

## CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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**BH**

### MYTH, MEMORY AND MARTHA

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There is a great deal of difference, in our American minds, between myth and/or memory and history. We trust that a historical account to be dispassionate and well researched. A myth, by contrast, may or may not be made out of whole cloth. It may have some kernel of truth but details are added over time, giving it a storybook quality. Memory can be seen as either history or myth. Unfortunately, as police can tell you, eyewitnesses are notoriously bad at identifying situations and suspects. The memories of one single event are probably as diverse as the people who witnessed it. And time and a propensity for myth-making and memory may alter versions of history.

Judaism emphasizes memory and myth far more than history. The story of one woman's demise during the destruction of Jerusalem provides an excellent example of this phenomenon. Martha, a rich widow, approaches death as she approached life: from a vantage point of power and privilege. In this case the memories of her life interfere with her dealing with the historical reality she faces.

The biryoni [Zealot bands] were then in the city. The Rabbis said to them: Let us go out and make peace with them [the Romans]. They would not let them, but on the contrary said, Let us go out and fight them. The Rabbis said: You will not succeed. They then rose up and burnt the stores of wheat and barley so that a famine ensued. Martha the daughter of Boetius was one of the richest women in Jerusalem. She sent her manservant out saying, Go and bring me some fine flour. By the time he went it was sold out. He came and told her, There is no fine flour, but there is white [flour]. She then said to him, Go and bring me some. By the time he went the white flour had sold out. He came and told her, There is no white flour, but there is dark [flour]. She then said to him, Go and bring me some. By the time he went the dark flour had sold out. He came and told her, There is no dark flour, but there is barley [flour]. She then said to him, Go and bring me some. By the time he went the barley flour had sold out. She had taken off her shoes, but she said, I will go out and see if I can find anything to eat. Some dung stuck to her foot and she died. Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai applied to her the verse, "The tender and delicate woman among you which would not adventure to set the sole of her foot upon the ground. (Deuteronomy 28:56)"...

When Martha was about to die, she brought out all her gold and silver and threw it in the street, saying, "What is the good of this to me?" and thus it is written, "They shall cast their silver in the streets. (Ezekiel 7:19)" (B. Gittin 56a)

First we note that this entire story is told in Aramaic, meaning it is probably a later, rather than earlier, composition, i.e., relatively far-removed in time from the events it describes which would have taken place in 70 C.E. And of course, the symmetry and logical progression of the famine's course as well as the neat illustrations of biblical verses are all indications that this is a fable and not an actual episode from Martha's life, although she may indeed have been impoverished by the siege against Jerusalem.

#### Discussion Questions:

1. How do we see the difference between memory, myth and history in today's journalism and academic research? Is it possible to be a dispassionate reporter?

2. Martha was one of, if not the, richest women in Israel at the time of Jerusalem's destruction. She is not able to cope with her change in fortunes. Can wealth become a handicap when survival is at stake? Why or why not?
3. We noted that the story here is in Aramaic. It also reports detailed dialogue. It is doubtful that anyone there was marking her exact words. Does this detract from the lessons the story teaches? Why or why not?