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We dare not ignore the lessons of Tishah B’Av

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Tishah B’Av begins on Wednesday evening. While it is a day on which stark tragedies occurred to our people throughout our history, at its heart stand two tragedies: the destruction of both temples, in 586 B.C.E. and 70 C.E. The First Temple’s destruction (the churban beit hamikdash) occurred “because the Lord has afflicted [Israel] for [its] many transgressions….[Israel] has greatly sinned.” (See Lamentations 1:5ff.)

Not so for the second churban. Says the Babylonian Talmud tractate Yoma 9b, the people at that time “were engaged in Torah, [observance of the] commandments, and [the performance of] righteous acts.” The cause of that churban, we are told, was the existence of “baseless hatred (sinat chinam)” within the community.

That, however, is not the whole story. Baseless hatred set the events in motion, but the calamity could have been avoided. Something else entirely brought it about. (See BT Gittin 55b-56a.)

Briefly told, Jerusalem’s sages attended a lavish feast at the home of a prominent citizen. At that feast, the host’s friend Kamtza was to be invited, but a servant delivered the invitation to a man named Bar Kamtza, who was someone the host detested. The sages sat silently as the host verbally abused Bar Kamtza and then physically threw him out.

Bar Kamtza was determined to get even—with the sages, not with the host. He convinced the local Roman officials that a revolt was being planned. As proof, he said, let a calf be sent as an offering to the Temple, as in times past. If it is rejected this time, that would prove his claim. Bar Kamtza made certain it would be rejected. He caused a slight blemish to the calf’s eyelid—a blemish in Jewish law, but not by Roman standards.

The sages suspected a trap, considering who brought it, and were willing to let the sacrifice be offered despite the blemish. One sage, however, objected. To allow the sacrifice, argued Zechariah ben Avkilus, would give people the idea that even blemished animals may be sacrificed. The sages then decided to have Bar Kamtza killed before he could report what had happened to the Romans. Again, Zechariah ben Avkilus objected. People would then say, he argued, that bringing a blemished animal for a sacrifice is a capital crime. “Said Rabbi Yochanan: ‘Because of the extreme humility of Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkilus, [the Romans] destroyed our Temple, burned our Sanctuary, and exiled us from our land.’”

By “extreme humility” is meant that Zechariah ben Avkilus was overzealous in his approach to Jewish law. Supposedly, he reasoned that being a mere human meant he had no right to second-guess what God would say in any given situation.

That brings us back to Tishah B’Av and why it needs to be observed—not because the Temple was destroyed, but why it was destroyed. An act of baseless hatred prepared the fuse and an act of religious extremism lit it.

Both factors exist in our Jewish world today, and that is a tragedy worth fasting over. There are countless divisions just within the Orthodox world. The whole notion that “Orthodox” exists as an individual stream in Judaism is ludicrous. The responsa of the late Rabbi Moshe Feinstein often conflict with those of the late Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik. The non-chasidic Orthodox world is alien to a chasid and vice versa, and a Satmar chasid bears little resemblance, say, to a Chabad adherent. Too many Ashkenazim look down at Sefardi interpretations of Jewish law.

One thing most do agree on, however, is that they do not want to have anything to do with the non-Orthodox. Most do not even want to acknowledge that non-Orthodox rabbis are rabbis. Only very rarely, such as following the killing of George Floyd, does an Orthodox organization issue a statement jointly with its non-Orthodox counterparts.

The late Rabbi Norman Lamm, former chancellor of Yeshiva University, decried “those issues that disunite us from each other,” and warned against the coming of “an unbridgeable and cataclysmic rupture within the Jewish community” to the detriment of “our Jewish people and its future.”

He wanted it “to be understood that…a Jew is a Jew even if he sins, as the Talmud teaches, and whether or not he thinks he is sinning. Those who deny this teaching are not Orthodox.”

Worse, he said, such a “withdrawal is a symbol of the splitting of Orthodoxy from the rest of the American Jewish community,” and that would be a tragedy. (See his article Seventy Faces: Divided we stand, but its time to try an idea that might help us stand taller. Moment Vol. II, No. 6, June 1986.)

While differences exist among and between the other streams, at least they acknowledge each other and are willing to work together on issues of serious import for the benefit of the Jewish community as a whole.

Our Sages understood the need for respecting each other. As the Talmud acknowledged in Rabbi Meir’s name, “[One] person is different from another in three ways: in voice, in appearance, and in thought.” (See BT Sanhedrin 38a. A similar lesson is found in BT Berachot 58a.)

In another piece of Talmud we are told this: “Anyone who learns Torah from [only] one teacher never sees a sign of blessing….[Rav Chisda added,] This concerns reasoning,” which is only possible if we are open to hearing and respectful of different opinions. (See BT Avodah Zara 19a.)

The Talmud is filled with conflicting opinions. Most frustrating to the sages were the halachic disputes between the students of the Schools of Shammai and Hillel .“These said: The halachah is in accordance with us, and these said: The halachah is in accordance with us.” It took a heavenly voice to resolve these disputes. “These and those are both the words of the living God,” it said. (See BT Eruvin 13b.)

In other words, there is room in our world for different approaches to God’s law. It is not how a person rules on a matter, but rather what the intent was behind those rulings. Was it meant to promote God’s law—was it done for the sake of heaven, as the sages put it—or was it designed to turn us away from that law, in other words in spite of heaven? Because both schools ruled for the sake of heaven, the heavenly voice declared, “both these and those are the words of the living God.”

Then, however, the heavenly voice added this: Nevertheless, “the halachah is in accordance with the School of Hillel.”

The ensuing discussion wondered why, if both are “the words of the living God,” the law is to follow the School of Hillel. The reason, we are told, is that the followers of Hillel were not only respectful of the School of Shammai’s opinions, they would teach those opinions before teaching their own.

Rashi expanded on this in his commentary. Each side, he said, cited a different biblical verse in support of its opinion. Rather than dismissing the verse cited by the School of Shammai, the School of Hillel would first go out of its way to explain—as respectfully as possible—why the School of Shammai considered that citation to be applicable before defending its own position.

There are other such teachings in the Talmud. However we choose to live a Jewish life, we need to be respectful of those who do so differently, even if we disagree with their approach, so long as each of us is doing it for the sake of heaven, not in spite of it.

We have serious issues to deal with, coming from within our own world and influenced by events in the broader world around us. We need to sit with each other for the benefit of our entire community, but we no longer have a “School of Hillel” to be respectful enough of contrary opinions to do so. There is no longer the sense that “both these and those are the words of the living God.” (For the record, Lamm argued that the “these and those” declaration does not apply to our current disputes, even though he advocated for dialogue among streams.)

All streams act for the sake of heaven, not in spite of heaven. They all want to bring people closer to God, not push them away from Him. We do not have to agree with their approach, we may even argue that their approach to some matters violates normative Judaism, but we must not turn our backs on them.

Zechariah ben Avkilus proved the dangers inherent in insisting upon the most extreme positions, whether on the right or the left. Bar Kamtza’s humiliation proved the dangers inherent in the sin of sinat chinam, baseless hatred. Both exist in our world today. If we do not relearn these lessons of Tishah B’Av—sooner rather than later—we will only have more reasons to observe this day in the years to come.

May we all have easy and meaningful fasts.