on account of a rooster and a hen, and Beitar was destroyed on account of shaft of a litter” teaches us, according to

Rabbi Yohanan, that ‘Happy is the man who is constantly in fear, but he that hardens his heart shall fall into trouble.’ We must live our lives with sufficient concern for them, and not harden our heart into believing that it is God’s duty to save us.⁴⁰

NOTES

I would like to thank Rabbi Yaakov Simon for his valuable comments and Saphira Tessler for her assistance with editing.

All English renditions from the Hebrew and Aramaic sources are my own and are meant to reflect the meaning and rhythm of the passages rather than the literal translation.

1. Presumably Rabbi Yohanan ben Nuri since Rabbi Yohanan ben Zaccai did not live to see the Bar Kohba revolt, as we can from see Rosh Hashana 31b “Rabbi Yohanan ben Zaccai lived a hundred and twenty years. For forty years he was in business, for forty years he studied, and for forty years he taught,” thus he must have been over eighty when he was the rabbinic leader at the time of the destruction of the Temple. For other rabbis named Yohanan from the tannaic era include Rabbis Yohanan ben Bag Bag, Yohanan ben Broka, Yohanan ben Gudgada, Yohanan ben Dahabai, Yohanan ben Yehoshua, Yohanan ben Matya, Yohanan ben Nuri, Yohanan ben Torta, and Yohanan Hasandlar. See Rabbi Mordecai Margolis, *Encyclopedia L'hakmei Hatalmud V'hageonim: Volume II* (Yavneh) p.493-510.
2. Contrast this with the Talmud’s statement “Why was the first Temple destroyed? Because of three things which prevailed there: idolatry, licentiousness, and bloodshed” (Yoma 9b), which lists causes more easily understood as to warrant destruction.
3. While some modern scholars [see Richard Lee Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia Between Persia and Roman Palestine* (Oxford University Press) p.207 n.50] identify Kamza and Bar Kamza with Campsos son of Campsos who are found in Josephus 9:33, though the relevance of this to our narrative is unclear. David Rokeah, in his article “Zekharia ben Avkalus-Anivut o’ Kannaut” *Zion* 53:1 (1988) p.53 proposes that the name could be ironic play on the Aramaic word “kamzan” meaning “cheap,” but neither of these characters fit that description. Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture* (Johns Hopkins University Press) p.148 suggests that the name is based on the Aramaic word for locust, alluding to the harbingers of destruction.
4. Maharsha (Rabbi Samuel Eidels, 1555–1631) in his *Hiddushei Aggadot* (ad loc.); noting the meaning of the Aramaic word “bar,” suggest that the two men were actually father and son.
5. Rabbi Yosef Hayyim in his commentary *Ben Yohoyaha* (ad loc.) suggests a moralistic teaching on the value of both exacting speech and listening based on this incident, stating “The author of this narrative wishes to teach us that a person must be very exacting in his language, as our sages have written ‘Be careful with your words.’ Similarly the listener also must pay attention to what he is listening to, for sometimes due to a small sound that he did not pay attention to destruction can

result. See that the small difference between the pronunciation on Kamza and that of Bar Kamza, to which the listener did not adequately pay attention, destroyed Jerusalem.”

6. “. . . a touch of humor perhaps attends the names Qamza and Bar Qamza, reminiscent of Tweedledum and Tweedledee.” Talmudic Stories p. 148.
7. See the commentary to the book of Ruth by Feivel Meltzer found in *Da'at Miqra Hamesh Megillot* (Mossad haRav Kook, 1990) p. 29 n.3 and the entry in F. Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc.) p.811.
8. A number of possibilities regarding the specific meaning of this phrase can be found in the *Da'at Miqra* commentary (ad loc.). For midrashic explanations see Ruth Rabbah VII:7.
9. “My uncle, R. Meir Berlin [Bar-Ilan], told me that once R. Hayyim of Brisk was asked what the function of a rabbi is. R. Hayyim replied: ‘To redress the grievances of those who are abandoned and alone, to protect the dignity of the poor, and to save the oppressed from the hands of his oppressor.’ Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man* (Sefer Ve Sefel Publishing) p. 90.

A view that does not put any blame on the rabbis can be found in *Otzar Mepharshai HaTalmud Gittin Volume 3* (Makhon Yerushalayim Publishing) ad loc; that brings the explanation of Ben Yohoyada who claims that that the rabbis were unaware that the confrontation at the party took place took place. Rabbi Yosef Hayyim (ad loc.) brings support for this view from our text, as the criticism of the rabbis comes from the mouth of Bar Kamza, not the Talmudic narrator.

It is worth noting that the rabbinic establishment blamed itself for the destruction, consistent with the tenant that “When a man person experiences suffering, he should examine his conduct” (Berakhot 5a). It is a testament to the convictions of the Talmudic scholars that rather than looking to place the blame on others for the tragedy, they search for what the rabbis themselves could have done better, an important lesson in this age of theosophic finger pointing.

10. A similar point is made Talmudic stories p. 148.
11. Maharsha (*Hiddushei Aggadot*, ad loc.) references Sota 41b, that discusses how the rabbis of that generation flattered those in power when they should have spoken out.
12. “The term קיסר, Caesar, is sometimes used not for the Roman Emperor, but for those who acted as his representative in the far-flung empire.” Rabbi Mordechai Kuber, *The Artscroll Series Talmud Bavli Gittin Volume II* ad loc. n. 11 (Mesorah Publications).
13. Though the exact meaning of the term given in the Talmud, עגלא תלתא, is difficult to decipher (see Tosafot ad loc. s.v. *Egla Tilta* for three possible explanations), it is universally accepted as being a quality calf. Maharsha (*Hiddushei Aggadot* ad loc.) points out the infamous history of calves in Jewish history, as is seen in the story of the Golden Calf in the desert (Exodus 32:4) and the two Golden Calves in Israel (I Kings 12:28).
14. Or eyelid, as in Rashi (Bekhorot 16a s.v. “*v'aliba d'Rabbi Akiba*”). See Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Hayes (1805-55) in his commentary *Maharatz Hayets* (ad loc.) who references halakhic discussions as to where and what the wound may have been. For a literary interpretation as to why Bar Kamza would have wounded one of these two places, see Maharsha *Hiddushei Aggadot* (ad loc.).
15. Such as in Rashi ad loc. s.v. “*l'dedei lo havei mumah*” and Steinsaltz ad loc.

“*Iyunim: D’lidian havei mumin.*”

16. Identified by some scholars as Zekharia ben Amphikaleus mentioned in Josephus’ Jewish Wars, see Rokeah, p.54. It is worth noting that in Book 2:293-411 of the Jewish war, Josephus relates the refusal by the Jews to bring sacrifices on behalf of the Roman government, though the connection between Josephus’ narrative and that in the Talmud is tentative at best. For the Talmud’s lack of interest in relating accurate historical facts see Jonathan Duker, *The Spirits Behind the Laws: The Talmudic Scholars* (Urim Publications) p. 115-8.

For a survey of possible meanings of the name Avkalus see *Talmudic Stories* p. 348 n.28.

17. The proscribed punishment for intentionally wounding an animal consecrated to be sacrificed is lashes, not death, see Temurah 6b.
18. See Hayyim Nahman Bialik and Y.H. Ravnitzky in *Sefer ha-Aggadah* (Dvir) Volume V:552-5.

Relating specifically to rabbis, examples of the virtue of humility are brought in reference to Hillel the Elder (Shabbat 30b-31a) and Rabbi Hanina (Megillah 31a, Berakhot 16b, Nidda 20b), see Kalmin p.206 n.23-4. Rubenstein in *Talmudic Stories* p.150 concludes a short survey by stating “I know of no other example of ‘*anvetan*’ used in a negative sense in all of Talmudic literature.”

19. *Soncino Judaica Classic’s Library Cd-Rom* (ed. David Kantrowitz, Soncino Press).
20. *Maharatz Hayets* (ad loc.), in summarizing the problem states that “I do not know what humility there was in his not allowing the sacrifice to be accepted or to kill Bar Kamza. It would have been proper for the Talmud to say the righteousness or piety of Rabbi Zekharia ben Avkulas, but not the term ‘humility.’ Note that Rashi was sensitive to this and wrote ‘his patience,’ but in actuality humility and patience are two separate things.”
21. See Rabbi Meir ben Jacob Schiff (1608-44) in his commentary *Maharam Schiff* (ad loc.) and *Maharatz Hayets* (ad loc.).
22. For a survey of the relationship between the text in Gittin and that in Eicha Rabba by contemporary scholars see Kalmin p.48-9.
23. See *Otzar Mepharshei HaTalmud Gittin* Volume 3 n.24.

This could explain why Rabbi Zekharia was more stringent than the rest of the rabbis in this case. While the other rabbis could clearly weigh the issues at hand, thus putting “peace with the government” as a higher priority than the other concerns at hand, Rabbi Zekharia felt responsible for the event and thus felt that any desecration of the halakha was a consequence of his actions thus sought his best to avoid it.

Rabbi Moses Sofer (1762-1839) in his commentary *Chatam Sofer* (ad loc.) reads the significance of the Midrash in another manner. He proposes that when Rabbi Zekharia saw Bar Kamza, who was obviously a wicked man as evidenced by his deeds later on in the narrative, at the party he should have left immediately since the great scholars should not break bread with evildoers. However, as Rabbi Zekharia was tolerant of Bar Kamza’s presence and did not leave the party himself, he contributed to a chain of events that led to destruction.

24. There are many more creative interpretations offered by both traditional and modern scholars. Rabbi Yosef Hayyim (ad loc.) suggests that Rabbi Zekharia, due to his humility, was unsure of his position and was in the process of bringing the animal the *lishkat hagazit* to ask the Sanhedrin their opinion when the Romans saw him bringing the animal out the *azarah*, and thereby assumed that the sacrifice was

rejected. Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna (*Divrei Eliyahu, Parshat Mishpatim, s.v. "Lo tihye"*) avers that Rabbi Zekharia's humility was characterized by his speaking first in a capital case, a role given to the least learned member of the Sanhedrin. Had Rabbi Zekharia offered his opinion later, others may not have listened to it. Rabbi Yehuda Hertzl Henkin (*Responsa Benei Vanim, Volume I: Ma'amar 5*) sees the term "humility" as identifying Rabbi Zekharia's hesitancy to "foster a mistaken concept in Halachah even when faced with a threat to national existence" with a similar tendency displayed by Moses (who is described by the Torah as "humblest of all men") facing the events of Ba'al Poer, as described in Talmud Bavli Sanhedrin 82a. Klausner (c. Yitzhak Baer "Jerusalem in the Time of the Great Rebellion", *Zion* 53:3 (1988) p. 171 n.152) argues that "humility" is a euphemism for "zealotry." Others claim that Rabbi Yohanan's statement originally referred to Rabbi Zekharia's behavior found in Shabbat 143a and was later inserted in Gittin, thus accounting for the phrases problematic nature. For more writings on the relationship between the narratives in Gittin and in Shabbat, see Saul Lieberman *Tosefta Ki-Fshutah* Volume III (Jewish Theological Seminary) p.268-9. The most original position that I have seen is that of Rabbi Judah David Bleich in his article, "*Siddur Hupa leKohen veSafek Gerusha Kedei leMa'et belssurin*" (*Tehumin* Volume 9, p. 41-49) who posits that Rabbi Zekharia behaved correctly regardless of the consequences of his actions, based on the prohibition of *hanuifa*- intentional misrepresentation of halacha. Rabbi Bleich brings the accolade of Rabbi Zekharia's humility as a proof to his position. For a listing of traditional commentators who understand the Talmud as criticizing Rabbi Zekharia see Rabbi Aryeh A. and Rabbi Dov I. Frimer, "Women's Prayer Services-Theory and Practice" (*Tradition* 32:2 p. 47.

25. It is unclear if Tur Malka (Aramaic for "Mountain of the King.") is a village, city, or entire mountainous region, though it is most likely located in, or encompasses the entire, Judean Mountains. Rashi calls it a *מדינה*, or province. Steinsaltz ad loc. *Lashon*: Tur Malkah states that the phrase "occasionally marks the entire mountainous region of Judah, though at times it only relates to the southern section of this region." Gedaliah Alon in *The Jews in their Land in the Talmudic Age Volume II* (Magnes Press) p.598 states that "Har Hamelekh and Tur Malkah are also clearly terms for the central Jerusalem massif."

Some scholars, such as in Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *Rabbinic Stories* (Paulist Press) p.52, identify Bar Droma with Bar Kohba which leads to the identification of Tur Malkah as Betar. Regarding the time of the presumed event, if we read the baraita in chronological order (knowing that the destruction of Jerusalem preceded that of Betar), then these events are placed between the destruction of Jerusalem and that of Betar.

26. Fowl were known for their sexual activity [as in Berakhot 22a "The one who taught (that one can purify himself from a seminal emission by merely pouring water over himself) whispered it so that scholars might not always be with their wives like roosters"]. For a creative bible-based explanation, see Maharsha ad loc.
27. "If the non-Jews have one way to strap their shoes and the Jews have another, since there is a Jewish way of doing it, and the way of Jews are to be modest, even this change which is not a commandment (*mitzvah*) but only a custom (*minhag*) sanctifies God's name before other Jews" (Rashi ad loc.). For theories on how exactly Jews differed from non-Jews in their shoe straps, see Steinsaltz ad loc. *Iyunim: Arkata Dimisana*.
28. Rambam (*Hilkhot Yesodei Hatorah* 5:3) states that even in a time of persecution

one only is only commanded to die if told to transgress a mitzvah. See the *Kesef Mishna* (ad loc.) for an attempt to understand Rambam's position in line with that of Raba bar Rav Yizhak.

29. For "If a man comes to kill you, rise early and kill him first" (Berahot 58a, Yoma 85b). For the logical progression from the obligation to lay down one's life to the commandment fight the source of the threat, see Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, *Mishpat Hakohen* (Mossad Harav Kook, 1985) p.336.
30. For alternate translations of the verse in this context, see Richard G. Marks, *The Image of Bar Kokhba in Traditional Jewish Literature: False Messiah and National Hero* (Pennsylvania State University Press) p. 33 n.42.
31. As "bar" means son, he could have been the son of a man named Droma, or alternatively, if "droma" is rendered as "south", then this name could just mean "a man from the south." Some scholars identify Bar Droma with Bar Kokhba, pointing to some overlapping details (see Steinsaltz ad loc. "*Lashon: Bar Droma*").
32. 1,480 meters according to William Smith, *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities* (John Murray) p.762. Artscroll (ad loc. n. 14), presumably based on contemporary halakhic standards, puts a mil at 3000-4000 feet.
33. "Soon after the completion of the Talmud, it was already debated among scholars whether or not the miracles that are found within its pages actually occurred. However, from our perspective (which I am arguing is the perspective of the talmudic scholars themselves), this argument is hardly essential. Once one establishes that the primary meaning of the text is not historical but rather moral, the issue of whether the miracles actually occurred or not takes on, at most, secondary importance", see Duker p.118 and the relevant citations there.
34. As the Talmud points out, this prayer was originally said by David. The nature of the Talmud's defense of David present in the phrase "David was saying it as rhetorical question" (אתמורה קא מתמה) is unclear. Maharsha (ad loc.) suggests that the verse must be seen in the larger context of David's prayer, a prayer that was uttered as a praise to God following a successful military encounter with Edom.
A creative solution is brought in *Otzar Mepharshai HaTalmud* (ad loc.) in the name of the commentary *Ya'arot Devash*: David's statement that God had abandoned him was accurate, as God's presence was not at the referenced battle as the fight took place outside of the Land of Israel.
35. Rubenstein (*Rabbinic Stories* p. 260 n.55) suggests that he may have died of prolapse, a condition where organs sometimes slip out of place and protrude through the rectum. Of course, if the story is meant to be taken allegorically, it is sufficient to note that Bar Droma, who was known for his invulnerability, died in a lowly fashion when he did not recognize that his strength came from God.
36. For a discussion of similar criticism in rabbinic literature of the Jews of Beitar see Marks p. 20-56.
37. Based on the phrase found in Psalms 119:126, this phrase was taken by the Mishna found in Berakhot 63a and subsequent Talmudic discussions as exhortation for the Rabbis to abolish certain commandments on a temporarily basis if there lead to an increase in observance in the longer term.
38. This question is especially poignant given Rabbi Zekharia's presumably low standing among his contemporaries. Though Rabbi Elijah of Vilna (ibid.) avers that he was the greatest scholar of the generation, this is a difficult position given that his halakhic practice is only mentioned once in the entire Talmud, and there derogatorily (see n.23). Great scholars found in Jerusalem at this time include Rabbi

Yohanan ben Zaccai, Rabbi Zadok, Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah, as well as others (see Gittin 56a).

39. Ad loc. Similarly, Rabbi Hayyim Joseph David Azulai (Petakh Einayyim, ad loc.) writes “This comes to enlighten us regarding an important guideline in the service of God, that one must carefully measure all that he does in light of the future, as it is written that sometimes the true observance of the Torah is through its nullification”. Likewise, Rabbi Henkin (ibid.) “. . . sometimes a leader needs to do what has not been done before, in circumstances for which there is no clear precedent. He cannot always base himself on the past”. For others traditional scholars that interpret along these lines see *Otzar Mepharshei HaTalmud* ad loc. n.21. Modern scholars with similar views include Yizhak Baer and Levi Ginzburg (Baer p.170).
40. Tosafot Gittin 55b s.v. “*ashrei he-adam*” discusses the tension between this and a seemingly more faith-based view in Berakhot 60a.