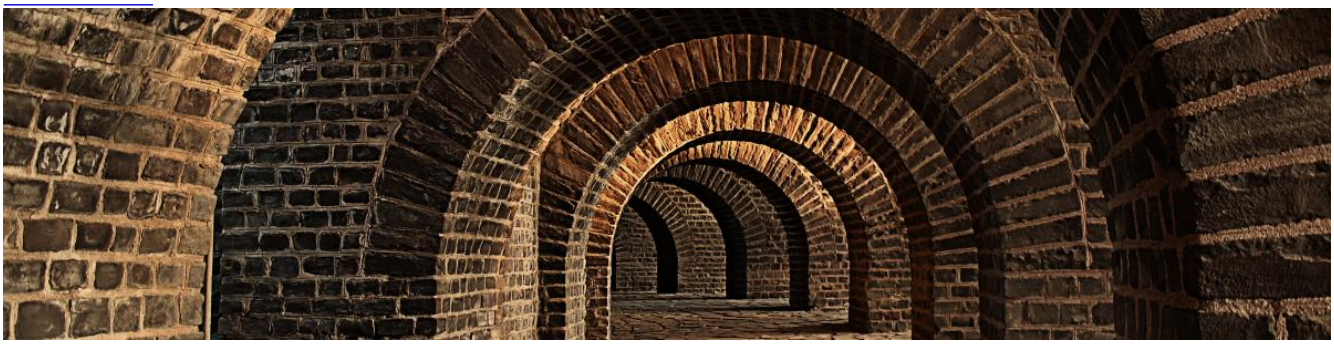
Kamtsa, Bar Kamtsa--and our Contemporary Parallels

View PDF



This is an excerpt of an article by Rabbi Marc D. Angel, "Reclaiming Orthodox Judaism," which appeared in issue 12 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. The entire article can be found at https://www.jewishideas.org/marc-d-angel/reclaiming-orthodox-judaism

The Talmud records a poignant story relating to the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE. Although historians describe various political, sociological, and military explanations for the Roman war against the Jews, the Talmud—through the story of Kamtsa and Bar Kamtsa—points to a moral/spiritual cause of the destruction:

R. Johanan said: The destruction of Jerusalem came through Kamtsa and Bar Kamtsa in this way. A certain man had a friend Kamtsa and an enemy Bar Kamtsa. He once made a party and said to his servant, Go and bring Kamtsa. The man went and brought Bar Kamtsa. When the man [who gave the party] found him there he said, See, you tell tales about me; what are you doing here? Get out. Said the other: Since I am here, let me stay and I will pay you for whatever I eat and drink. He said, I won't. Then let me give you half the cost of the party. No, said the other. Then let me pay for the whole party. He still said, No, and he took him by the hand and put him out. Said the other, Since the rabbis were sitting there and did not stop him, this shows that they agreed with him. I will go and inform against them to the Government. He went and said to the Emperor, The Jews are rebelling against you. He said, How can I tell? He said to him: Send them an offering and see whether they will offer it [on the altar]. So he sent with him a fine calf. While on the way he [Bar Kamtsa] made a blemish on its upper lip, or as some say on the white of its eye, in a place where we [Jews] count it a blemish but they [the Romans] do not. The rabbis were inclined to offer it in order not to offend the Government. Said R. Zechariah b. Abkulas to them: People will say that blemished animals are offered on the altar. They then proposed to kill Bar Kamtsa so that he should not go and inform against them, but R. Zechariah b. Abkulas said to them, Is one who makes a blemish on consecrated animals to be put to death? R. Johanan thereupon remarked: Through the scrupulousness of R. Zechariah b. Abkulas our House has been destroyed, our Temple burnt

and we ourselves exiled from our land. (Gittin 55b–56a)

The story tells of a host—apparently a wealthy man—who throws a party and wants his friend Kamtsa to be brought to it. The servant makes a mistake and brings Bar Kamtsa—a person the host despises. When the host sees Bar Kamtsa, he orders him to leave. Even though Bar Kamtsa pleads not to be humiliated by being sent away, the host is unbending. Bar Kamtsa offers to pay for whatever he eats, for half the expenses of the entire party, for the entire party—but the host unceremoniously leads Bar Kamtsa out of his home.

The story reflects a lack of peace among the Jewish community in Jerusalem. The antagonism between the host and Bar Kamtsa is palpable. The unpleasant scene at the party was witnessed by others—including "the rabbis"; obviously, "the rabbis" were included on the party's guest list. They were part of the host's social network. When Bar Kamtsa was ejected from the party, he did not express rage at the host. Rather, he was deeply wounded by the fact that rabbis had been silent in the face of the humiliation he had suffered: "Since the rabbis were sitting there and did not stop him, this shows that they agreed with him." He might have understood the host's uncouth behavior, since the host hated him. But he could not understand why the rabbis, through their silence, would go along with the host. Why didn't they stand up and protest on behalf of Bar Kamtsa? Why didn't they attempt to increase peace? Bar Kamtsa was so disgusted with the rabbis that he decided to stir up the Roman Emperor against the Jewish people. If the rabbinic leadership itself was corrupt, then the entire community had to suffer.

Why didn't the rabbis speak up on behalf of Bar Kamtsa?

Apparently, the rabbis kept silent because they did not want to offend their host. If the host wanted to expel a mistakenly invited person, that was his business—not theirs. The host seems to have been a wealthy patron of the rabbis; he obviously wanted them included on his invitation list. Why should the rabbis offend their patron, in defense of an enemy of their patron? That might jeopardize their relationship with the host and could cost them future patronage.

The rabbis kept silent because they thought it socially and economically prudent for their own interests. They could not muster the courage to confront the host and try to intervene on behalf of Bar Kamtsa. By looking out for their own selfish interests, the rabbis chose to look the other way when Bar Kamtsa was publicly humiliated.

Rabbi Binyamin Lau, in his review of the rabbinical and historical sources of that period, came to the inescapable conclusion that "the rabbis were supported by the wealthy [members of the community], and consequently were unable to oppose their deeds. There is here a situation of economic pressure that enslaved the elders of the generation to the officials and the wealthy….The Torah infrastructure depended on the generosity of the rich."

When rabbis lost the spirit of independence, they also lost their moral compass. They were beholden to the rich, and could not afford to antagonize their patrons. They remained silent even when their patrons behaved badly, even when their silence allowed their patrons to humiliate others. Bar Kamtsa was outraged by the moral cowardice of the rabbis to such an extent that he turned traitor against the entire Jewish people.

The story goes on to say that Bar Kamtsa told the Emperor that the Jews were rebelling. To verify this, the Emperor sent an offering to be sacrificed in the Temple. If the Jews offered it up, that proved they were not rebelling. If the Jews refused to offer it up, this meant that they were defying the Emperor and were rising in rebellion. Bar Kamtsa took a fine calf on behalf of the Emperor, and put a slight blemish on it. He was learned enough to know that this blemish—while of no consequence to the Romans—would disqualify the animal from being

offered according to Jewish law.

When Bar Kamtsa presented the offering at the Temple, the rabbis were inclined to allow it to be offered. They fully realized that if they rejected it, this would be construed by the Emperor as a sign of disloyalty and rebellion. Since there was so much at stake, the rabbis preferred to offer a blemished animal rather than incur the Emperor's wrath. This was a sound, prudent course of action. But one of the rabbis, Zecharyah b, Abkulas, objected. He insisted that the rabbis follow the letter of the law and not allow the offering of a blemished animal. He cited public opinion ("people will say") that the rabbis did not adhere to the law and therefore allowed a forbidden offering. The rabbis then considered the extreme possibility of murdering Bar Kamtsa, so that this traitor would not be able to return to the Emperor to report that the offering had been refused. Again, Zecharyah b. Abkulas objected. The halakha does not allow the death penalty for one who brings a blemished offering for sacrifice in the Temple. Murdering Bar Kamtsa, thus, would be unjustified and illegal. This was "check mate." The rabbis offered no further ideas on how to avoid antagonizing the Emperor. The offering was rejected, and Bar Kamtsa reported this to the Emperor. The result was the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and razing of the Temple. "R. Johanan thereupon remarked: Through the scrupulousness of R. Zechariah b. Abkulas our House has been destroyed, our Temple burnt and we ourselves exiled from our land."

Rabbi Johanan casts R. Zecharyah b. Abkulas as the villain of the story. R. Zecharyah was overly scrupulous in insisting on the letter of the law, and he lost sight of the larger issues involved. He did not factor in the consequences of his halakhic ruling; or if he did, he thought it was better to suffer the consequences rather than to violate the halakha. Rabbi Johanan blames R. Zecharyah's "scrupulousness" for the destruction of Jerusalem, the razing of the Temple, and the exile of the Jewish people. The moral of the story, according to Rabbi Johanan, is that rabbis need to have a grander vision when making halakhic decisions. It is not proper—and can be very dangerous—to rule purely on the basis of the letter of the law, without taking into consideration the larger issues and the consequences of these decisions. Technical correctness does not always make a halakhic ruling correct. On the contrary, technical correctness can lead to catastrophic results. To follow the precedent of Rabbi Zecharyah b. Abkulas is a dangerous mistake.

Yes, Rabbi Zecharyah b. Abkulas was overly scrupulous in his application of halakha, when other larger considerations should have been factored in. His narrow commitment to legal technicalities caused inexpressible suffering and destruction for the Jewish people. But is he the real villain of the story?

Rabbi Zecharyah was only one man. The other rabbis formed the majority. Why didn't they overrule Rabbi Zecharyah? The rabbis surely realized the implications of rejecting the Emperor's offering. They were even willing to commit murder to keep Bar Kamtsa from returning to the Emperor with a negative report. Why did the majority of the rabbis submit to Rabbi Zecharyah's "scrupulousness"?

The story is teaching not only about the mistaken attitude of Rabbi Zecharyah b. Abkulas, but about the weakness and cowardice of the rest of the rabbis. The other rabbis were intimidated by Rabbi Zecharyah. They were afraid that people would accuse them of being laxer in halakha than Rabbi Zecharyah. They worried lest their halakhic credibility would be called into question. Rabbi Zecharyah might be perceived by the public as the "really religious" rabbi, or the "fervently religious" rabbi; the other rabbis would be perceived as compromisers, as religiously defective. They recognized that Rabbi Zecharyah, after all, had technical halakhic justification for his positions. On the other hand, they would have to be innovative and utilize meta-halakhic considerations to justify their rulings. That

approach—even if ultimately correct—requires considerable confidence in one's ability to make rulings that go beyond the letter of the law. Rabbi Zecharyah's position was safe: it had support in the halakhic texts and traditions. The rabbis' position was risky: it required breaking new ground, making innovative rulings based on extreme circumstances. The rabbis simply were not up to the challenge. They deferred to Rabbi Zecharyah because they lacked the courage and confidence to take responsibility for bold halakhic decision-making.

When Rabbis Do Not Increase Peace in the World

When rabbis lose sight of their core responsibility to bring peace into the world, the consequences are profoundly troubling. The public's respect for religion and religious leadership decreases. The rabbis themselves become narrower in outlook, more authoritarian, more identified with a rabbinic/political bureaucracy than with idealistic rabbinic service. They become agents of the status quo, curriers of favor from the rich and politically well-connected.
When rabbis lack independence and moral courage, the tendencies toward conformity and extremism arise. They adopt the strictest and most fundamentalist positions, because they do not want to appear "less fervent" than the extremist rabbinic authorities.

When rabbis fear to express moral indignation so as not to jeopardize their financial or political situation, then the forces of injustice and disharmony increase. When rabbis adopt the narrow halakhic vision of Rabbi Zecharyah b. Abkulas, they invite catastrophe on the community. When the "silent majority" of rabbis allow the R. Zecharyahs to prevail, they forfeit their responsibility as religious leaders.

The contemporary Hareidization of Orthodox Judaism, both in Israel and the Diaspora, has tended to foster a narrow and extreme approach to halakha. This phenomenon has been accompanied by a widespread acquiescence on the part of Orthodox rabbis who are afraid to stand up against the growing extremism.

In the summer of 1984, I met with Rabbi Haim David Halevy, then Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv. He was a particularly independent thinker, who much regretted the narrowness and extremism that had arisen within Orthodox rabbinic circles. He lamented what he called the rabbinic "mafia" that served as a thought police, rooting out and ostracizing rabbis who did not go along with the official policies of a small group of "gedolim," rabbinic authorities who are thought to have the ultimate power to decide halakhic policies. When honest discussion and diversity of opinion are quashed, the religious enterprise suffers.

The Orthodox rabbinic establishment in Israel, through the offices of the Chief Rabbinate, has had the sole official religious authority to determine matters relating to Jewish identity, conversion, marriage, and divorce. It has also wielded its authority in kashruth supervision and other areas of religious law relating to Jewish life in the State of Israel. This religious "monopoly" has been in place since the State of Israel was established in 1948. With so much power at their disposal, one would have expected—and might have hoped—that the rabbinate would have won a warm and respectful attitude among the population at large. The rabbis, after all, are charged with increasing peace between the people of Israel and their God; with applying halakha in a spirit of love, compassion, and understanding; with creating within the Jewish public a recognition that the rabbis are public servants working in the public's interest.

Regrettably, these things have not transpired. Although the Chief Rabbinate began with the creative leadership of Rabbis Benzion Uziel and Yitzchak Herzog, it gradually sank into a bureaucratic mire, in which rabbis struggled to gain political power and financial reward for themselves and/or for the institutions they represent. The Chief Rabbinate is not held as the

ultimate religious authority in Israel by the Hareidi population. It is not respected by the non-Orthodox public. It has scant support within the Religious Zionist camp, since the Chief Rabbinate seems more interested in pandering to Hareidi interests than in promoting a genuine Religious Zionist vision and program for the Jewish State.

Recent polls in Israel have reflected a growing backlash against the Hareidization of religious life and against the political/social/religious coercion that has been fostered by Hareidi leadership. Seventy percent of Jewish Israelis are opposed to new religious legislation. Fifty-three pecert oppose all religiously coercive legislation. Forty-two percent believe that the tension between the Hareidim and the general public is the most serious internal schism in Israeli Jewish society—nearly twice as many as those who think the most serious tension is between the political left and political right. Sixty-five percent think the tensions between Hareidim and the general public are the most serious, or second most serious, problem facing the Israeli Jewish community. An increasing number of Israelis are in favor of a complete separation of religion and State, reflecting growing frustration with the religious status quo.