

Kamtza and Bar Kamtza
Tales of the Talmud with Rabbi Nick Renner

R. Yochanan said, “What illustrates the verse, ‘Happy is the man who always fears, but he who hardens his heart falls into evil’¹?”

The destruction of Jerusalem came through a Kamtza and a Bar Kamtza in this way. A certain man had a friend named Kamtza and an enemy named Bar Kamtza. He once threw a party and said to his servant, “Go and bring Kamtza.” The servant accidentally went and brought Bar Kamtza. He came and found him sitting. He said, “What is this? That man is an enemy of this other man!² What do you want here? Get out!”

[Bar Kamtza] responded, “Since I am already here, let me stay, and I will pay you for whatever I eat and drink.

He said, “I won't.” [Bar Kamtza replied,] “Then let me pay 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 grabbed him by the arm and threw him out.

Said [Bar Kamtza], “Since the Rabbis were sitting there and didn't stop him, this shows that they agreed with him. In that case, I'll go and inform against them to the government.” He went and said to the Emperor, “The Jews are rebelling against you.” [The Emperor] said, “How can I tell?” [Bar Kamtza] said to him, “Offer them a sacrificial animal and see if they will sacrifice it.” So [the Emperor] sent with him a calf for sacrifice. While on the way [Bar Kamtza] 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 [Romans] do not.

¹ Proverbs 28:14

² i.e. “you are my enemy.”

At first, the Rabbis were inclined to offer the sacrifice in order not to offend the government. But R. Zecharia b. Avkulos said to them, "People will say that blemished animals are offered on the altar!" They then proposed to kill Bar Kamtza so that he should not go and inform against them, but R. Zecharia b. Avkulos said to them, "Is a person who puts a blemish on sacrificial animals to be put to death?!?"

Thus, R. Yochanan said, "Through the humility of R. Zecharia b. Avkulos our House has been destroyed, our Sanctuary burned, and we ourselves exiled from our land."

Babylonian Talmud
Tractate Gittin 55b-56a