

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

"A TALMUD TALE" PREMIERS THIS FEBRUARY IN HOUSTON, TX!

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BH

THE DESTRUCTION OF JERUSALEM ... FROM A DIFFERENT POINT OF VIEW

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The story of Jerusalem's destruction is possibly one of the best-known stories in all of rabbinic literature (B. Gittin 55b-57a). This version of it sheds some more light on the fall of a city:

For three and a half years Vespasian surrounded Jerusalem, having four generals with him: the general of Arabia, of Africa, of Alexandria, and of Palestine. With regard to the general of Arabia two teachers differ as to his name, one declaring that it was Killus and the other Pangar. In Jerusalem there were four councilors, Ben Tzitzit, Ben Gorion, Ben Nakdimon, and Ben Kalba-Savua. Each of them was capable of supplying food for the city for ten years. There was also there Ben Battiah, the nephew of R. Johanan b. Zakkai, who was appointed in charge of the stores, all of which he burnt. When R. Johanan b. Zakkai heard of this he exclaimed, 'Woe!' It was reported to Ben Battiah, 'Your uncle exclaimed "woe!"' He sent and had him brought before him and asked, 'Why did you exclaim "woe!"?...He answered, 'Because you burnt all the stores, and I thought that so long as the stores were intact the people would not expose themselves to the dangers of battle.'...

Three days later Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai went out to walk in the market-place and saw how people seethed straw and drank its water; and he said to himself, 'Can men who seethe straw and drink its water withstand the armies of Vespasian?' He added, 'I have come to the conclusion that I must get out of here.' He sent a message to Ben Battiah, 'Get me out of here.' He replied, 'We have made an agreement among ourselves that nobody shall leave the city except the dead.' He said, 'Carry me out in the guise of a corpse.' Rabbi Eliezer carried him by the head, Rabbi Joshua by the feet, and Ben Battiah walked in front. When they reached [the city gates, the guards] wanted to stab him. Ben Battiah said to them, 'Do you wish people to say that when our teacher died his body was stabbed!' On his speaking to them in this manner, they allowed him to pass. (Midrash Lamentations Rabbah 1:31)

Discussion Questions:

1. The basics of the story are the same: fighting among factions causes a shortage of food that leads Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai to the conclusion that the situation is hopeless. Not to ask the obvious, but to truly cause you to think about it, why is this? Is it the lack of coordinated defense or the shortage of food in the besieged city? Think of Leningrad during WWII, where the besieged residents withstood many years of privations. Yet they stood fast...was it because they had one leader in whom they believed, or perhaps one cause in which they believed?
2. There is no version of this story at all in the Yerushalmi. What do you make of this?