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Posted May 24, 2001 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

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BH

DIVORCE AND THE DESTRUCTION OF JERUSALEM

Before we study our mishnah we need to understand the idea of sikarikon. This describes the following situation. During wartime, especially the Bar Kokhba revolt, Roman soldiers would threaten Jewish residents with death unless they sold away their property for pennies on the dollar, so to speak. The soldiers really had no interest in keeping or working the land and so, consequently, sold it cheaply but still enough to make a profit. For example, if a soldier stole a piece of property worth a thousand dollars by buying it for one hundred dollars, he would turn around and sell it for five hundred dollars and make a good profit for himself but without charging the true price of the land. This is what we mean when we use the term sikarikon: this stolen property.

In Judea the law of sikarikon was not [applied] to those killed in war, [but] those killed in a war and afterward the sikarikon is [applied]. How? One who took from sikarkon and went back and took it from the [original] owner his purchase is invalid. If one took it from the owner and returned and took it from sikarikon, his purchase is valid. (M. Gittin 5:6)

This mishnah is highly technical and difficult to understand. Basically, what it is saying is that if one purchased land from a soldier who'd stolen it through the process of sikarikon, then that purchase is invalid. But if one had already paid the owner and then paid the price again in a sikarikon situation, that is a valid purchase. Obviously, this mishnah seeks to minimize the economic damage inflicted by the Roman armies.

It was these very armies which destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 C.E. As is its wont, the Gemara takes this concrete mishnah about dealing with an occupying army and refocuses it onto an emotional and spiritual plane. While there is probably some truth to the concept that the Jews lost the battle of Jerusalem with Rome because they could not make peace between the fighting factions, the Gemara spiritualizes this discord and relates it to the Temple service.

Said Rabbi Yohanan what [does Scripture mean by what] is written, "Happy the person who always fears, but one who hardens his heart will fall into trouble (Proverbs 28:14)"? [It refers to] the destruction of Jerusalem [which came about because of an incident involving] Kamtsa and Bar Kamtsa...[How did it happen?] A certain man loved a [man called] Kamtsa and hated a [man called] Bar Kamtsa. He made a feast [and then] said to his servant: Go and bring Kamtsa. The man went and brought Bar Kamtsa. When the man [who gave the party] found him [Bar Kamtsa] there he said: Behold this man hates me. What do you want here? Leave!

[Bar Kamtsa] said to him: Since I came, let me stay and I will pay you for what I eat and drink.

He said to him: No

He said to him: Then let me give you half the cost of your feast.

He said to him: No.

He said to him: Then let me give you the [complete] cost of your feast.

He said to him: No, and took his hand and put him out.

[Bar Kamtsa] said: Since the rabbis sat there and did not stop him, it can be deduced that they were comfortable [with what he did]. I will go and slander them at the king's house. He went and said to the Caesar: The Jews are revolting against you.

He said: How can I tell?

He said to him: Go and send them an offering [in honor of the government] and see whether they will offer it [on the altar]. So he sent with him a choice calf. While on the way he made a blemish on its lip, and some say, on the white of its eye, in a place where we count it as a blemish but they do not. The rabbis sought to offer it in order to keep peace the Government. Said Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkulas to them: [People] will say that blemished animals are offered on the altar. They [then] sought to kill Bar Kamtsa so that he should not go and inform against them, [but] Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkulas said to them: Is one who makes a blemish on consecrated animals to be put to death? Rabbi Yohanan said: Through the humbleness of Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkulas our House has been destroyed, our Temple burnt and we are exiled from our land.

(B. Gittin 55b-56a)

The rudeness shown to one person was the downfall of a whole people. Our single, individual actions are always more potent than we know and this is but an extreme example.

Discussion Questions:

1. How does the action of one Jew affect Jews everywhere? How can treasuring hurt feelings damage a whole group?
2. There was a chance to save this situation but Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkulas refused to let the community take advantage of it. Are there any issues today, in the Jewish or secular worlds, where we must play by new rules as the old ones do not work anymore?