

The Butterfly Effect in Judaism

Tish'a B'Av

Saddest day on Jewish calendar. History full of catastrophic events that befell Jews on Tish'a B'Av (accidentally or intentionally):

-From Mishnah [Ta'anit 4:6]:

- The spies Moses sent to scout the Promised Land brought back a largely negative report which demoralized the Israelites,
- Both Temples destroyed (586 BCE and 70 CE),
- The Bar Kochba revolt against Rome failed in 135 CE when he was killed and the city of Betar was destroyed, and
- Jerusalem was razed a year later, and the Exile began.

-Since then...

- In 1095, the Pope began the Crusades. On the way to the Land of Israel, the Crusaders slaughtered 30-50% of the Jews of Europe.
- In 1242, 24 cartloads of handwritten Talmuds burned in Paris.
- In 1290, Jews expelled from England.
- In 1306, Jews expelled from France.
- In 1492, Jews expelled from Spain, including my own ancestors.
- In 1626, the false messiah Shabtai Tzvi was born. His apostasy he dashed the hopes of millions of Jews (one-third of the total) and severely disrupted their lives.
- In 1914, World War I began:
 - Led to World War II and the death of 6 million Jews in the Holocaust.
 - Facilitated the Communist Revolution, leading to 70 years of darkness for Soviet Jews.
- In 1941, Nazis ordered the Final Solution: The Holocaust.

Why was the Second Temple Destroyed?

Why was the Second Temple destroyed? The Talmud tells us that it was because of **senseless hatred** – *sin'at chinam*.

Common interpretation: Jewish factions fighting among themselves made it easier for the Romans to win the war.

But elsewhere, Talmud says: The senseless hatred was a lot more focused; war against Roman occupation and destruction of Jerusalem and the Second Temple happened because of a strange backwater chain of events:

Jerusalem was destroyed on account of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza.

A certain man had a friend Kamtza and an enemy Bar Kamtza.

He once made a large feast and said to his servant: "Go bring me Kamtza."

The man went and brought him Bar Kamtza [instead, by mistake].

-When the man [who gave the party] found him there he said: "You are my enemy. What do you want here? Get up and leave."

-The other said: "Since I am here, do not put me to shame. Let me stay and I will pay you for whatever I eat and drink. Or I will sit without eating or drinking anything."

-He said: "I won't [let you stay. You must go.]"

-[Bar Kamtza said:] Then let me give you half the cost of the party.

-No, said the other.

-[Bar Kamtza said:] Then let me pay for the whole party.

-[The other] still said no, and he took him by the hand, stood him up and took him out.

-[Bar Kamtza said to himself:] "The rabbis were sitting there and did not protest his actions. This shows that they agreed with him. I will go and inform against them to the Government."

-He went and said to the Emperor [Nero]: "The Jews have rebelled against you."

-[The Emperor] said: "Can you prove it?"

-[Bar Kamtza] said to him: "The sacrifices which you send to the Jews to offer in the Temple they eat themselves and substitute [inferior animals]. Send them an offering and see whether they will offer it [on the altar]."

So [the Emperor] sent with him a choice calf. 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 as a blemish but [the Romans] do not.

The rabbis were inclined to offer it so as to avoid offending the Government.

-But Rabbi Zekharya ben Avkolas said to them: "People will say that blemished animals are offered on the altar. [The Torah does not allow this.]"

-Then they proposed to kill Bar Kamtza so that he should not go and inform against them, but Rabbi Zekharya ben Avkolas said to them: "Is one who makes a blemish on consecrated animals to be put to death? [That's not in the Torah.]" [As a result, they neither sacrificed the Emperor's animal nor killed the informer.]

[The Emperor then] sent against them Vespasian, [who would later become] Caesar. He came and besieged Jerusalem for three years [and destroyed it and the Temple]... Hence the popular saying: “Because of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza the Temple was destroyed.”

-Rabbi Yochanan thereupon remarked: [Also,] the [scrupulousness] of Rabbi Zekharya ben Avkolas destroyed our Temple, burned our Sanctuary, and exiled us from our land. Rabbi Yosei said: “The meekness and unwillingness of Zekharya ben Avkolas burnt the Temple.”

[Gittin 55b-56a and Lamentations Rabbah 4:3]

Rabbi Zekharya was right on not agreeing to kill a man for an offense that does not call for the death penalty, but wrong on not sacrificing animal (invoking piku'ach nefesh).

Rav Tzadok Ha-kohen of Lublin said that this story is in Tractate Gittin (Divorces) because God was “divorcing” Israel.

Corroboration

-Josephus [Wars II, 17:2] also says the war began because the Jews did not accept the offering of the Emperor:

Eleazar, the son of Ananias the high-priest, a very bold youth, who was at that time governor of the temple, persuaded those that officiated in the divine service to receive no gift or sacrifice from any foreigner. And this was the true beginning of our war with the Romans; for they rejected the sacrifice [offered by] Cæsar... When many... besought them not to reject the sacrifice, which it was customary for them to offer for their rulers, they would not be prevailed upon.

-The Talmud speaks of the “popular saying”: “Because of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza the Temple was destroyed”, indicating the story was widely known.

Analysis

-Bar Kamtza interpreted the invitation as an act of reconciliation, and so came! The host should have seen that, but: **senseless hatred!**

-The host publicly humiliated Bar Kamtza. This is the worst outrage – **senseless hatred!** Bar Kamtza was even willing to pay big bucks to avoid it. Talmud:

Rabbi Eleazar says: Come and see how great is the power of shame ... It caused God to destroy His Temple and burn His Sanctuary. [Gittin 57a]

-Rabbis should have intervened, but did not. Their behavior caused a (maybe) good Jew to turn against Judaism itself – **senseless hatred!**

-Some will say: This was just the straw that broke the camel's back. The war would have happened anyway. Maybe and maybe not.

Main Lesson: The Butterfly Effect

This is known as the "butterfly effect": Very small changes that produce very large effects.

If the servant had not invited the wrong person, the disastrous war would not have occurred.

It is the subject of a new branch of physics called "chaos theory". It was started in 1972 by Lorenz with the comment:

A butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil can cause a tornado in Texas. The present may determine the future, but the approximate present does not approximately determine the future.

Now, *all* events have a low probability of occurrence. No matter what happens, a small change sometime in the past would have caused them not to happen. The butterfly effect is just when the events in question are of a *massive* character.

Examples in the Torah

-If Lot had not slept with his daughter, we would not have had King David and will not have the future Messiah.

-If Joseph had agreed to become the secret lover of Potiphar's wife, he would not have gone to jail, would not have attracted Pharaoh's attention with his ability to interpret dreams, would not have become viceroy of Egypt, would not have brought his family to Egypt, and the Jews would not have been enslaved.

Examples in history

-In 43 BCE, Queen Cleopatra of Egypt seduced Antony while he was involved in a civil war with Octavian (later Augustus). Pascal, the French philosopher, wrote that if her nose had been shorter, the whole face of the world would have been changed [*Pensées*]. He meant she would have not have been considered beautiful, Antony would have paid more attention to the war, would have won it, and Rome would have remained a republic rather than become an empire.

-In 1905, Hitler applied twice to the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. He was rejected both times. Had he been accepted, he would have become an artist.

-In 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo because his driver took a wrong turn, and met a killer. This started World War I. All historians agree the world just blundered into this war. It also ushered in World War II.

-In 1918, a British soldier, Henry Tandey, was fighting in France in World War I. He had a German soldier in his line of fire. He decided to spare his life. That soldier was Adolf Hitler.

-In August 1945, the target for the second atomic bomb was Kokura, not Nagasaki. But the Japanese burned coal tar as a smokescreen, so the bomber could not find his precise target, and dropped the bomb on Nagasaki instead.

-In 1999, the spacecraft Mars Climate Orbiter received some commands in inches and pounds, but it was expecting meters and grams. The billion-dollar mission was lost.

-Benjamin Franklin wrote:

For want of a nail the shoe was lost,
For want of a shoe the horse was lost,
For want of a horse the rider was lost,
For want of a rider the battle was lost,
For want of a battle the kingdom was lost,
And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.

Some say this refers to the death of King Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth Field in 1425, when he fell from his horse.

The butterfly effect is also illustrated in a 1963 children's book by Charlotte Zolotow. It is called "The Quarreling Book", and I read to my grandchildren. In it, the father gets up on the wrong side of the bed and neglects to kiss the mother before leaving for work. The mother, peeved, takes it out on her son, who takes it out on his sister, who takes it out on her best friend at school, who takes it out on her little brother, who takes it out on his dog.

The dog doesn't understand, thinks it's a game, and he jumps on the little boy, licks his face, tickles him and makes him laugh. The boy, now in a good mood, then starts acting nicely with his sister, who apologizes to him and acts nicely with her school friend, who acts nicely with her brother, who acts nicely with his mother. Then the father comes home from work and greets the mother with a big kiss.

Conclusion

In 1965, the Lubavitcher Rebbe said:

Every person has an impact on his surroundings ... When a person blows in a room within a room, this affects the temperature at the North Pole ... for the entire world is in a unified state. And so, when a change takes place in a certain part of the world, there must be a change throughout the world.

So, be wary of the "butterfly effect". Be very scrupulous in everything you do, because even actions that seem minor can have cataclysmic consequences.