

### United Synagogue of Hoboken

TAMUZ/AV 5779

August 2019

# Political Civility: Rethinking Bar Kamtza

Rabbi Robert Scheinberg



In the last couple of years, we have seen an increase in the number of incidents in which political conflict has spilled out into interpersonal relations between individuals who do not know each other. Restaurateurs have refused to serve perceived political opponents; public figures and private citizens alike have been harassed for their perceived political views. I was asked: are there any classical Jewish parallels to such incidents?

I responded that a close parallel may be a story that is well-known to many Jews, especially at this time of year, as we approach the fast day of Tisha B'Av (observed this year on August 11) that commemorates the destruction of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem (by the Babylonian Empire in 586 BCE, and by the Roman Empire in 70 CE).

The Talmud relates that the city of Jerusalem was destroyed by the Roman Empire as the culmination of a series of tragic incidents that all began with an incident at a party. According to the Talmud: A certain man had a friend named Kamtza and an enemy named Bar Kamtza. He once made a party and said to his servant, "Go and bring Kamtza." However, the servant got confused with the similar names and made the mistake of bringing Bar Kamtza. (In a study group I led last year at this time, someone quipped: "That's like if I wanted to invite Sarah Huckabee Sanders to my party and I invited Bernie Sanders by mistake.")

When the host found him there, he said, "You are my enemy!" [alternate translation: "You tell tales about me!"] What are you doing here? Get out."

Bar Kamtza responded: "Since I am here, let me stay, and I will pay you for whatever I eat and drink."

The host said, "I won't."

- "Then let me give you half the cost of the party!"
- "No!" said the host.
- "Then let me pay for the whole party!"

The host still said "No!" and took him by the hand and threw him out of the party.

Bar Kamtza then said: "Since the Rabbis were sitting there and did not stop him, this shows that they agreed with him. I will go and inform against them to the Government."

Bar Kamtza then contacted the Roman Emperor and said, "The Jews are rebelling against you." When the Emperor was skeptical, Bar Kamtza proposed a test: he invited the Emperor to donate an animal for a sacrifice in the Temple in Jerusalem and see if the Jewish leaders would accept it. While transporting the animal, however, Bar Kamtza blemished the animal to render it unfit for sacrifice, with the knowledge that the Jewish leaders would probably refuse to offer it as a sacrifice, which would lead the Emperor to conclude that they were being disrespectful to him.

This is only the first chapter of a multi-part story, but it is the most famous part of the story. I have had numerous opportunities to teach this story to adults and children alike, and I always ask: what were the "off-ramps" that were missed in this story? What could each of the characters done to prevent the unfolding disaster? (continued on page 2)

#### **UPCOMING EVENTS**

#### August 2019

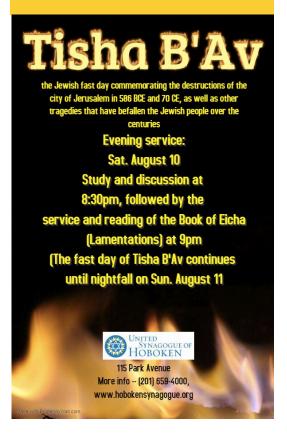
- 7 Legacy of Abraham NHIEC 7pm
- 10 Tisha B'Av at USH 8:30pm
- 12 USH at the Shelter 6pm
- 13 USH Board of Trustees 7pm

#### September 2019

- 6 Shabbat in the Park Pizza Party(at USH) -5:30pm
- 22 Mini-Holiday Series
- 29 Erev Rosh Hashanah
- 30 Rosh Hashanah Day 1

Friday night services 7:00 pm Saturday morning services 9:30 am

See www.hobokensynagogue.org and the USH Facebook page for more info on these and other upcoming events!



#### (continued from page 1)

Consistently, people answer: the host of the party is primarily at fault. He should have welcomed Bar Kamtza, or at least taken him up on his generous financial offer. Alternately, the rabbis at the party should have spoken up for Bar Kamtza to spare him the embarrassment of being thrown out of a party. The Talmud indicates that this was Rabbi Eleazar's interpretation of the story as well: "Rabbi Eleazar says: Come and see how great is the power of shame, for the Holy Blessed One assisted Bar Kamtza in destroying God's Temple and burning God's sanctuary." (BT Gittin 57a) This story is often used as an illustration of the *sin'at hinam*, "causeless hatred," that was the ultimate cause of the destruction of Jerusalem. In this story, a petty interpersonal conflict festers into a conflict between peoples and ultimately leads to death and destruction, because of the host's intransigence.

As time goes on, however, I have started to think about this story differently — and over time, my empathy for the host has grown, as my empathy for Bar Kamtza's humiliation has diminished.

A first textual clue is that Bar Kamtza is introduced as a בעל דבבא ba'al devava – a phrase that is often translated as 'enemy,' but can also mean 'tale-bearer.' And in fact, that is what Bar Kamtza does: immediately after being thrown out of the party, he contacts the Emperor and makes a false report about the Jewish people.

Bar Kamtza's later actions give us some indication of his character, his connections, and the role that he apparently plays in Judean society. That he has access to the Emperor places him at the upper echelons of society, aligned with those who already have a conflicted relationship with the leaders of the Jewish community. When Bar Kamtza has a grievance, he responds immediately by crafting a plan of deception and manipulation, with the goal of provoking a regional catastrophe, and he has the high level connections to make it happen. It is possible that some of these qualities are the reasons why the host was not excited to have him at the party in the first place. This leads me to suggest an alternate reading of the story. Bar Kamtza is not at all "embarrassed" to be thrown out of the party. Rather, he is a political operative who knows how to exploit every mis-step of his opponents. Such a person is skilled at harnessing umbrage and using it for political purposes. I picture Bar Kamtza receiving the invitation to the party, realizing that it must have been received in error, and rejoicing that he has an opportunity to exploit his enemy's mistake. Of course he is going to attend the party, and of course he is going to respond with crocodile tears when he is asked to leave, with the goal of provoking an overreaction by the host. And of course he is going to use the experience as a pretext to pursue the goal that he had already established – but this time with the appearance of the moral high ground.

What would have happened if the host had welcomed him into the party, or taken him up on one of his offers of payment? My sense is that Bar Kamtza would have found some way to exploit this as well. He might say, for example, that it is a sign that the host is unprincipled and materialistic. Or he might overhear some information at the party that he could use to pursue his goals. Or he might simply wait until tomorrow for another chance to pursue his goals. I used to empathize with Bar-Kamtza over his embarrassment at being disinvited, but now I feel that even if he is coddled, he will always manage to find something to take umbrage about, at a time and place of his choosing.

The implications of this reading of this classic story are challenging in light of the current debate over "civility" in the United States and elsewhere. I would still counsel civility as the wise choice in almost every interaction with people with whom one disagrees, even if the disagreement is vehement. A person like Bar Kamtza is trying to provoke an overreaction from the other side, which is a good enough reason not to overreact. But I am increasingly convinced that Bar Kamtza does not deserve our sympathy. And sadly, our world is full of those who will exploit apparent minor slights with the goal of magnifying them into serious conflicts — and that, too, is a manifestation of the *sin'at hinam*, "causeless hatred," that we are cautioned to avoid.  $\Rightarrow$ 



#### **MEET OUR NEW RABBINIC INTERN**

Noam Kornsgold, from East Windsor, NJ, is currently in his fourth year of The Jewish Theological Seminary's Rabbinical School program. In addition to studying towards ordination, Noam is also pursuing a Masters in Talmud and Rabbinics. Throughout the year, Noam (along with his wife Gavi) serves as the Jewish Life Director for List College, the undergraduate program for JTS, and as JTS Chancellor Arnold M. Eisen's research assistant. Noam spends his summers at Camp Ramah in the Berkshires, where he has been privileged to serve as a counselor and a unit head. Noam was graduated from the Joint Program between Columbia and JTS, where he earned bachelor degrees in History and Talmud and Rabbinics. Noam loves watching superhero films, reading detective novels, and living in New York with his wife Gavi. Noam is very excited to serve as the United Synagogue of Hoboken's rabbinic intern for the year!

# SHABBAT IN THE PARK

Join us for song, prayer and friends to welcome Shabbat!

Bring a Picnic Dinner (Kosher or Vegetarian, Please!) and We'll Provide the Challah and Grape Juice!

Free and open to the community, special activities for families with children 5 and under. RSVP appreciated



·WEATHER PERMITTING

(Please note: regularly scheduled service takes place at the synagogue at 7pm as usual.)

#### 2019 Dates & Locations\*

- May 31 Church Sq. Park Ice Cream Party! (5th btw Park & Willow)
- Jun 14 Maxwell Place Park (11th and the river)
- Jul 12 Church Sq. Park
- Jul 26 Van Vorst Park (Montgomery
- Sept 6 USH Pizza Party! (115 Park Ave)
- (5:30pm start time)
- \*Starts at 6pm unless otherwise noted







To RSVP or for more information please contact **ushpreschool@gmail.com** 

115 Park Ave Hoboken, NJ 201-653-8666 www.kaplancooperativepreschool.org

5/201

#### Thursday mornings, 9.30-11am

# Torah Study with Rabbi Scheinberg





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You are cordially invited to our interfaith symposium " *The Legacy Of Prophet Abraham in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*" hosted by the North Hudson Islamic Education Center (NHIEC)

at **7:00PM**, **Wednesday Aug 7**. The program will last till 9:00 PM

Father Eugene P. Squeo, President of the Brotherhood Sisterhood Association, will serve as moderator

Rabbi Naomi Kalish, panelist Father Phil Latronico, panelist Sheikh Mohammad Alhayek, panelist

North Hudson Islamic Education Center (NHIEC) 4613 Cottage Place, Union City, NJ 07087

Mitzvah opportunity:



Family Promise,
Hudson County's shelter for homeless
families, needs your help,
August 11-18 at
Temple Beth El, Jersey City

Family Promise is a shelter for homeless families that is hosted by a number of houses of worship in our area for a week at a time. USH does not have enough space to be a host - but we are helping to provide volunteers for various roles (providing food, spending time with the families and kids, and sleeping overnight) when Family Promise is hosted at Temple Beth El in Jersey City on August 11-18, 2019.

Sign up at http://bit.ly/FamilyPromiseBethElAugust2019 for a volunteer slot!

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## MITZVAH DAY IS COMING!

#### Mitzvah Day Is Coming!

Sunday, Sept. 15, 2019

13 projects! All ages welcome!

Questions? Please contact: mitzvahday@hobokensynagogue.org



## MITZVAH DAY SEPTEMBER 15, 2019



A chance for the USH community — adults and children of all ages — to come together to make a difference in our community. Look over the list of activities;

choose a first, second, and third choice. Sign up: bit.ly/USH\_Mitzvah\_Day\_2019 NOTE: FIRST COME FIRST SERVED!

Some popular projects will fill up very quickly!

Questions? Write us at mitzvahday@hobokensynagogue.org .

Agency Name	Description of Mitzvah	Details: When, Where, Who, How many
Making Sandwiches for Hoboken Shelter Shifts A,B,C, D	How many sandwiches can we make this year? Last year we made more than 300! Sandwiches are caringly prepared, wrapped, and boxed for Shelter guests. We will then deliver them to the Shelter.	Shift A: 10am-11am (especially for children age 7-12 and their families); Shift B: 11:15am-12:15pm; Shift C: 12:30-1:30pm; Shift D: 1:45-2:45pm + delivery to shelter At USH, 115 Park Ave. Ages 7 and up; 15 per shift (When you sign up, indicate shift preference)
Visiting Seniors	Make an impact and engage in an age-old Jewish tradition: visit a Jewish homebound senior in Bayonne/JC/ Hoboken in their home and brighten their day with a gift from USH. Co-sponsored by Jewish Family & Counseling Service.	11am-1pm Meet at USH All ages can volunteer 12 participants only (Having a car is helpful but not essential)
Mitzvah Stories & Songs (for kids under 4 & families)	Mitzvahs are for kids of all ages! Participate in an age-appropriate activity, co-sponsored by the Kaplan Preschool. More details coming soon!	10-11:30am Meet at USH Kids under 4 along with their families Unlimited number of participants
No-sew fleece blankets (for kids age 5-8 & families)	Create blankets for donation to the Hudson Hematology Oncology Center, Jersey City. Co-sponsored by PJ Library of Hudson County.	10-11:30am Meet at USH Kids age 5-8 and their families Unlimited number of participants. You must sign up but can drop in any time during the activity.
Scouts Food Drive	Help the Hoboken Food Pantry feed its clients! Cheerfully encourage Acme shoppers to donate food to Hoboken Food Pantry. Cosponsored by Cub Scout Pack 18.	9am-1pm Meet at Hoboken Acme (614 Clinton) Age 7+ (must be accompanied by adult) 15+ people needed
Toiletries Drive for Hoboken Shelter	More than 1,000 guests shower weekly at the Hoboken Shelter. Sort and pack travel-sized toiletries into mini-kits for guests of the Shelter.	1-2:30 pm Meet at USH Age 7+; 6 people needed
Cemetery Clean-up	Perform an act of chesed shel emet - an ultimate act of loving-kindness for the deceased. Clear growth and other debris in USH section at Riverside Cemetery. Cosponsored by Tribe of Hoboken/Jersey City.	11am-2pm Riverside Cemetery, Saddle Brook, NJ Adults—Strong people needed 6-8 volunteers

Continued on next page!

We need help from the entire community to collect:

**Mini-size Toiletries** for the Hoboken Shelter – New and Unused shampoo, conditioner, toothpaste, body lotion, soap, and individually wrapped toothbrushes. **Box in the USH Lobby now!** 

**Winter Coats** for Welcome Home of Jersey City, which helps refugees in our area – freshly laundered, gently used winter coats for men, women, and children of all ages. **September 8-15 only.** 

**School clothing** for the Hoboken Food Pantry – freshly laundered, gently used school-appropriate clothing for children going into kindergarten through 8th grade. **September 8-15 only.** 



#### MITZVAH DAY SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 15, 2019 (CONTINUED)



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Agency Name	Description of Mitzvah	Details: When, Where, Who, How many
Coat drive for refugees	Drop off freshly laundered, gently used coats for all ages/sizes to USH from Sept. 8 through Mitzvah Day. Volunteers will sort, label, and deliver them to Welcome Home, which aids refugees in the Jersey City area.	1-3 p.m. Age 13+ 4-6 people USH
Cookies in a Jar (Middle Grades activity)	Create "cookies in a jar" – dry-ingredient gifts to be donated to clients of the Hoboken Food Pantry.	Noon-2pm prep, plus 2-2:30pm delivery Meet at USH; group will walk over to Our Lady of Grace Church, 411 Clinton St. 2-2:30pm 5th-7th graders
Spiffing up the sanctuary	Help prepare our sanctuary for the High Holy Days. Cleaning and polishing the Torah crowns, breastplates, brass railing, plaques and other decorations; ironing prayer shawls; and other preparation tasks.	1-2:30pm Age 15+ 5 people
Serve lunch at Shelter (teen/high school activity)	Prepare and serve a meal for the guests at the Hoboken Shelter.	11am-2:30pm Hoboken Shelter, 300 Bloomfield St. 8th-12th graders Bring your own vegetarian or Kosher lunch
Food Pantry (Shift A and B)	Assist our Hoboken neighbors at the Emergency Food Pantry, where they receive clothing, household items, and food. Shift A: Organize donated clothing and food; Shift B: Assist Food Pantry clients in selecting items from the collection room.	Shift A: 11:30am-1:30pm: sorting Shift B: 2pm-4pm distribution Our Lady of Grace Church, 411 Clinton St. Age 10+ 4-6 participants
Lobby Welcome Desk	The first face people see on Mitzvah Day! Welcome and greet volunteers and direct them to the project spaces.	Shift A 9:45 am–12:15 pm Shift B 12:15–2:45 pm 2-3 volunteers for each shift–Adults only

Sign up online at <a href="www.hobokensynagogue.org/mitzvah-day.html">www.hobokensynagogue.org/mitzvah-day.html</a> or <a href="bit.ly/USH\_Mitzvah\_Day\_2019">bit.ly/USH\_Mitzvah\_Day\_2019</a> before September 12. You will be contacted by email with your assignment the week of Mitzvah Day.

#### We are also collecting the following items:

(Toiletries drive happening now; coats & clothing starting Sept. 8, all in the USH lobby. Deadline to contribute all items is 11 a.m. on Mitzvah Day – September 15.)

- Coats for men, women, & kids: freshly laundered, gently used, all ages & sizes. Drop off Sept. 8–15.
- School clothes in good condition: freshly laundered, gently used, for clients of the Food Pantry. Drop off Sept 8 – 15.
- \*\*New/unused\*\* travel-sized toiletries, to be donated to the Hoboken Shelter: shampoo and conditioner, soap and body lotion, toothpaste, and individually wrapped toothbrushes.

#### **DONATIONS:**

**General Fund**Alix Biel
Jonathan Zaid

Kaplan Preschool Fund Michele & Keith Lustman

Tenafly Pediatrics

#### **CONDOLENCES TO:**

Rick Stempler, on the loss of his grandfather, Melvin Stempler.

Thank you for sponsoring Kiddush:

July 6 Casey Urban & Kyle Lipsky in honor of the Simchat Bat of their daughter, Sydney

July 13 Eve Mensch

July 20 David Swirnoff & Merry Firschein

July 27 The Reibman Family, in honor of Isaac's Bar Mitzvah

#### **Congratulations to:**

Isaac Reibman on his bar mitzvah, and to his parents Andrew Reibman and Elisabeth Oldmixon and to this brother Benjamin, and his sisters Tzipporah and Shifra.

Casey Urban and Kyle Lipsky on their daughter's baby naming. Amy and David Strougo on the birth of their son Camden and to his brothers Mason and Jackson.



Thanks again to everyone who attended Beer Mitzvah, as our USH brought another nice haul to the Hoboken Shelter!

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# www.IntroJudaismNJ.com

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converting to Judaism?
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See www.IntroJudaismNJ.com for registration info

All classes meet for 24 sessions. This class fulfills many of the educational requirements towards conversion to Judaism, but interest in conversion is not a prerequisite for the class. A project of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism and the Rabbinical Assembly, NJ Region

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## IT'S THAT TIME OF YEAR AGAIN....



www.hobokensynagogue.org/membership

renew online, or find forms to print and send!

We are grateful for your support of our community!

#### PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

#### **By Jeremy Morley**



#### "Teach the Children Well"

What a remarkable privilege we share to be able to have our children educated Jewishly at the United Synagogue of Hoboken! Some months ago, I attended a weekend seminar for synagogue leaders and my new friends there were just utterly gobsmacked (that's English English) at the extent of USH's success in creating and maintaining such a dynamic, broad and flourishing educational program.

At the core of Jewish values is the emphasis on education. It's a Jewish duty to educate our children, as to Jewish ritual, ethics and history, and to teach good deeds by words and especially by example. I think that it's education that is the secret sauce of our survival and success.

**At USH we teach our children**, with great love and joy, through programs from infancy and all the way to 12<sup>th</sup> grade, that emphasize caring for others and connecting meaningfully with other people in our community.

We have the very best preschool. Rachelle and her crew are so warm, nurturing, loving, committed, kind and clever. The Kaplan Cooperative Preschool is truly committed to creating a nurturing and inclusive community for preschoolers and their families. Indeed, I am here as President of USH because I sent my youngest to Kaplan nine years ago. She absolutely blossomed here, and I learned my Jewishness for the second time as Hannah was learning it for the first time. Rachelle, Marcy and all the teachers welcome each family member into the school community, especially through the parent cooperative program.

#### A reviewer said:

"The best preschool for kids, especially from Jewish families. We are starting the 4th year (2 kids) and planning to send the third son to Kaplan as well, when he's 3yrs old. We love the teachers, the place, the attitude and a Jewish tradition touch. Kids are thriving, learning and having fun here."

And we really do have the very best Learning Center. Grace and her team are so devoted, joyful, encouraging, dedicated, astute and fun – and cuddly. Remembering my own experience at "cheder" in an orthodox shul in England, I thought "how can this stuff possibly be fun?!" But I was wrong. Grace and Rhonda and the teachers at the Learning Center showed me that Jewish learning for kids can be awesome. Their program is the envy of shuls throughout the East Coast.

Indeed, for this coming year the Learning Center is working on some amazing events, such as:

The Bible Players improv Jewish comedy team have been invited to teach Jewish values from the Bible to our students (and parents) during Shabbat.

Our LEGO architect will supervise our students join us in building two-story Hanukkiah in our sanctuary as we learn about Hanukkah and the ethic of enhancing a mitzvah through aesthetics known as *Hiddur Mitzvah*.

Our older students will travel to Philadelphia to contribute in Mitzvah projects throughout Philly, and to learn how the Jewish community contributed to the forming of our nation and continues to this day to mark a social action presence in the city.

Parents in and around Hoboken are just so incredibly fortunate to have the USH pre-school and the USH Learning Center available for their kids \$\psi\$

#### The USH "Pair for Prayer" Initiative

The skill of leading Jewish prayer services has long been an important aspect of Jewish leadership. A knowledgeable Jewish community like ours has many people who have these skills (and all bar/bat mitzvah students in our community acquire some of these skills), but we can always use more. You are invited to fill out the form at <a href="http://bit.ly/pair\_for\_prayer\_USH\_2019">http://bit.ly/pair\_for\_prayer\_USH\_2019</a>, to indicate what skills you have and what skills you are willing to teach as a volunteer. We will then make an effort to pair people together to acquire these skills. Many recordings, texts, etc are available to assist you, whether you are a teacher or a learner, at rabbischeinberg.blogspot.com.

#### **Shabbat Dinner Initiative**

We would like to try a new approach to encouraging people in our community to share shabbat meals together. We invite you to fill out this questionnaire (http://bit.ly/USH\_Shabbat\_Dinner\_Initiative\_2019) and to indicate if you are interested in hosting a shabbat dinner and inviting others from our community, and/or in being a guest at a shabbat dinner. We also invite you to indicate your approximate age and life stage, if you would be interested in connecting with others who are demographically similar to you. We will then work with the hosts to help them to invite people who have indicated a desire to be guests. We also have resources available to help people to learn and lead the Shabbat evening rituals (see <a href="http://rabbischeinberg.blogspot.com/p/resources-for-hosting-shabbat-dinner.html">http://rabbischeinberg.blogspot.com/p/resources-for-hosting-shabbat-dinner.html</a>). It is our hope that this initiative will strengthen the bonds that connect us to each other, as well as strengthen our connection to Shabbat. There is also an opportunity on the questionnaire to indicate if you would like to assist in organizing this initiative.

UNITED SYNAGOGUE OF HOBOKEN 115 Park Avenue Hoboken, NJ 07030-3703

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