



Elana Stein Hain and Leora Batnitzky

Individuals in a Time of Communal Tragedy
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I. Tragedy as Fire	1
1. Babylonian Talmud Bava Kamma 60a	1
II. “The evil may to be blame, but the righteous perish too, and even first...”	1
2. Babylonian Talmud Bava Kamma 60a-b	1
III. Going Inside	2
3. Babylonian Talmud Bava Kamma 60b	2
IV. Being with Others	3
4. Babylonian Talmud Bava Kamma 60b, cont.	3

In times of war, personal tragedy tends to be subsumed by a collective sense of loss and grief. Borrowing a metaphor from a rabbinic passage about the spread of wildfire in Bava Kamma 60a-60b, **Elana Stein Hain** and **Leora Batnitzky**, a professor of philosophy and Jewish studies at Princeton University, explore human interconnectedness as it relates to evil in the world. Together they consider the question: during times of communal pain, when is it right, and even necessary, to close ourselves away, and when are we morally bound to participate in the wider community?

*This source sheet is part of the February 15, 2024 episode of the podcast **TEXTING with Elana Stein Hain** which delves deeply into Jewish texts to guide and inspire us as we grapple with the concerns and meaning of this moment. Join Elana as she addresses the issues of our day through the lens of classical Jewish texts in conversation with Hartman scholars.*

Dr. Elana Stein Hain is the Rosh Beit Midrash and a senior research fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America, where she serves as lead faculty, engages in research and curriculum development and consults on the content of lay and professional leadership programs. A widely well-regarded teacher and scholar, Elana is passionate about bringing rabbinic thought into conversation with contemporary life. To this end, she hosts [TEXTing](#) a bi-weekly podcast that considers issues relevant to Jewish life through the lens of classical and modern Torah texts; she also teaches [Talmud from the Balcony](#), an occasional learning seminar exposing the big ideas, questions, and issues motivating rabbinic discussions. She is the author of [Circumventing the Law: Rabbinic Perspectives on Legal Loopholes and Integrity](#) (Penn Press, 2024) which uses loopholes as a lens for understanding rabbinic views on law and ethics. Elana also contributes to [For Heaven's Sake](#), a bi-weekly podcast with Donniel Hartman and Yossi Klein Halevi, exploring contemporary issues related to Israel and the Jewish world. She earned her doctorate in Religion at Columbia University and is an alumna of the Yeshiva University Graduate Program in Advanced Talmudic Studies (GPATS) as well as the Consortium in Jewish Studies and Legal Theory Graduate Fellowship at Cardozo School of Law. She also served for eight years as a clergy member on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, at both Lincoln Square Synagogue and the Jewish Center, has taught at the Wagner School at NYU, and sits on the board of Sefaria: A Living Library of Jewish Texts.

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I. Tragedy as Fire

1. Babylonian Talmud Bava Kamma 60a

מתני' השולח את הבערה, ואכלה עצים או אבנים או עפר – חייב; שנגמר: "כי תצא אש ומצאה קצים, ונאכל גדיש או הקמה או השדה, שלם ישלם המבער את הבערה"

MISHNA: If one started a fire and it consumed wood, or stones, or earth, one is liable, as it is stated: "When a fire is started and spreads to thorns, so that stacked, standing, or growing grain is consumed, the one who started the fire must make restitution" (Exodus 22:5).

II. "The evil may be blame, but the righteous perish too, and even first..."

2. Babylonian Talmud Bava Kamma 60a-b

...אמר רבי שמואל בר נחמני אמר רבי יונתן: אין פורענות באה לעולם אלא בזמן שהרשעים בעולם, ואינה מתחלת אלא מן הצדיקים תחלה, שנגמר: "כי תצא אש ומצאה קצים" – אימתי אש יוצאה? בזמן שקוצים מצויין לה. ואינה מתחלת אלא מן הצדיקים תחלה, שנגמר: "ונאכל גדיש"; "ונאכל גדיש" לא נאמר, אלא "ונאכל גדיש" – שנגמר גדיש כבר.

...The Gemara cites an aggadic midrash based on this verse: Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahmani says that Rabbi Yonatan says: Calamity befalls the world only when wicked people are in the world, but the calamity begins only with the righteous first, as it is stated in the verse: "If a fire breaks out, and catches in thorns, so that a stack of grain, or standing grain, or the field, is consumed" (Exodus 22:5). When does the fire, i.e., calamity, emerge? At a time when the thorns, i.e., the wicked, are found with it. But calamity begins only from the righteous first, as it is stated in the continuation of the verse: "And a stack of grain is consumed [vene'ekhal]." It is not stated: If a fire breaks out, and catches in thorns, and consumes [ve'akhal] the stack of grain; rather, it states: "A stack of grain is consumed," meaning that the stack, i.e., the righteous, has already been consumed before the thorns.

תאני רב יוסף, מאי דכתיב: "ואתם לא תצאו איש מפתח ביתו עד בקר"? כיון שניתן רשות למשחית, אינו מבחין בין צדיקים לרשעים. ולא עוד, אלא שמתחיל מן הצדיקים תחלה, שנגמר: "והכרתי ממוך צדיק ורשע".

Rav Yosef taught a *baraita*: What is the meaning of that which is written with regard to the plague of the firstborn: “And none of you shall go out of the opening of his house until the morning” (Exodus 12:22)? If the plague was not decreed upon the Jewish people, why were they not permitted to leave their homes? Once permission is granted to the destroyer to kill, it does not distinguish between the righteous and the wicked. And not only that, but it begins with the righteous first, as it is stated in the verse: “And will cut off from you the righteous and the wicked” (Ezekiel 21:8), where mention of the righteous precedes the wicked.

בְּכִי רַב יוֹסֵף : כּוֹלֵי הָאֵי נְמִי לְאִין דּוֹמִין . אָמַר לִיה אַבְיִי : טִיבוּתָא הוּא לְגַבִּיּוּהוּ , דְּכָתִיב : “כִּי מִפְּנֵי הַרְעָה נִאָּסַף הַצַּדִּיק” ...

Rav Yosef cried and said: Are all these righteous people also compared to nothing when calamity strikes? Abaye said to him: It is goodness for the righteous that they die first, as it is written: “The righteous is taken away because of the evil to come” (Isaiah 57:1), so that he will not have to endure the suffering that will befall the people...

III. Going Inside

3. Babylonian Talmud Bava Kamma 60b

תְּנוּ רַבָּנָן : דְּבַר בְּעִיר – פְּנִס רַגְלֵיךָ , שְׁנֵאָמַר : “וְאַתֶּם לֹא תֵצְאוּ אִישׁ מִפֶּתַח בֵּיתוֹ עַד בֹּקֶר” . וְאוֹמַר : “לֵךְ עִמִּי בֵּא בְּחַדְרֵיךָ , וּסְגוֹר דְּלֶתְךָ בְּעֶדְךָ” . וְאוֹמַר : “מִחוּץ תִּשְׁכַּל חֶרֶב , וּמִחַדְרִים אֵימָה” ...

The Sages taught: If there is plague in the city, gather your feet, i.e., limit the time you spend out of the house, as it is stated in the verse: “And none of you shall go out of the opening of his house until the morning.” And it says in another verse: “Come, my people, enter into your chambers, and shut your doors behind you; hide yourself for a little moment, until the anger has passed by” (Isaiah 26:20). And it says: “Outside the sword will bereave, and in the chambers terror” (Deuteronomy 32:25)...

וְכִי תֵימָא : הֲנִי מִיְלִי [הֵיכָא] דְּלִיכָא אֵימָה מְגוּוּאֵי , אֲבָל הֵיכָא דְּאִיכָא אֵימָה מְגוּוּאֵי – כִּי נְפִיק וְתֵיב בִּינֵי אִינְשֵׁי בְּצוּוּתָא בְּעַלְמָא , טַפִּי מְעַלִּי ; תָּא שְׂמַע : “מִחוּץ תִּשְׁכַּל חֶרֶב וּמִחַדְרִים אֵימָה” – אַף עַל גַּב דְּמִחַדְרִים אֵימָה , מִחוּץ תִּשְׁכַּל חֶרֶב .

And if you would say that this matter applies only where there is no fear inside, which explains why it is preferable to remain indoors, but where there is fear inside, one might think that when he goes out and sits among people in general company it is better, therefore, the Gemara introduces the third verse and says: Come and hear: “Outside the sword will bereave, and in the chambers terror.” This means that although there is terror in the chambers, outside the sword will bereave, so it is safer to remain indoors.

רַבָּא, בְּעֵיְדוֹ רְתִיחָא הָוָה סָכַר פְּוִי, דְּכָתִיב: "כִּי עָלָה מוֹת בְּחַלּוֹנֵינוּ"...

At a time when there was a plague, Rava would close the windows of his house, as it is written: "For death is come up into our windows" (Jeremiah 9:20)...

IV. Being with Others

4. Babylonian Talmud Bava Kamma 60b, cont.

תָּנּוּ רַבָּנָן: דְּבַר בְּעִיר – אֵל יִפְגֵּס אָדָם יַחִיד לְבֵית הַכְּנֶסֶת, שְׁמֵלֶאָדָּה הַמּוֹת מִמְּקוֹד שָׁם כְּלָיו. וְהָגִי מִיְלֵי הַיְכָלָא דְלֹא קָרוּ בֵּיה דְרַדְדִּיקִי, וְלֹא מְצֵלוּ בֵּיה עֲשָׂרָה...

The Sages taught: If there is a plague in the city, a person should not enter the synagogue alone, as the Angel of Death leaves his utensils there, and for this reason it is a dangerous place. And this matter, the danger in the synagogue, applies only when there are no children learning in the synagogue, and there are not ten men praying in it. But if there are children learning or ten men praying there, it is not a dangerous place...