

# Covenantal Leadership Over Paralytic Purity: Kamza and Bar Kamza Reexamined

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As the calendar of Tammuz and Av once more draws Am Yisrael into the orbit of the Nine Days and the shadow of Tisha B'Av, the ancient patterns identified by our Sages two millennia ago continue to shape the challenges of Jewish continuity, sovereignty, and leadership. The recurring slogans of “unity,” “dialogue,” and “avoiding civil rupture” frequently mask a deeper structural refusal: the refusal to exercise the courageous flexibility demanded when the collective House itself stands at risk. The sugya of Kamza and Bar Kamza in the Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 55b–56a, is not merely an ancient cautionary tale of baseless hatred (*sinat chinam*) or failed hospitality. It is a precise political and spiritual autopsy of leadership paralysis—an examination of how the elevation of optics, technical purity, and the fear of “what people will say” can destroy a Temple, burn a Sanctuary, and exile a people from their Land.

This expanded reflection returns to that sugya with renewed intensity, reading it through the dual lenses of Chassidic interiority (particularly the Tanya's teachings on the intermediate soul, *ahavat Yisrael*, and the demands of *hishtadlut*) and the covenantal-republican understanding of non-domination, shared responsibility, and the formative power of decisive leadership. The goal is not historical antiquarianism but living *avodah*: to diagnose the same pattern as it appears in contemporary Jewish life and to raise a clear standard—a banner—of covenantal leadership capable of choosing life over performative purity.

## I. The Sugya in Full: Anatomy of Paralysis

The narrative in Gittin 55b–56a is deceptively simple and devastatingly precise. A certain man of wealth instructs his servant to invite his friend Kamza to a feast. The servant errs and invites the host's enemy, Bar Kamza. When Bar Kamza arrives, the host publicly demands that he leave. Bar Kamza, seeking to avoid humiliation, offers successively to pay for his portion, for half the feast, and finally for the entire feast. The host refuses each offer and expels him in full view of the assembled guests. Humiliated and enraged, Bar Kamza goes to the Roman authorities and informs against the Jewish community, claiming that the Jews are rebelling against the emperor.

To test the claim, the emperor sends a sacrificial animal. On the way, Bar Kamza deliberately places a blemish on the animal—either on the upper lip or on the white of the eye—creating a disqualification according to Jewish sacrificial law but not according to the standards the Romans themselves would recognize. When the animal arrives at the Temple, the Sages of Yerushalayim confront a crisis of existential proportions.

Three options present themselves. First, the Sages consider offering the blemished animal nevertheless, for the sake of *shalom malchut*—peace with the governing power—a technical and temporary compromise to avert catastrophe. Second, they consider killing the informer so that he cannot complete his report and bring the full weight of Roman power against Jerusalem. Third, they do nothing and trust in miracles or passive righteousness.

At each decisive moment Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkulas intervenes with the same paralyzing caution: “People will say...” People will say that blemished animals may be offered upon the altar; people will say that one who places a blemish upon consecrated animals is put to death. The result is total inaction. Bar Kamza’s report is accepted. The war begins. The Temple is destroyed. The people are exiled.

Rabbi Yochanan’s verdict is merciless and has echoed through Jewish memory ever since: “The *anvanut* of Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkulas destroyed our House, burned our Sanctuary, and exiled us from our Land” (Gittin 56a). The term *anvanut* here does not denote the beautiful humility of Moshe Rabbeinu, who is described as *anav me’od* more than any person on earth (Bamidbar 12:3). It denotes a false, optics-driven, responsibility-evading meekness—a piety that prioritizes the appearance of technical perfection over the survival of the people and the House of G-d.

The broader narrative of the siege also critiques Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai’s later request for Yavneh and its sages. While that request preserved the continuity of Torah learning and ultimately enabled Jewish survival in exile, the Gemara registers a note of incompleteness: more might have been pressed for. Both extremes—excessive purity that freezes action and insufficient boldness that settles for too little—are weighed in the balance of Jewish historical memory and found wanting.

## II. False Humility versus True Anavah and the Demands of Hishtadlut

The distinction between true *anavah* and the *anvanut* of Rabbi Zechariah is fundamental. True humility, as modeled by Moshe, is compatible with decisive leadership, confrontation of evil (Korach, the spies, the Golden Calf), and the willingness to stand in the breach. False humility is the rationalization of inaction under the guise of piety. It is the soul’s preference for clean hands over dirty work when the House is on fire.

In the language of the Alter Rebbe’s Tanya, this pattern maps onto a distortion of the intermediate soul’s struggle. The *beinoni*—the intermediate person who is neither fully righteous nor wicked—knows the difference between good and evil and is engaged in continuous inner combat. Yet the *beinoni* can rationalize the path of least resistance as “peace,” “humility,” “strategic patience,” or “avoiding *machloket*.” True *avodah*, the Tanya teaches across Likutei Amarim and the Iggerot HaKodesh, demands maximum *hishtadlut* within the system of nature and human responsibility, coupled with complete *bittul* to the will of Hashem that the Jewish people must live, thrive, and sanctify His Name in the Land He gave them.

Chapter 32 of Tanya provides the crucial corrective regarding *ahavat Yisrael*. One must love every Jew with the love of one’s own soul, recognizing that the essence of every Jewish soul is a portion of G-d above. Yet that love does not require the surrender of truth, justice, or collective survival. Love demands clear-eyed confrontation of the Bar Kamza impulse within the community—the internal informer, the self-sabotaging veto, the preference for clean optics over the messy labor of preservation. Hatred directed at evil can itself be a mitzvah when performed *l’shem shamayim* (see Rambam, Hilchot De’ot 6:3–5). The challenge of leadership is to hate the destructive pattern while still seeking residual *tikkun* in the individual where possible. Leadership that cannot make this distinction fails both the demand of love and the demand of justice.

### III. Covenantal Dyads and the Rejection of Unilateral Purity

Jewish leadership has always operated through covenantal dyads and partnerships: Moshe and Aharon, David and Yoav, Esther and Mordechai, the Rebbe and the chassidim who transmit and actualize the vision. The *brit* itself is not a unilateral purity test but a shared commitment requiring flexible partnership, mutual sacrifice, and the capacity to act decisively when the covenant's physical and spiritual vessel is threatened.

When Rabbi Zechariah imposed his veto, he severed the possibility of that covenantal flexibility. He transformed potential partnership with the pragmatic elements of leadership into paralysis. The same dynamic reappears whenever voices—whether from the political left, the center, or certain segments of the religious world—insist that any strengthening of responsible executive authority, any realistic security doctrine, or any prioritization of Jewish sovereignty and *pikuach nefesh* over abstract “democratic norms” (often defined by those hostile to Jewish continuity) is inherently illegitimate. They would rather risk the House burning cleanly than allow the slightest blemish on their ideological *korban*.

The mainstream of Torah tradition rejects this posture. Rambam in Hilchot Melachim uMilchamot 5:1 and following codifies that in times of *milchemet mitzvah*—including war to defend Israel from an attacking enemy—the rules of governance shift. The king (and by extension responsible leadership) possesses expanded latitude precisely because the stakes are existential. Compulsion of the people is permitted; the requirement for Sanhedrin approval that applies to optional wars does not apply in the same way. The Gemara in Eiruvim 13b famously records that the words of both Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel are “divrei Elokim chayim,” yet the *halacha* follows the more pragmatic approach of Beit Hillel because that approach better sustains the people over time. We are commanded to choose life (Devarim 30:19), not performative martyrdom or paralysis dressed as piety.

### IV. Non-Domination, Veto Paralysis, and the Republican Parallel

In the conceptual language of non-domination republican theory (articulated in modern form by Philip Pettit and anticipated in biblical and rabbinic political thought), the true threat to liberty is not strong and accountable governance but the arbitrary domination of veto players who can paralyze the *res publica*. When every major decision of national survival requires the effective consent of those least invested in Jewish physical and spiritual continuity, *malchut Shamayim* is displaced by the tyranny of the minority. The vision of *dira b'tachtonim*—making this lowest world a dwelling place for the Divine Presence—requires bold action in the physical, political, and institutional realm. Retreat into spiritualized passivity or endless procedural purity is a betrayal of that vision.

The pattern of “people will say...” is the ancient form of what modern political science recognizes as the paralysis of veto players and the prioritization of image over capacity. Whether in prolonged institutional battles that elevate process over substance, in calls for “unity” that function as demands for unilateral ideological surrender, in reluctance to confront terror infrastructures lest international opinion turn, or in the post-trauma return to purity spirals after collective catastrophe—the underlying structure is the same. Optics and the fear of internal or external censure repeatedly override the raw imperative of *pikuach nefesh* for the collective Jewish body and soul.

## V. The Path of Covenantal Leadership

What, then, is the path forward in this season of mourning and in the years of reconstruction that must follow?

First, redefine unity. True unity is not the absence of disagreement or the demand that one camp surrender its legitimate mandate. It is the shared, covenantal commitment to three interlocking goods: the flourishing of Torah and *kedushah*, the physical security and demographic vitality of the Jewish people, and the sanctification of Hashem's Name through Jewish sovereignty and ethical power in the Land.

Second, leaders—political, rabbinic, communal, and parental—must internalize the dual responsibility of maximum *hishtadlut* within the bounds of *halacha* and democratic legitimacy, paired with absolute *bitachon* that Hashem governs the world and that human effort is the vessel through which Divine providence operates.

Third, every Jew, from the full-time learner in the *beit midrash* to the soldier on the frontier, from the native-born to the immigrant who has bound his or her fate to this Land, must ask a simple diagnostic question: Am I contributing to the *anvanut* that destroys the House, or to the courageous pragmatism that builds and defends it?

As we approach and pass through the days of mourning the Temple, it is necessary to mourn also the repeated loss of nerve that helped bring about its destruction and that continues to endanger its eventual rebuilding. The generation now living is not condemned to repeat the cycle. It can break it—not by waiting passively for Mashiach to accomplish everything from above, but by becoming the vessels worthy of his arrival through decisive, covenantal, theocentric leadership that chooses life, chooses the Land, and chooses to build even when the world, the media, and internal critics declare that the action has gone too far.

*Venahafoch hu*. The same fire that consumed can purify. The same capacity for humility that once destroyed can be reborn as true *anavah* rooted in strength and responsibility. Am Yisrael Chai—strong, sovereign, and unapologetically committed to its divine mission in history.

**Chazak v'nitchazek.**

### Extended Bibliography

#### Classical Jewish Sources

Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 55b–56a (and the parallel siege narrative)

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Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot De'ot 6; Hilchot Melachim uMilchamot 5

Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 604 and related discussions of *pikuach nefesh*

Devarim 30:19; Eiruvim 13b; Bamidbar 12:3

Mesilat Yesharim, Chapter 20 (on properly weighed *chasidut* and the danger of uncalculated piety)

Maharal of Prague, Netzach Yisrael (discussions of the causes of destruction)

Eichah Rabbah (parallel traditions on the destruction)

### **Political Theory and Conceptual Parallels**

Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (non-domination)

Related discussions in the work of Daniel Elazar on covenantal federalism and the biblical roots of republican thought

Yoram Hazony and the particularist tradition in political philosophy

### **Contemporary and Contextual**

Daily Chitas cycle, Tammuz–Av 5786 (themes of *churban*, mourning, and longing for Geulah)

Selected modern Torah commentaries on Gittin 55b–56a linking the sugya to leadership failure and national resilience

**Chazak chazak v’nitchazek.**

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