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THE BAR-KAMTZA STORY: COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS

1. The moral of the story is self-evident. The Sages attributed the Destruction of the 2nd Temple to שנאת חנם, and what better illustration or personification of it than the gratuitous hatred of the anonymous villain, the host, and the other villain, Mr. Bar-Kamtza.
2. But this is more than a Rabbinic fable. A close reading raises many, and sometimes uncomfortable, questions. Some such questions that occurred to me follow.
3. Bar-Kamtza faulted the Rabbis who attended the same banquet, for not rising up in protest against the humiliation imposed on him. Why, indeed, did they not object to this injustice? Were they anxious not to disturb the party or Simcha? If so, is that an acceptable excuse? Or, were they cognizant of their host's wealth and criticism – in which case it is even more deplorable.
4. The one identifiable personality who is strongly criticized is R. Zechariah b. Avkulas. R. Yochanan openly blames him for the Destruction. The following questions occur:
5. Who was he? (I do not believe he is mentioned anywhere in then entire rabbinic literature, except for this incident.) What or who gave him the power to veto the majority opinions of his contemporaries? Were the Rabbis again guilty of failing to protest an injustice or wrong-headed decision?
6. Or was this an early case of דעת תורה—which makes his פסק infallible and hence incontrovertible? If so, there is hardly a better argument to prove the invalidity of the contemporary interpretation of דעת תורה.
7. The term used by R. Yochanan in criticizing R. Zecharaiah is ענותנותו of the latter. What does that mean? The usual connotation is "humility." Others use "tolerance." Neither of these is acceptable in the context of this passage. The only translation I can offer, although I have no etymological justification for it, is "narrowness." R. Zechariah was incapable of going beyond his misgiving that "people" will misunderstand his action and eventually violate one halakha or other. His vision focused exclusively on a *possible* transgression (and not a terrible one, at that!) and did not or could not foresee the consequences of his decision. Twice he made the fatal mistake of narrowness, of ignoring long-range consequences of his immediate legal concerns. He probably was a great ת"ח who was blind to the outside world either by theory or disposition.

8. This tendency to achieve extra piety at the expense of considering ultimate consequences was already criticized centuries ago by one of the great teachers of Musar, Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto, who wrote the following in his פ"ב מסילת ישרים:

אין לדון דברי חסידות על מראה הראשון, אלא צריך לעיין ולהתבונן עד היכן תולדות המעשה מגיעות, כי לפעמים המעשה בעצמו יראה טוב, ולפי שהתולדות רעות יתחייב להניחו, ולו יעשה אותו יהיה חוטא ולא חסיד. הנה מעשה גדליה בן אחיקם גלוי לעינינו שמפני רוב חסידותו שלא לדון את ישמעאל לכף חובה או שלא לקבל לשון הרע, אמר ליוחנן בן קרח שקר אתה דובר על ישמעאל (ירמיה מ'), ומה גרם? גרם שמת הוא ונפזרו ישראל וכבה גחלתם הנשארה, וכבר ייחס הכתוב הריגת אנשים אשר נהרגו אליו כאילו הרגם הוא, ובמאמרם ז"ל (נדה ס"א): על הפסוק את כל פגרי האנשים אשר הכה ביד גדליה. והבית השני גם הוא חרב ע"י חסידות כזה אשר לא נשקל במשקל צדק במעשה דבר קמצא....