YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Tisha be-av 5782**

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**In memory of Esther Leah Cymbalista z"l   
Niftera 7 B'Av 5766.   
Dedicated by her family.**

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**In Loving Memory of Jeffrey Paul Friedman z"l**

**August 15, 1968 – July 29, 2012**

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**"Anyone Who Shares in The Community's Pain**

**Will Merit to See The Community's Consolation"**[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Rabbanit Bat Sheva Samet**

The series of vignettes surrounding the destruction of the Temple in *Massekhet* *Gittin* 56 includes the well-known story of Marta bat Baytus, which paints a bleak picture of the situation in Jerusalem at the time. The background to the story is the siege on the city, with a desperate shortage of food that was accelerated when the zealots burned the city’s storehouses, and bitter tensions among different sectors of the population. The Gemara relates:

Marta bat Baytus was one of the wealthy women of Jerusalem. She dispatched her servant, telling him, “Go, bring me fine flour.”

By the time he went, it was already sold out. He came back and said to her, “There is no more fine flour, but there is regular flour.”

She said to him, “Go, bring me some.”

By the time he went, it was already sold out. He came back and said to her, “There is no more regular flour, but there is coarse flour.”

She said to him, “Go, bring me some.”

By the time he went, it was already sold out. He came and said to her, “There is no more coarse flour, but there is barley flour.”

She said to him, “Go, bring me some.” By the time he went, it was already sold out.

[Marta] had just removed her shoes, but she said, “I will go and see if I can find something to eat.” [On the way] some dung stuck to her foot and [overcome by disgust] she died. […]

Some say [what happened was that] she ate a fig of Rabbi Tzadok, and was overcome with disgust, and died. Rabbi Tzadok had fasted for forty years so Jerusalem would not be destroyed. [He was so emaciated that] when he ate something, it was visible from outside his body. When he would eat [between fasts], they would bring him figs; he would suck out their moisture and cast away the remains. [It was one such fig that Marta found and ate.]

As [Marta] was dying, she took out all her gold and silver and threw it into the marketplace, saying, “Of what use is this to me?” This is as it is written, “They shall cast their silver in the streets…” (*Yechezkel* 7:19).

Much has been written about this story. I would like to address an aspect that I find particularly significant.

Why are these two possibilities offered by the Gemara as the causes of Marta's death? What are these two causes supposed to symbolize? Is there a connection between them? A deeper reading of the causes might give us a better understanding of Marta's apparent wrongdoing.

The first cause described in the Gemara depicts Marta, barefoot, treading on dung and dying. The second depicts her eating one of Rabbi Tzadok's figs – in other words, one of the figs whose moisture Rabbi Tzadok sucked out as he persevered with his fasting. Seemingly, both stories reflect Marta's sheltered, comfortable existence. Is this perhaps her sin?

In order to answer this question we must turn our attention to another *midrash*. The following account is recorded in *Midrash Eikha Rabba* (1, 47):

Miriam (Marta) bat Baytus was betrothed to Yehoshua ben Gamla; [thereafter] the king appointed him Kohen Gadol, and he married her. Once she said, “I will go and see how he reads from the Torah [in the Temple] on Yom Kippur.” [Her servants] laid out carpets from the entrance of her house to the entrance of the Temple, so that her feet would not become scratched, but her feet nevertheless became scratched.

Marta, a woman who hails from the upper class of wealth and power – the religio-political elite of the time – cannot simply walk about the streets of Jerusalem like any regular person. Similar to the previous story, however, although her servants do all they can to provide a smooth surface extending from her front door to the Temple, she suffers along the way. Once again, we encounter Marta in a context related to footwear; once again, she is completely disconnected from her surroundings and is unable to cope with the reality of Jerusalem as it is. In both stories, she is described as delicate and dainty, but her refinement is excessive. I believe that the story indicates *Chazal*'s disapproval of Marta's overly pampered existence. The message they convey is that her extreme sensitivity is a reflection not of noble refinement but rather of excessive luxury and indulgence and – more than anything else – a lack of connection with the prevailing conditions outside of her own four walls.

Marta sends her servant to the market again and again, unable to comprehend the severity of the situation. She lacks the capacity to believe that all the food in the city is in fact gone. She remains completely passive in this dreadful reality; when she decides to take action and leave her home – seemingly after not having ventured out for some time – it is already too late.  It turns out that by the time Marta emerges to see for herself and understand what is going on in the city, the gap between her personal world and the reality outside is so great that it is more than she can bear, and she dies. The muck that adheres to her foot symbolizes the impossible chasm separating her cloistered, privileged existence and the starving, desperate state of Jerusalem outside.

Only when she steps outside does the hideous reality begin to penetrate the thick, protective layers of Marta's consciousness. For the first time in her life, she leaves her defenses behind and ventures out to seek food on her own. But she takes this exposed, barefoot step too late. Having been cut off from what everyone else is going through and having experienced nothing of their suffering, she is completely ignorant of the situation outside and completely lacking in the resilience needed to cope with the reality in the streets, so that contact between her foot and the exposed dung causes her to die of sheer revulsion. The cataclysmic result of her encounter with the situation indicates the degree to which she had previously been detached from it.

It is not the famine – the objective disaster – that leads to her death, but rather her own subjective suffering, as someone who has always operated within a comfortable cocoon. Encounter with the bare earth includes the phenomenon of animal droppings – a common sight on the roads at the time – but she cannot bear even this ordinary inconvenience, and her life comes to an end.

Animal droppings are part of the experience of the real world, but someone who has spent her entire life in a protected bubble cannot cope with reality.

The story doesn't stop here. *Chazal* offer another possible cause of Marta's death: eating a fig from Rabbi Tzadok. Rabbi Tzadok seems to feature here as a foil to Marta; a contrasting image that serves to highlight her character.

Rabbi Tzadok, whose name hints to his righteousness (*tzedek, tzadikut*), lives a life of fasting and self-affliction – above all, his life is that of someone whose consciousness is bound up with the situation of the masses. He is personally pained by the suffering in the city and the impending destruction. While Marta is portrayed as dainty and spoiled, Rabbi Tzadok is portrayed as ascetic and spartan. If Rabbi Tzadok adopted his austere lifestyle and fasted for so long "so that Jerusalem would not be destroyed," Marta's behavior may well have been among the factors that led to "Jerusalem being destroyed."

The comparison between R. Tzadok and Marta is also evident in the use of the similar expression, "כאשר הוה," meaning, "when he/she did…."

R. Tzadok was so skeletal after all his fasting that when he ate something, the food was visible from the outside. And since he was no longer capable of swallowing solids, he would suck on the figs that were brought to him, ingesting a small amount of moisture. These graphic details are supplied not only in order to describe R. Tzadok's fragile physical condition, but also to convey something of his essence. Whatever enters his body is visible from the outside. This is a person who literally embodies the ideal of "*tokho ke-varo*" (one who is "the same inside and out" – i.e., a person of complete integrity). He is devoid of personal interests. His entire being is dedicated – indeed, sacrificed – for the public good: "so that Jerusalem would not be destroyed." He is all about inner essence; he attaches no value to his body. Even when he obtains his meager nutrition from the figs, he takes in only their internal essence.

Marta and R. Tzadok are opposites. The plain, simple, exposed, emaciated figure of R. Tzadok contrasts with the spoiled, impervious Marta. When Marta bat Baytus eats one of R. Tzadok's figs, she is exposed not only to the putrid, distasteful food remains, but also to the impending destruction of the city and the Temple – a cataclysm that she had managed to ignore so long as she was secure in her bubble.

At this point, Marta manages a final act of *teshuva*: mirroring R. Tzadok's casting away of the fig remains, she casts away her gold and silver. But this gesture, too, comes too late. Her gold and silver are no longer of any help, now that there is no food left in the city. "**They shall cast their silver in the streets** and their gold shall be as an impure thing; their silver and their gold shall not be able to deliver them in the day of the Lord's wrath – to satiate their souls or to fill their bowels – for they caused them to stumble into guilt" (*Yechezkel* 7:19).

We find the following in a *beraita* in *Massekhet Ta'anit* (11a):

The Sages taught: At a time when the Jewish People is mired in distress, and someone separates himself [and does not share their suffering], the two ministering angels that accompany the person come and place their hands on his head, and say, “This man, so-and-so, since he has separated himself from the community – let him not see the consolation of the community.”

Similarly, it is taught: At a time when the community is mired in distress, a person should not say, “Let me go to my home, and eat and drink, and peace be upon you, my soul.” If he does so, the following verse applies to him: “And behold joy and gladness, killing oxen and slaying sheep, eating meat and drinking wine; let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” (*Yeshayahu* 22:13). […] Rather, a person should share the distress of the community, as we find in the case of Moshe Rabbeinu, who shared the distress of the community, as it is written: “And Moshe's hands were heavy, and they took a stone, and placed it under him, and he sat upon it” (*Shemot* 17:12). Did Moshe then not have a single pillow or cushion to sit on, that he had to sit on a rock? Rather, Moshe said as follows: “Since the Jewish people are suffering, I will suffer along with them.”

And anyone who shares in the community's pain will merit to see the community's consolation.

Experiencing and sharing the community's distress and pain is of profound importance and value. Cutting oneself off from the social reality leads to death and destruction. *Chazal* are critical of such detachment and teach us that redemption is supposed to come about through reconnecting with reality, with *Am Yisrael*, with Jerusalem, and with life.

The concept of "baseless love," which comes as a repair for the "baseless hatred" that caused the destruction of Jerusalem, may be understood as a warning not to cut oneself off from the collective but rather to see, recognize, and internalize the reality around us; not to turn our backs and ignore suffering even where this appears to be an option.

It is partaking of communal suffering and distress that allows us the possibility of experiencing communal consolation and redemption.

May we all soon merit to see the consolation and rebuilding of Jerusalem.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. Parts of this *shiur* are based on an article on the same topic by Shmuel Faust, published as a chapter in his book, *Aggadeta – Sippurei ha-Drama ha-Talmudit*, Dvir, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)