Talmud Selection
Gittin 55b-56a

One of the Torah portions that are permitted for study on Tishah B’Av is Tractate Gittin 55b-56a, which is comprised of narratives and Aggadic teachings about the destruction of the Second Temple. Following is an interpretative elucidation with notes, of part of this section (55b-56a).

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HANIZAKIN  CHAPTER FIVE  GITTIN  56a

— [The host] said to [Bar Kamtza] — He went and told Caesar: “The Jews have rebelled against you!”
[Bar Kamtza] said to him: “Who says so?” — [Bar Kamtza] said to Caesar: “Send them an animal as a sacrifice to your holy temple and see whether they offer it in their Temple.” — Caesar went and sent a fine calf with Bar Kamtza.
— As he was going to Jerusalem, — [Bar Kamtza] caused a blemish in [the calf’s] upper lip, — or, as some say, he caused a cataract in the eye. Either way, he ensured that the blemish was in a place where it is considered a blemish for us, i.e., for offering outside the Temple.

— 55b — When [the host] arrived at the banquet and found [Bar Kamtza] sitting there, — he said to [Bar Kamtza]: “Look here, that man [you] is the enemy of that man [me].”
— What do you want here? — Get up and get out!”
— [Bar Kamtza] said to him: “Since I am here already let me stay.”
— I will pay you for whatever I eat and drink.”

NOTES

1. The name of two Jews (Rashi).
2. A certain man, a friend named Kamtza and an enemy named Bar Kamtza, — made a banquet. — He told his attendant: “Go and bring Kamtza to join me at the banquet.”
3. — [The attendant] went and mistakenly brought him Bar Kamtza.

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The narrative is resumed:

9. It is Biblically prohibited to blight a man designated as an offering. (This prohibition carries the penalty of lashes; it is not a capital offense.) People might (mistakenly) assume that Bar Kamtza was executed for violating this prohibition (Rash.)

10. Rashi: Alternatively, R’ Zechariah, because of his humility, did not feel himself qualified to make the determination that Bar Kamtza posed a mortal danger to the Jewish nation. (This explains the use here of the word heymiyt, which usually means “his humanity”) (Gershon Tzurich).

11. The word lona, Heichal, usually refers to the chamber in the Temple that housed the Menorah, the Shulchan and the Golden Altar. Sometimes it is used to denote the Temple in its entirety (see Tosefta Yev. Tz. 4:1).

12. In fact, the Destruction of the Temple had already been Divinely decreed. This incident was effective only in causing the Destruction to take place at that particular time (Misharim Shl.).

Alternatively: Only the exile had already been decreed (as punishment for the grave transgression of allowing one person to be blighted).
traveled behind him on cushions (kese); i.e. he walked only on fine fabric. Ḥakkel — Some say that he was given this name because his seat cushion (kese) was among the nobles of Rome whenever he went there for an audience with the emperor.224

The narrative is continued:

To make a storehouse full of wheat into bread requires sixty storehouses of wood. — [These three men] had enough supplies to sustain the residents of Jerusalem for twenty-one years.

However, among [the people] were [a band of] ruffians. — The Rabbi said to [these ruffians]: “Let us go out and make peace with [the Romans].” But the ruffians would not let them do so, and they rebuked them.

Let us go out and wage war against [the Romans].”

— [The ruffians] arose and burned down the storehouses of wheat, barley and wood.

— The Gemara relates one of the tragic effects of the famine:

Martha the daughter of Boethus was the wealthy woman of Jerusalem. — She sent out her messenger, saying to him: “Go and away and converted to Judaism, נָדְקִידְיוֹן בְּן גּוּרִיон — and El Meir was descended from him. נָדְקִידְיוֹן בְּן גּוּרִיון was so called because he once happened that the sun miraculously shone (mountain) on his behalf. Ben Kalba Savua was so called because everyone who entered his house became as hungry as a dog (בֵּן כַּלְבּוֹז) — as hungry as a dog. Ben Tzitzis Hakeses was so-called because wherever he walked, his τιττίτις225

NOTES
23. According to this explanation, “Ben Tzitzis” was his real name. “Hakeses” was added in recognition of his prestigious position (Rash.)

24. שְׁעָרִים, baryonim [from the root base, empty]. empty men, with a propensity to violence (Rashi.). Here, the reference is to the ardent nationalist group whom secular history knows as the Zealots. As the Gemara relates presently, they advocated the overthrow of Roman rule through war, and violently resisted any attempts at reconiliation.

25. The Rabbi had a tradition to this effect from our Forefather Jacob (see Mekhilta.)

26. The intent of the baryonim was to give the populace no choice but to wage war against the Romans.
The Gemara concludes with an account of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai’s dramatic escape from the ruffians, and how he successfully petitioned Vespasian to spare the Torah academy in Yavneh. Vespasian was then called to Rome to become the emperor, and was replaced by Titus as head of the military campaign against Jerusalem. Titus invaded Jerusalem and desecrated the Temple. The Gemara describes the punishments that befell Titus, as well as other enemies of Israel.

**NOTES**


28. He responded to omen of the Destruction which were discernible forty years before it actually occurred (Midrash; see Yoma 59b).
Thus, the cycle of events put into motion by the incident of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza culminated in the Destruction of the Temple. The Gemara (57a) concludes the account of this incident and its aftermath with the following observation:

It was taught in a Baraita: 
R’ Elazar said: 
And he burned his Beis Chelach.