“In our regular lives most of us, with the exception of some academics or particularly reflective individuals, or moments of sudden perspective -- see ourselves as outside of history. History is something that happened in the past, it is a perspective gained only when we look back. History is rarely taking place now.
Over the past couple of weeks, it feels that our perspective on history and our place in it has shifted. We invoke the past frequently, talk about what is happening in an historical way. What exactly happens in the present that makes us feel like we are part of history? What gives us this perspective? What are the limitations of this perspective? What need does it fill?”

Rabbi Shoshana Cohen
BAVLI GITTIN 56A-B

• Part of a longer story cycle about the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE
• Some information is substantiated by accounts in Josephus
  • Jerusalem controlled by rebel forces
  • Vespasian: Roman Emperor from 69-79 CE; took power during the siege of Jerusalem

Julia Watts Belser, *Rabbinic Tales of Destruction* (Oxford, 2019): “Arguably the most over-narrated event in pre-modern Jewish history”
What might we read for when we read stories like this one?

- History
- Literature
- Understanding of ethics/human nature
QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

• How should societies/individuals deal with a lack of economic resources?
  • How do our circumstances affect our bodies?
  • Should we view the wealthy as valuable sources of help, as fellow victims of scarcity, or as contributors to inequality?

• What should leadership look like during a time of crisis?
  • What is the right balance between boldness and caution?
  • When should leaders look out for their own people, and when should they attempt to forge allegiances and compromises?
PART I: THE FAMINE

Whose fault is the famine in Jerusalem?
What, if anything, could leaders have done to prevent the famine?
Is communal suffering a “great equalizer,” or does it exacerbate preexisting disparities of wealth and privilege?
What enables the cooperation between R. Yohanan ben Zakkai and Abba Sikara and R. Yohanan ben Zakkai’s successful escape?
What are the different ideals of leadership that are presented by Vespasian, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, and other rabbinic voices?
TAKEAWAYS
“Bavli Gittin’s food narratives include almost no distinctive markers of Jewishness. Instead, these tales draw attention to the social and political dynamics that drive conspicuous consumption and luxurious desires, as well as the material realities of hunger and famine.”

Julia Watts Belser, *Rabbinic Tales of Destruction*
TAKEAWAYS: LEADERSHIP

“Ultimately the story reflects on the problems of rabbinic leadership… To opt out of positions of leadership, not to act, invites disaster. Functioning as leaders involves difficult decisions, risks errors in judgment, and often requires compromise.”

Jeffrey Rubenstein, Talmudic Stories (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999)
TAKEAWAYS

Stories of crisis may be historically specific, but through our encounters with them, we can gain a better understanding both of our present circumstances and of the texts themselves.