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Yom Kippur Sermon 5770
September 28, 2009

Let me begin with a 2,000 year old story.

There were these two men, and they had such similar names. The first was called Kamtza. And the second was called Bar Kamtza. As legend has it, it was because of them that Jerusalem was destroyed.

It happened this way: There was once a wealthy man who was friends with Kamtza, but he hated Bar Kamtza. One day this man held a banquet. "Go, invite my dear friend, Kamtza, to my party," he ordered his servant. But the servant got confused between the two men, Kamtza and Bar Kamtza, and he brought back Bar Kamtza instead.

Can you imagine what the host felt when he saw his enemy, Bar Kamtza, seated among his guests? The rage! The indignation! "What are you doing here?!" he howled. "Get out of my house!"

Bar Kamtza's face turned scarlet. How embarrassing to be singled out in front of the other guests. "Look," he stammered. "I am already here. Let me stay. I will pay you for whatever I eat and drink."

"Absolutely not," declared the host.

"Okay, I will pay for half of the cost of your party."

"No," shouted the host, his anger seething.

"Then let me pay for the whole party. That is my final offer!"

None of the guests said a word.

Still refusing and shouting, the host stormed over to Bar Kamtza, grabbed him by the neck, and tossed him into the street.

Livid, Bar Kamtza muttered to himself, "All those Rabbis were just sitting there among the guests. Not one of them spoke up in my defense. Not one of them even offered me a kind word. They were silent. Well, I'll show them." He got an idea – I will go to the Emperor of Rome himself. They are going to pay for this.

And would you believe, he got an appointment to see the Emperor himself?

"The Jews are rebelling against Rome," declared Bar Kamtza.

Now the Emperor was a little skeptical. "How can I know that this is true? Prove it."

"Why don't you give them the opportunity to make a sacrifice on your behalf? And see whether they will offer it on the altar."

"Fair enough," said the Emperor. So he sent Bar Kamtza back with a fine, unblemished calf. But on the way home Bar Kamtza made a blemish on its upper lip, making it unfit for Jewish sacrifice, though still acceptable to the Romans.

He then brought it to the Rabbis, who did not know what to do. "We cannot offer a blemished calf on the altar," said one.

"But we must not offend the Roman government. Maybe we should offer it anyway," countered another.

"No!" objected Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkulas: "This will teach people that it is okay to offer blemished animals. That sets a terrible precedent." So they did not sacrifice it.

But the Rabbis began to worry about Bar Kamtza. "Perhaps we should kill him. Otherwise he is going to tell the Romans that we refuse their offering."

But Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkulas objected again. “Since when do we kill people for making a blemish on a consecrated animal?” And again, the Rabbis heeded his words.

As feared, the wrath of Rome came down upon them. Jerusalem was destroyed, the Temple burned, and the Jews exiled from their land.

As Rabbi Elazar taught: “Do you see how serious a matter it is to shame someone? In order to defend Bar Kamtza’s honor, God was even willing to destroy the Holy Temple!” (Based on Gittin 55-56, 57a)

One of the greatest catastrophes of Jewish life, the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, seems to have been caused by a humiliating incident at a dinner party. It is an outlandish story. But it is one that has much to teach us this Yom Kippur. For we have come here to examine who we are, how we have wronged others in the year that has passed, and how we can make amends and behave differently when confronted with similar situations in the future.

The story of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza is one of personal and communal responsibility – or lack thereof. It is a story of how selfishness, complacency, shame, resentment, bitterness, and vengeance can lead to the shattering of relationships, community, and society.

Jewish tradition teaches us to love our neighbors as ourselves. But what happens when doing so is exceedingly difficult? What happens when we hold hatred in our heart, when we cannot let go of the bitterness that consumes us? What do we do when we have been wronged – when a friend steals from us, when our spouse cheats on us, when our parent abuses us? What do we do when we are lied to, betrayed, manipulated, or exploited? What do we do with that hatred?

One path, of course, is to do what the host in our story did. He embarrassed his enemy, Bar Kamtza, who unwittingly ended up at his banquet, perhaps because he believed that the invitation was an act of reconciliation. As the host of the party, he had particular power over his guest, and he used it in an ugly manner, shouting at him in front of others and making him feel small and worthless. When we have such hatred in our hearts, it can be tempting to turn it into a weapon of humiliation and shame.

The Rabbis argue that “one should jump into a fire rather than cause someone else embarrassment.” They say that “one who embarrasses a person in front of others, it is like spilling their blood.” Indeed, as our story tells us, Jerusalem was destroyed because of the humiliation of Bar Kamtza.

In what ways over the past year have we embarrassed or humiliated others – even if the behavior was directed towards someone who had wronged us? Was it a carefully placed jibe towards a colleague at an important meeting? A sarcastic remark that we leveled at our son or daughter? A thoughtless comment that we muttered to our spouse?

Perhaps we have shamed others when they in fact did not do anything harmful towards us. Perhaps we just did not like them. Or we felt insecure around them. Or we were in a

bad mood and they just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Or they reminded us of someone who had hurt us and we unthinkingly acted out our anger towards that person on them.

The story does not tell us why the host and Bar Kamtza were enemies. This is important. We feel disgust, hold grudges, or just act meanly towards others for both significant *and insignificant* reasons. But the point is that it does not actually matter why they were enemies. We will always have difficult relationships with others, and even if we are totally innocent – which in most cases we are not – the question is how we act towards them.

Now turning towards Bar Kamtza. He could have dealt with his shame in many ways. He chose to take revenge. He went to the Roman authorities and convinced them that the Jews were rebelling against Rome. He orchestrated events in such a way to lead to the destruction of his people. Why? Because he wanted to show his enemies that he could fight back. Out of broiling anger he took revenge on his countrymen. At what expense? The destruction of Jerusalem and the holy Temple.

One of the rabbinic teachings associated with this story is that the Temple was destroyed because of *sinat chinam* – senseless hatred. It was the kind of hatred that was so blinding that the people had only contempt for their neighbors. They did not see them as human beings. They lost sight of the larger issue of the Roman attack and concerned themselves only with their own needs. They failed to realize that their destiny was intimately connected to the destiny of their neighbors.

We hear this all the time – we cannot speak to our enemies, we cannot work things out with them. They are animals who cannot be reasoned with. We tell ourselves and others to stay away from them. We separate ourselves from them, and we tell lies about them. In recounting past events, we have done no wrong. They have done nothing right.

But we are not blameless. We have lashed out at our neighbors, co-workers, community members, and loved ones. The hatred in our hearts can become so powerful that we seek vengeance on them. When our hearts are hardened and our egos wounded, revenge may seem to be the only option. So we deceive a colleague. We betray a friend. We resort to physical or verbal assaults against a child, parent, or spouse. We cheat on a boyfriend or girlfriend. We initiate vicious divorce proceedings.

There exists within each of us a real, human impulse to cause harm to another. Judaism does not teach us to love our enemies, but it does teach us to struggle against the ugliness and hatefulness that exists within each of us. And even when the hatred we feel is so strong, we are still expected to act with *derech erez* – respectful, thoughtful behavior, and we are still expected to act justly, fairly, and even compassionately towards our enemies.

The story of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza has much to teach us about the danger of humiliation and revenge, but there is a deeper – and perhaps more important – message of this story. It is fairly obvious how humiliation and revenge can rip apart human relationships and communities. We can easily recognize that senseless hatred destroys the bonds needed to sustain a healthy, compassionate society. And we know that there

will always be people who act viciously towards others, who resort to humiliation and revenge.

The more significant issue is that at that dinner party two thousand years ago, no one spoke up in Bar Kamtza's defense. The Rabbis were silent. "You shall not stand idly by," we read in Leviticus (Lev 19:16). But they stood idly by, and they watched one person humiliate another. They did not protest. They did not try to intervene. They offered no words of consolation. Bar Kamtza felt betrayed by the very people who were supposed to provide the moral leadership of his community. The silence was shattering.

We read in the Talmud, "*Shetikah k'hoda'ah damya* – Silence is tantamount to acceptance." It is irresponsible to be silent in a situation that calls for action. By standing idly by the Rabbis tacitly approved of the host's actions.

How often do we stand by and quietly observe an injustice done to our neighbor? How often do we fail to speak up against the abuse of power?

The word, *kamtza* can mean locust or ant. Because of something really insignificant like a locust or ant was Jerusalem destroyed. It is often the smallest acts – acts of omission, of not having the courage or desire or moral strength to protest the wrongs we see – that can have enormous consequences. Small actions or inactions can have a cumulative effect on an individual, family, community, or society.

Do we speak up when we see one sibling betray another over their parents' inheritance? When we realize that a friend is embezzling money? When someone tells us a racist joke? When we watch our boss act abusively towards our co-worker? When we read that immigrants in our community are being treated unlawfully? When we hear that Palestinians are being humiliated at Israeli checkpoints?

Two thousand years ago Judaism was completely centered around the Temple. Offering sacrifices to God was the very heart of Jewish practice. After the Temple was destroyed and it became impossible to offer sacrifices, the people wondered how they could ever again atone for their wrongdoings, how they could ever again be in relationship with God, how they could ever again live holy lives.

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai's answer was that it was acts of loving kindness that would replace the animal sacrifices. Without the Temple, God now dwells among us. To live in the image of God means to treat our neighbors, our families, our loved ones, with kindness. While there does exist within each of us an impulse to lash out against the ones who have wronged us, there also exists within each of us an extraordinary capacity to move past those hurt feelings and to reach out to our fellow human beings with love and compassion and to act with real integrity.

Gmar chatimah tovah – May you be sealed for good.