

On April 2, 2022, Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove of Manhattan's Park Avenue Synagogue delivered a sermon titled "The Pipeline Problem." In it, he laid out a dire future for the Conservative movement, which is contending with dramatically reduced enrollment at JTS, contraction of Conservative synagogues and inability to fill available Rabbinic positions.

I quote:

"Fewer choosing to enter Jewish education, fewer choosing to enter the rabbinate, fewer choosing to serve congregations, resulting in fewer congregations creating vibrant Jewish communities capable of inspiring the best and brightest to choose a career in service to the Jewish people. There are those who would say I am exaggerating, that there are bright spots to be found and that these trends are cyclical and thus not cause for alarm. I think those people are wrong. I think these people are in denial. I think I am being kind. I think this is a vicious and self-perpetuating cycle – an existential crisis facing American Jewry.¹"

It would be tempting to dismiss this as someone else's problem, one that does not affect us in the Orthodox community. That would be a grave mistake, on two counts. Firstly, if fewer Jews are connected with any kind of Judaism, we all lose out.

¹ <https://pasyn.org/sermon/pipeline-problem>

It means less Torah is being shared, less Jewish historical sensitivity is being developed, less Israel advocacy is taking place, less leadership and fewer dollars pouring into all of our Jewish institutions and causes.

Second, it is relevant to the Orthodox community because we also have a pipeline problem. In speaking with various Orthodox placement offices and rabbinical institutions around the country, and observing the local educational landscape, it is clear that fewer talented and dedicated educators are signing up for a life in avodat hakodesh. Young talmidei chachamim are more reluctant than ever to serve in the pulpit, and prime Rabbinic positions have fewer candidates than ever vying for them. Community Kollels, even the more yeshivish ones, are having difficulty finding members. In the Modern Orthodox community, it is harder and harder to find teachers and administrators, a problem that is compounded anywhere outside of larger communities, as we know all too well. If Tisha B'Av commemorates the destruction of Torah, we need to admit when that is happening on our watch, and ask why.

The central and most well known story about the Chorban Bayit appears in the Talmud, in Tractate Gittin and it is referred to as the story of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza. The Gemara relates that Bar Kamtza was accidentally invited to a meal hosted by a person who despised him, who intended to invite his friend Kamtza instead.. When the error was discovered, Bar Kamtza was reduced to begging to

retain his seat at the meal, yet was still ejected despite the pathetic display of groveling. Bar Kamtza realized that the Rabbinic leadership of the generation were present at the meal, and they all allowed him to be humiliated while sitting by idly. To exact revenge, he contrived a scheme to convince the Romans that the Rabbis were a dangerous fifth column. He asked the Roman centurions to send an animal as a sacrifice, which he damaged in a small and barely detectable manner. The Rabbis inspected the animal carefully, and realized they were placed in an impossible dilemma. Either they had to reject the sacrifice, thereby maintaining the standards of the Beit Hamikdash, or accept the sacrifice, and begin down a slippery slope of concessions. Rabbi Zecharia ben Avkolos insisted that the animal not be offered; after all, the Beit Hamikdash is not a place for compromise. The Rabbis suggested a third option- killing Bar Kamtza, whose perfidious behavior was placing the Jews in grave danger. Rabbi Zecharia rejected this suggestion as well, as that might lead people to the erroneous conclusion that causing a blemish in a sacrifice is a capital offense². In the meantime, everything Bar Kamtza sought to accomplish came to pass. The Romans offered their sacrifice, and used its rejection as a pretext to destroy the Jewish people.

² תלמוד בבלי מסכת גיטין דף נו עמוד א

סבור רבנן לקרוביה משום שלום מלכות, אמר להו רבי זכריה בן אבקולס, **יאמרו:** בעלי מומין קריבין לגבי מזבח!

סבור למיקטליה, דלא לייזיל ולימא, אמר להו רבי זכריה, **יאמרו:** מטיל מום בקדשים יהרג!

Who is to blame? One certainly cannot give a pass to Bar Kamtza. After all, he is so thin skinned that he cannot abide the fact that he was disliked or mistreated, so when he didn't get his way, he burned down the entire Beit haMikdash with him - to borrow an expression from Shimshon - תמות נפשי עם הפלשתים - I will die along with the Philistines I am about to kill. We've all heard of helicopter parents, we have spoken about submarine parents or lawnmower parents. These are the kind of parents who hover around their children and make sure they encounter no adversity, or make sure all adversity is cleared from their path. A teacher named Kelly Treleaven wrote an op-ed piece that was featured in the Washington Post this week, in which she talked about a different kind of parent, one more exhausting, dangerous and pernicious: The jackhammer parent. These kinds of parents are loud, obnoxious and relentless, refusing to change their minds once they get an idea in their head- about what their child is being taught or how they are being taught it; about the teacher who is doing the teaching and about the policies of the institution. Such parents are willing to loudly destroy the institution that educates their children, and make life miserable for the people who are doing so, because like Bar Kamtza, they think they are virtuous warriors who are here to teach bad people a lesson. I think this is one of the reasons it is so difficult to find educators. Yes, part of the difficulty of finding educators in our community is that being an educator requires one to be an idealist. One can complain that teachers are underpaid, and of course, they are- but unless and until that changes, being a

teacher means forgoing financial opportunities and material comforts that one's peers may be enjoying, in the service of a higher and noble calling. True idealists, though, are often aliyah minded, so finding the best educators is often a temporary prospect at best. But those idealists who *are* interested in education, who *are* willing to defer their dreams and do without, have no interest in the constant drama and politics that seem to be the rule at schools everywhere these days. Even when politics are not the issue, they often have to contend with their work being accorded lesser value; schools have state-of-the-art athletic facilities, amazing sports teams and outstanding college acceptance rates, but students can't read a piece of Talmud- or even a passage in Tanach- on their own after four years of high school. Dealing with these conditions all day, every day. is soul crushing. It is why, in the secular world, teachers are leaving in droves, teaching positions remain vacant in the thousands, and in our community, it is why potentially transformative educators are staying away from the classroom to begin with. If our schools didn't provide these things, you better believe that the jackhammer parents would be making relentless noise. This is the legacy of Bar Kamtza, who created the toxic environment that destroyed the Beit Hamikdash.

So Bar Kamtza deserves a fair share of the blame...but not all of it. Surprisingly, when looking to assign blame for the episode and its fallout, Chazal chose to point a finger in another direction - towards R' Zecharia ben Avkolas.

אמר רבי יוחנן: ענוותנותו של רבי זכריה בן אבקולס, החריבה את ביתנו, ושרפה את היכלנו, והגליתנו מארצנו.

Rabbi Zecharia's excessive caution, paranoid obstructionism and gratuitous humility were, according to our sages, the proximal cause of the destruction of the second Beit HaMikdash.

What was Rabbi Zecharia's crime? Who was he, anyway? You may be surprised to learn that Rabbi Zecharia ben Avkolas only appears in the Talmud one other time. The Talmud in Mesechet Shabbat features a debate between Beit Shamai and Beit Hillel regarding the correct method of disposing of chicken bones on Shabbat, assuming that the bones are considered muktzah and therefore problematic to move directly. The Talmud (Shabbat 143a) then shares that Rabbi Zecharia ben Avkolas refused to touch the bones directly and would instead look away and cast the bones onto the ground behind his seat:

אמרו עליו על רבי זכריה בן אבקולס שהיה מחזיר פניו אחורי המטה וזורקן.

The fact that Rabbi Zecharia is only mentioned twice in the entire Talmud led the Chatam Sofer to read these two incidents as speaking to similar behavior patterns. Rabbi Zecharia was comfortable throwing bones behind his bed, because he had an unusually high tolerance for garbage. He didn't even consider a pile of bones in one's presence to be repulsive (and therefore were not permissible to move under

the usual *heter* of moving disgusting items). In the same way he tolerated actual garbage, he also had a high tolerance for the presence of abhorrent human beings, and the appalling inaction of the Rabbis and the host, too. In fact, in order to cover for the Rabbis and their reputation, he engaged in fancy Talmudic footwork. You can just picture him gesticulating with his thumbs, poring over a text while real people are in mortal peril. The tale of Rabbi Zecharia is a story of a person whose central failing was his lack of courage and conviction to stand up for what was right, allowing bad actors to get off without so much as a slap on the wrist. Why did he fail to act? It is because he was always looking over his shoulder at what others would think, waiting for their approval. Notice that the objection he raises to taking either of these actions is not out of principle but rather based upon what others might say:

"יאמרו: בעלי מומין קריבין לגבי מזבח!... יאמרו: מטיל מום בקדשים יהרג!"

He had no problem with offering a blemished animal, should the lives of thousands of Jews depend upon it, and he had no problem sacrificing the scoundrel to save the Jewish people. His problem was one of PR paralysis. What will they say about me on social media? What will they tweet about me? That kind of inaction is considered deeply immoral, as it places publicity and perception over principle. Indeed, cowardly spiritual leaders who do this are one reason people are turned off from Judaism. But it is also the kind of calculation that many clergy members, especially

Rabbis, feel they are forced into, especially in a post-pandemic world. If I speak out about this issue, will I be fired? Who do I need to keep happy to keep my job? If I teach Torah and arrive at a certain politically unpopular conclusion, will I be canceled? One can understand how this deters talented and sincere individuals from *avodas hakodesh*, as they aren't keen on spending their career sitting on eggshells, worrying about what others might say or do. How can you ever make a difference if you live with meekness and in constant dread? This is the ענותנותו של ר' - who can never speak up when he sees an injustice or the need to offer a bold ruling, who felt forced to countenance terrible people. His hands had been tied and he sat in silence in front of a pile of garbage (גרף של רעי) pretending as if it didn't stink.

Several weeks ago, a colleague of mine told me about a remarkable young man who attends a mishnayot class he delivers to kids non Shabbat. The young man asked him, in a candid moment, "why would you want to be a rabbi, when you could have been a lawyer?" After a moment's pause, he responded that he became a Rabbi so that he could have someone like this young man in his class. This is a boy from a home that prioritizes Torah study and with the utmost respect for Rabbis- someone with the potential to be a first-rate educator one day, yet he and his peers are socialized to question the wisdom and benefit of becoming one- or they intuit why they might wish to avoid it.

Don't get me wrong- I am blessed to work in *avodas hakodesh* and wouldn't trade it for anything. But these are real issues that many of my colleagues face, and it is not just rabbis and educators, either. We don't need to be Rabbis, or great poskim, to become paralyzed by fear, and to become the kind of person who stomachs injustice and honors miscreants. Anyone in a community, whether as a spiritual leader or a lay leader, has to contend with serious issues that they are often hamstrung about fighting. Many qualified people have been permanently turned off from volunteering for a committee, from giving tzedakah, from participating in minyanim because of the headaches and ingratitude associated with these noble endeavors. And tragically, many of us would find it exceptionally challenging to stand up in the face of injustice, to defend a bullied or abused child, to care when teenage drug use or adult alcohol use is rampant in our community, to be a bit more hospitable - because doing these things has become so difficult and exhausting that it is easier and safer to do nothing.

The Talmud tells us that one of the silver linings of the story is the wisdom of Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakai - who when given one request on behalf of the beleaguered Jews of Jerusalem- advocated for the academy of Yavneh, the future of our tradition, to be preserved. Yavneh was the only oasis left on earth that still held an optimistic view of Jewish community and the continuity of Torah education. Our future depends upon creating the climate that promotes the blossoming of great

teachers, courageous spiritual leaders and above all, a community filled with people who are proud, loyal, decent and committed.

We are about to begin the book of Eichah. In its simple meaning, this book laments a destruction that was entirely preventable, whose problem was only perceived when it was already too late. Let us wake up now.