

Churban - How did we get here?

Today is Shiv'ah Asar Be'Tammuz, a fast day that commemorates a crisis and tragedy that befell the Jewish people. What exactly are we commemorating?

According to the Mishnah, five spiritual disasters befell the Jewish people on the 17th of Tammuz:

Mishnah Ta'anit 4:6	משנה תענית ד:ו
<p>There were five events that happened to our ancestors on the seventeenth of Tammuz and five on the ninth of Av. On the seventeenth of Tammuz: The tablets were shattered; The tamid (daily) offering was cancelled; The [walls] of the city were breached; And Apostomos burned the Torah, and placed an idol in the Temple.</p>	<p>חֲמִשָּׁה דְּבָרִים אֶרְעוּ אֶת אֲבוֹתֵינוּ בְּשִׁבְעָה עָשָׂר בְּתַמּוּז וְחֲמִשָּׁה בְּתַשְׁעָה בָּאָב. בְּשִׁבְעָה עָשָׂר בְּתַמּוּז נִשְׁתַּבְּרוּ הַלְּוִחוֹת, וּבִטַּל הַתָּמִיד, וְהִבְקְעָה הָעִיר, וְשָׂרְף אֶפּוֹסְטוֹמוֹס אֶת הַתּוֹרָה, וְהַעֲמִיד צֶלֶם בַּהִיכָל. בְּתַשְׁעָה בָּאָב נִגְזַר עַל אֲבוֹתֵינוּ שֶׁלֹּא יִכְנָסוּ לְאֶרֶץ, וְחָרַב הַבַּיִת בְּרֵאשׁוֹנָה וּבִשְׁנִיָּה, וְנִלְכְּדָה יְבִיתָר, וְנִחְרְשָׁה הָעִיר. מִשְׁנַכְנְסֵי אֲב, מִמַּעֲטֵין בְּשִׁמְחָה</p>

Ultimately, the 17th of Tammuz marked the beginning of the eventual destruction of the Temple. We ask the same question as above: How did we get here?

Gittin 56a-b	גיטין נו:א-ב
<p>Rabbi Yohanan said:...Jerusalem was destroyed on account of Kamtza and bar Kamtza...The Gemara explains: Jerusalem was destroyed on account of Kamtza and bar Kamtza. This is as there was a certain man whose friend was named Kamtza and whose enemy was named bar Kamtza. He once made a large feast and said to his servant: Go bring me my friend Kamtza. The servant went and mistakenly brought him his enemy bar Kamtza. The man who was hosting the feast came and found bar Kamtza sitting at the feast. The host said to bar Kamtza. That man is the enemy of that man, that is, you are my enemy. What then do you want here? Arise and leave. Bar Kamtza said to him: Since I have already come, let me stay and I will give you money for whatever I eat and drink. Just do not embarrass me by sending me out. The host said to him: No, you must leave. Bar Kamtza said to him: I will give you money for half of the</p>	<p>אמר רבי יוחנן...אקמצא ובר קמצא חרוב ירושלים דהוא גברא דרחמיה קמצא ובעל דבביה בר קמצא עבד סעודתא אמר ליה לשמעיה זיל אייתי לי קמצא אזל אייתי ליה בר קמצא אתא אשכחיה דהוה יתיב אמר ליה מכדי ההוא גברא בעל דבבא דההוא גברא הוא מאי בעית הכא קום פוק אמר ליה הואיל ואתאי שבקן ויהיבנא לך דמי מה דאכילנא ושתינא אמר ליה לא אמר ליה יהיבנא לך דמי פלגא דסעודתיך אמר ליה לא אמר ליה יהיבנא לך דמי כולה</p>

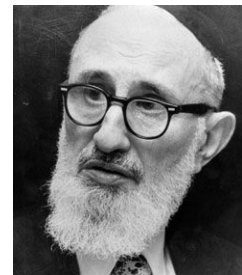
feast; just do not send me away. The host **said to him: No**, you must leave. Bar Kamtza then **said to him: I will give you money for the entire feast;** just let me stay. The host **said to him: No**, you must leave. Finally, the host **took bar Kamtza by his hand, stood him up, and took him out.** After having been cast out from the feast, bar Kamtza **said** to himself: **Since the Sages were sitting there and did not protest** the actions of the host, although they saw how he humiliated me, **learn from it that they were content** with what he did. **I will therefore go and inform [eikhul kurtza] against them to the king.**

סעודתך א"ל לא נקטיה בידיה
ואוקמיה ואפקיה

אמר הואיל והווי יתבי רבנן ולא
מחו ביה ש"מ קא ניחא להו
איזיל איכול בהו קורצא בי
מלכא.

- According to this narrative, how does the story of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza lead to the destruction of the Second Temple?
- What lesson is this story teaching us about how to conduct ourselves in our relationships?
- How do you feel about giving reasons for why tragedy strikes?

Rabbi Joseph Baer Soloveitchik, 1913-1993, was the towering figure of post-war American Modern Orthodoxy. At home in the academy and in the Beit Midrash as both a philosopher and a pre-eminent Talmudist, he ordained thousands of Rabbis over his decades serving as Rosh Yeshiva at Yeshiva University and taught thousands more in public shiurim in New York City and Boston, where he made his home.



Rav Soloveitchik *Kol Dodi Dofek*:

“There is **evil that is not susceptible to explanation** and comprehension. Only by comprehending the world in its totality can man gain insight into the essence of suffering. However, as long as man’s perception is limited and fragmented, so that he sees only isolated portions of the cosmic drama and the mighty saga of history, **he cannot delve into the recesses of evil and the mystery of suffering.**” (5)

“When the [halakhic person] suffers, he says in his heart, “There is evil, I do not deny it... I am, however, interested in it from a halakhic point of view; and as a person who **wants to know what actions to take** ... The question of questions is: **What does suffering obligate man to do?**” (7-8)

Summary: Humans cannot understand the many factors which underlie apparent evil in this world because they do not have the full view of the universe which God alone enjoys. Therefore, it isn’t wise for us -- as mere human beings -- to attempt to explain why there is evil in the world. Instead, we must ask ourselves what we should do when we experience evil and what actions we should take.

- Why according to Rav Soloveitchik, is it not possible for us to understand evil?
- What does Rav Soloveitchik say the sufferer must ask him/herself?

In the following selection, the Rav answers the above question.

Rav Soloveitchik's, "A Halakhic Approach to Suffering"

"The topical Halakhah is an open-eyed, tough observer of things and events and, instead of indulging in a speculative metaphysics [(the 'why' questions)], **acknowledged boldly both the reality of evil and its irrationality**, its absurdity." (12)

"Man should actively interfere with evil. Man is summoned by God to combat evil, to fight evil, and to try to eliminate it as much as possible." (15)

Summary: Jewish tradition does not demand us to try and answer the "why" questions (such as why bad things happen), but demands of us to answer the "how" questions - of how to make things better.

- According to Rav Soloveitchik, what is the sufferer commanded to do?
- Do you think Rav Soloveitchik's approach makes suffering easier or more difficult?

Conclusion:

Rav Soloveitchik teaches us that it is important for us to look at crises as opportunities rather than opportunities to explain why bad things happen.

Rav Soloveitchik seems to assert that one cannot provide reasons for why crises happen, but Chazal in the Kamtza/Bar Kamtza story provides the reason of *sinat chinam* for why the Temple was destroyed.

- Are these two sources necessarily in disagreement with each other?
- **How might these two sources work together? Is it possible that Chazal are not looking to provide a historical cause for the destruction, but instead use the story to learn a lesson?**
 - Consider that Chazal's framing of the crisis which they experienced, with specific reasons for its outcome, occurred with 20/20 hindsight. How might this affect your answer?
- Can you think of times when you experienced some kind of crisis? Would it have been helpful to frame it in the way Rav Soloveitchik suggested?

[Churban - Where do we go from here?](#)

Trigger: When we consider photography a very interesting question arises - how does hindsight color the way in which we view normal, fleeting actions?



- What is happening in the photo?
- Who do you see? Who do you think is missing?
- Where is this photo being taken?
- How do you think the people in the photo are feeling?
- What is your reaction to the photo?

This is a photo of the Battle of Iwo Jima between the Japanese and the Americans, which occurred between February and March in 1945, during World War II. “The raising of the national colors immediately caused a loud cheering reaction from the Marines, sailors, and coast guardsmen on the beach below and from the men on the ships near the beach.” Joe Rosenthal, of the Associated Press, had the following to say regarding the remarkable spur-of-the-moment photo: “Out of the corner of my eye, I had seen the men start the flag up. I swung my camera and shot the scene. That is how the picture was taken, and when you take a picture like that, you don’t come away saying you got a great shot. You don’t know.”

In light of the newly gained information, how does it change how you perceive the photo from above? Do you have different answers to the original questions? Do different parts of the photo take on new meaning? If the Americans had lost the war, would this photo still be as significant?

How do we perceive certain events in the moment, especially crises? Do we gain new understanding as we gain new information about events?

Yesterday, we discussed Rav Soloveitchik’s approach to dealing with crisis as a call to action. Today we will explore how the centrality of halachah and rabbis as halachic decisors after the destruction of the Second Temple is an example of responding to a crisis by acting.

Part 1: Reacting Amidst Crisis

Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai was the leader of the Jewish community during the events which eventually ended in the destruction. Let’s look at how he handled the crisis:

Masechet Gittin 56b tells the story of Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai a few years before the destruction but amidst internal fighting happening in Jerusalem and the Roman siege of Jerusalem slowly worsening. As part of his elaborate plan to take action, a student smuggles him out of Jerusalem secretly in a coffin. He searches for Vespasian, an important leader of the enemy Romans at the time, and makes a request.

Gittin 56b	
Vespasian then said to Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai: I will be going to Rome to accept my new position, and I will send someone else in my place to continue besieging the city and waging war against it. But before I leave, ask something of me that I can give you . Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai said to him: Give me Yavne and its Sages and do not destroy it...	אמר ליה מיזל אזילנא ואינש אחרינא משדרנא אלא בעי מינאי מידי דאתן לך אמר ליה תן לי יבנה וחכמיה ושושילתא דרבן גמליאל ואסוותא דמסיין ליה לרבי צדוק קרי עליה רב יוסף ואיתימא רבי עקיבא (ישעיהו מד, כה) משיב חכמים אחור ודעתם יסכל איבעי למימר ליה לשבקינהו הדא זימנא

- What did Rabban Yochanan ask for?
- Why do you think he made this request? Would you have asked for something else?

For example, see what other rabbis thought Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai should have asked for:

And some say that it was Rabbi Akiva [who said that] he should have said to him to leave the Jews alone this time.	ואיתימא רבי עקיבא איבעי למימר ליה לשבקינהו הדא זימנא
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- Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai had to decide whether to save the Beit HaMikdash and continue the old ways of religious practice, even though the long prospects weren’t looking so bright for the Beit HaMikdash long-term, or to sacrifice it all and bet on a new center for rabbinic

leadership. Now that we understand the options which Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai had before him, would you have made this choice?

Nonetheless, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai's request for Yavneh ensured that rabbinic learning and leadership could continue to flourish, even after the destruction of the Second Temple. His action guaranteed and established rabbinic Judaism as the authoritative voice of Judaism for generations to come.

Part 2: Action in Response to Crisis

With the Temple destroyed, how were Jews to continue worshipping God? Their main channel of communication - *korbanot*, offerings, which the Kohanim, priests, had offered on their behalf for a thousand years in the Beit HaMikdash - had been severed. The rabbis at Yavneh had to brainstorm:

Berachot 26b	
<p>The prayers were instituted based on the daily offerings sacrificed in the Holy Temple, and the prayers parallel the offerings, in terms of both time and characteristics...Megillah 17b: It is taught in a <i>baraita</i>: Shimon HaPakuli [who lived in the generation after the destruction] arranged the eighteen blessings of the <i>Amida</i> prayer before Rabban Gamliel in their fixed order in Yavne...Now, since the <i>baraita</i> teaches that a hundred and twenty Elders, including many prophets, established the Amida prayer in its fixed order [in the times of the <i>Anshei Knesset HaGedolah</i>, two hundred years before the destruction of the Temple], what is it that Shimon HaPakuli arranged in a much later period of time, as related by Rabbi Yoḥanan? The Gemara answers: Indeed, the blessings of the <i>Amida</i> prayer were originally arranged by the hundred and twenty members of the Great Assembly, but over the course of time the people forgot them, and Shimon HaPakuli then arranged them again.</p>	<p>תפלות כנגד תמידין תקנום...מגילה יז ב - יח א: תניא, שמעון הפקולי הסדיר שמונה עשרה ברכות לפני רבן גמליאל על הסדר ביבנה...וכי מאחר דמאה ועשרים זקנים ומהם כמה נביאים תקנו תפלה על הסדר, שמעון הפקולי מאי הסדיר? שכחום וחזר וסדרום.</p>

- How does tefillah specifically respond to the crisis of the destruction of the Second Temple?
- The baraita explains that the *Shemoneh Esrei* actually existed before the destruction of the Second Temple. How can something that happened in the past still be useful in the present? Does this still count as responding to crisis?
- We've seen that tefillah is instituted as a replacement to temple worship. In the process, a religious experience which initially was only reserved for the *kobanim* - the offering of *korbanot* - becomes accessible to everyone in the form of *tefillah*. Do you think that is positive? Are there any possible downsides?

The establishment of halachah and rabbis saw its mission as ensuring Jewish identity could continue to flourish even without a Temple. Consider the following source from Masechet Berachot, *daf* 8a:

And this concept is expressed in that which Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Ami said in the name of Ulla: Since the day the Temple, where the Divine Presence rested in this world, was destroyed, the Holy One, Blessed be He, has only one place in His world where he reveals His presence exclusively; only in the four cubits of halakha.

וְהִיְיָנוּ דְאָמַר רַבִּי חִיַּיא בַר אַמִּי
 מִשְׁמִיָּה דְעוּלָא: מִיּוֹם שְׁחָרַב בֵּית
 הַמִּקְדָּשׁ אֵין לוֹ לְהִקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא
 בְּעוֹלָמוֹ אֶלָּא אַרְבַּע אַמּוֹת שֶׁל
 הַלְכָה בְּלִבָּד

- As we saw above in the case of tefillah, the religious connection which is concentrated in the Beit HaMikdash becomes accessible to everyone in the form of halachah and Talmud Torah. Just as we asked before, do you think that this is a positive development? Are there any possible downsides?

CONCLUSION:

In the above sources, we saw different responses and actions to crisis. Our religious practice today, stems from these very actions during a crisis.

- How do you think our Judaism today still responds to crises with action? Can you find any examples of the Halachah responding to crises that we've seen in previous *shi'urim*? [Hint: check out the *Shemittah/Yovel* packet again!]
- How can we implement the lessons which we learn from the above sources to our responses to crises in our daily life?