

SERMON/ STORY TELLING YOM KIPPUR 5781 Morning

Rabbi David Edleson, Temple Sinai, S. Burlington, Vermont

I want to tell you a story of two temples in two cities: one ancient Jerusalem, one right here in South Burlington.

The Talmud asks: Why was the Temple in Jerusalem destroyed by the Romans and the nation exiled? The Talmud answers because of fighting between us and because of too much self-righteousness.

It tells the story of a Jerusalem man whose riches and extravagant parties were legendary. Everyone who was anyone went, and everyone wanted an invite. Well, this is the 1st Century so there is not mail or texting or evites, and this rich man sent his servant to deliver invitations personally.

The wealthy man was planning a big party, and one day as preparations were being made, it occurred to the man that he hadn't invited his dear friend Kamtza, who would be very hurt if he didn't get an invitation, so he asked his servant to go invite him. Now the servant was up in years, and didn't hear so well with all the noise of party preparations happening all around, and he thought his employer had told him to invite Bar Kamtza, instead of Kamtza, and so he went to house of Bar Kamtza who was very surprised but said "yes"!

Well, the servant didn't know that Bar Kamtza and his employer hated each other. They had worked together on the Board of the Temple Sinai up in Babylon, and had butted heads. Eventually there were accusations about missing funds, and backroom deals, about fake news and as always, such things are rooted in hurt feelings. Bar Kamtza couldn't even remember exactly what the fight was about.

But the host of the party remembered. Every detail! Imagine his surprise, shock and horror when he sees Bar Kamtza waltzing into the party, wearing robes and jewels and big gaudy turban with a gold pin in the front. He marched right up to Bar Kamza and demanded, hands on hips, that he leave forthwith! "Get out! "

Bar Kamza was embarrassed and felt like a fool, and not wanting any more trouble, he tries to make peace by offering to pay for any food he eats. "Get out! Tzeh mi po!" the host insists.

Bar Kamza then offers to pay for half the expense of this extravagant party. "Get out! Tzeh mi po!" demands the host .

Bar Kamza, having arrived excited at the thought of moving past what had happened before, offers to pay for the entire party. "Get out! Tzeh mi po!" the host bellows, and orders his bouncers to escort Bar Kamza out. The other guests and dignitaries, including several prominent rabbis, stood in shock but said nothing, and did nothing. The host was known to be a bit petty and vengeful, a counterpuncher and they wanted to stay on the invite list.

Humiliated, hurt and confused, Bar Kamza vows revenge against the rabbis at the party who did not come to his defense while he was being publicly shamed.

A few weeks later, Bar Kamza is lunching with the Roman Governor of Judeah, about a building project. The Governor asks how the Jews are faring, and Bar Kamtza, still furious, begins to tell the Governor of their treachery, of the wealth they are skimming from his taxes, and that they are encouraging a revolt against Rome!

Governor isn't sure he believes Bar Kamza, and to test this, he sends a beautiful perfect calf to be sacrificed as a peace offering at the Temple in Jerusalem, and asks Bar Kamza to accompany his offering. On the way, Bar Kamza worried his enemies will be let off the hook, sneaks out of his tent in the middle of the night, goes up to the calf and cuts the calf's lip so it will be unfit for a sacrifice at the Temple, but so minor that a Roman soldier with him won't notice.

Upon seeing the wounded animal coming to the temple, the rabbis realize they are in a sticky situation. Some advocate making an exception to the law and allowing the calf to be offered; it will save many lives, they argue. Rabbi Zecharia ben Avkolos refuses that idea, saying it will set a precedent that the Board will not like. Then the rabbis suggest putting Bar Kamza to death since he is the cause, but again Rabbi Zecharia ben Avkolos balks, because death is not the punishment for hurting a calf or bringing an offering that isn't qualified. After much argument, the Governor's peace offering was refused at the insistence of Rabbi Zecharia.

The Governor tells Rome and, incensed and insulted, they send an army to lay siege to Jerusalem, eventually leading to its downfall and the destruction of the Temple on Tisha B'Av in the year 70 C.E. Josephus (Wars II, 17:2) confirms that the beginning of the war was caused by the refusal to accept the offering of the Emperor. Both the rich man and Bar Kamtza's lives are destroyed and their wealth taken.

The Talmud says that because Rabbi Zecharia was so strict and rigid, the Temple was destroyed, and the Jews sent into exile. I think it starts earlier. Others say it was because our people attacked one another. Others say the inhospitality of the wealthy man toward Bar Kamtza who tried to make things right is the source of the sin.

Now a tale from a much later Talmud, one that takes place in a place not unlike Vermont, in a Temple, not unlike this one.

There was a cantor, let's call him Markus Cantorus, and he grew up in a Reform Jewish home, and loved Debby Friedman, loved English tunes and in general, wanted to be part of the larger Reform movement.

There was a choir leader, let's call him Brucius Judius, and he was from a much more traditional family, but they both ended up at this Temple in this town, and one year, they faced the daunting task of creating High Holy Day Services together.

Both pushed for their vision. Both talked, practiced, argued, and came back to work some more. It could have torn the temple apart, but instead, little by little that found their way to compromise. Brucius Judius worked in more traditional chants and folkways, and Markus Cantorius in *Heal us Now*, and *The Lord is My Shephard*, and Debbie's *Mi Shebeirach*, and through their exemplary virtues, they compromised. Each gave up things that were important to them and each got things that were important to them, but more than anything, they put the need to stay together, to work together, to make it work as the higher virtue. Because of their ability to find a way to work together, we were made stronger, and Rome didn't come and destroy us.

We can be so righteous, and so ethical, full of righteous-indignation and moral certainty, we can be so certain of our positions and that we are doing right, that we inadvertently help tear a society apart. Our own values, if not balanced with other virtues, can help create the very thing we are trying to avoid.

Or we can learn to listen, to actually hear what the other is saying and not dismiss them as ignorant, but to see the good intentions in both and let that guide them.

Our Temple needs to be big enough for different opinions, different approaches, whether it is services or our social action. We will all feel uncomfortable

sometimes, but if our hearts are in it for good; if we are striving to be good and to serve our people and God, then surely we can find a way to come together in holiness, and compromise.

Let's look to one another's intentions, even when it's hard and frustrated. Let's remember we are all trying to be good, and we have different ideas of what that is.

Let us love one another, talk to one another, listen to another, and find ways to move forward together into the new year.

It is not too hard for you. It is not something that can only be done in other places by other people. Our ability to cooperate, to work together is one of the things that defines us as human beings.

And as our Torah reading reminds us, our ability to be good, our ability to live up to our best selves is in us always. It is in our hearts, and in our minds, and in our mouths that we may live and move forward together.

Ken Y'hi Ratzon