



SINAT CHINAM: WHERE DOES IT COME FROM, AND HOW DO WE FIX IT?

Chazal identify a number of causes for the destruction of the Beit HaMikdash (the Temple). The causes include the following:

- We violated the three cardinal sins: murder, idolatrous practices, and acts of sexual promiscuity (*Yoma* 9b).
- We were not sufficiently careful to honor the great among us (*Shabbat* 119b).
- We did not act *lifnim mishurat hadin* — above and beyond the law — and instead were satisfied with a minimalistic fulfillment of the basic “letter of the law” requirements (*Bava Metziah* 30b).

- We did not recite a blessing prior to learning Torah, which some associate with an insufficient appreciation of the wonderful gift of Torah (*Nedarim* 81a).

In addition to the above enumerated causes, perhaps the most famous is the Talmud’s statement in *Yoma* (9b) that the Second Temple was destroyed because of baseless hatred, *sinat chinam*. According to some,¹ baseless hatred is even the driving force behind some of the other Talmudic explanations for Churban HaBayit; were it not for baseless hatred, we would have been better at honoring others and would have been more successful at developing a positive

relationship with Torah.

The Talmud Yerushalmi, *Yoma* 1:1, powerfully states that any generation in which the Beit HaMikdash is not rebuilt is held accountable for Churban HaBayit, for had that generation been worthy enough to be spared Churban HaBayit, they would also be sufficiently worthy to merit its rebuilding during their own later era. This suggests that the lessons that emerge from the religious and moral deficiencies of the generation of Churban HaBayit have important implications for us as well.

The purpose of this article is to better understand the source of *sinat chinam*. What generates baseless hatred?

Indeed, the term itself requires further elucidation. People don't generally hate others for no reason at all, and, on the contrary, people usually offer explanations for why they feel slighted or offended. What, exactly, constitutes *sinat chinam*? In exploring these questions, we will strive both to gain a better understanding of the root cause of the Beit HaMikdash's destruction, and to empower ourselves to work toward rectifying the problem.

Approach #1: Rav Hirsch — Loving and Hating those who are Different

Rav Shimshon Rafael Hirsch addresses love and hatred in several places in his commentary on the Torah. Within his view, a clear perspective emerges in which love and hatred primarily relate to our capacity to handle and interact with "the other."

R' Hirsch comments on the pasuk in Parshat Vayerah (Breishit 22:2):²

אשר אהבת. "אהב" - "הב" בהקדמת אל"ף המתיחסת אל האישיות הפעילה, היינו: להתמסר לזולת, וגם לשאוף לקרב את הזולת אליו ביותר; היינו: לשאוף להגיע לכלל התחברות הדוקה ביותר עם הזולת. היפוכו של "אהב": "שנא", קרוב ל"סנה", היינו בעיקרו: היות קוץ, לדחות את הזולת מעצמו, להרחיק אותו מעצמו עד כמה שאפשר. ל"אהבה" דרוש קיומו של הזולת, ל"שנאה" - ריחוקו עד כלה:

"Whom you love." The word "אהב" is the word "הב" (to give) with an "א" preceding it, which symbolizes the individual self. This means that we devote ourselves to another and also attempt to draw the other closer, seeking to create a strong bond with the other. The opposite of "אהב" is "שנא" which is similar to the word "סנה" (shrub), because at its core it is a thorn that pushes away another to

distance him as much as possible. For love requires a presence with another and hate requires absolute distance.

R' Hirsch notes that the word "אהב" is comprised of the letter "א" signifying the individual self, adjacent to the word "הב" which refers to an act of giving to another. R' Hirsch explains that love is the process of devoting myself to the other, thus creating a close connection. This involves an element of sacrificing complete fulfillment of my self-interests, and instead, bringing "the other," a being outside of and distinct from myself, closer to me. Love is about cultivating connection and intimacy, whereas hate is about distancing those who are dissimilar and/or distinct from me.

R' Hirsch further expounds on this concept in the context of the divine command, "ואהבת לרעך כמוך," love your neighbor like yourself (Vayikra 19:18). R' Hirsch explains that creating this closeness involves looking out for the best interest of others, feeling invested in their success, and doing what I can to advance their accomplishments, whereas hatred is all about pushing others away, rooting for their failures, and celebrating their eventual downfall.

This prescription sounds compelling and (perhaps) somewhat within reach when interacting with kind, compassionate, like-minded individuals. However, according to Rav Hirsch, how do we develop strong, positive relationships and avoid a sense of hatred when dealing with individuals who have offended us or caused us pain?

While Rav Hirsch makes several suggestions throughout his commentary on Chumash, one seems especially pertinent. The verse (Vaykirah 19:17) states:

לֹא תִשָּׂא אֶת אָחִיךָ בְּלִבְךָ הוֹכֵחַ תּוֹכִיחַ אֶת עַמִּיתְךָ וְלֹא תִשָּׂא עָלָיו חֶטְאִי:

You shall not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your brother but incur no guilt because of him.

Rav Hirsch notes the relationship between the two phrases in this pasuk: (a) We are not supposed to hate our brother in our heart, and (b) We are enjoined to rebuke others in instances of misbehavior.

Rav Hirsch suggests the following:

כאן נאמר: אל תשנא את אחיך בלבבך, אלא הוכיחנו להביאו לכלל הכרה עצמית. נמצאת זו החובה המוטלת עלינו - כל אימת שנראה לנו, שאחר פגע בנו: או נשכח את הפגיעה, ושוב לא תשפיע על דעותינו כלפיו; ואם אין אנחנו מסוגלים לכך - אל יעלה בליבנו טינה עכורה; אלא נוכיח את ריענו בגלוי ובמישרין, וכך נאפשר לו להסביר - או לתקן - את מעשיו. רק אדם, שלא עידן את נפשו, שותק מתוך איבה כבושה.

Here it says: don't hate your brother in your heart, rather rebuke him so that he can come to a personal recognition. This is an obligation placed on us. Whenever it seems that someone has wronged us, we can forget the wrongdoing and not let it influence our thoughts toward the offender. If we are not capable of doing that, we should not bear a grudge, but rather rebuke our friend in an open way. Through that, we can explain or correct his ways. A person who has not refined his ways will remain quiet because of a pent-up hatred.

According to R' Hirsch, when someone behaves in a way that offends us, we are called upon to have one of two reactions. Ideally, we should try to forget the event that happened, to the point that it has no negative impact on our attitude or behavior toward this individual. However, if this is not possible, our second option is to share what was hard for us with the offending party so that he/ she may

be able to improve his/her behavior going forward. R' Hirsch is highlighting the idea that at times, rebuke is a way of preventing or reducing negative feelings toward others.

In this passage, Rav Hirsch highlights an incredibly important insight into human relationships. Confrontation is uncomfortable and people tend to shy away from challenging or awkward conversations. However, R' Hirsch is pointing out that given the reality that family, friends, and acquaintances can, at times, hurt one another, if we can't forget about the offending incident and erase it from the record of our mind and heart, then the ability to sensitively engage in open communication can be the key to mending and improving those relationships. Whether it is because the dialogue gives the other party the chance to explain his/her thinking or circumstances and to potentially clear up a misunderstanding, or because the process of getting something off our chest can be cathartic and can provide a release for the hurt that has been stewing within, the short-term challenge of engaging in open, sensitive communication can strengthen relationships in very meaningful and long-lasting ways. This type of open dialogue can be an important force in preventing baseless hatred, namely, hatred that didn't have to be, i.e. hatred that grows as a result of negative emotions that, absent a healthy outlet, mushroom into larger-than-life proportions and create a toxic backdrop for the relationship.

Approach #2: The Way We Talk

As is well-known, the Chafetz Chaim analyzed at length the laws relating to proper and improper speech. He introduces the work *Chafetz Chaim*

with an explanation as to why he believed it was so important to write about these laws, a decision that warrants particular justification given that no one before him had dealt with these laws in nearly as comprehensive a manner as he did.

The Chafetz Chaim starts off by seeking to understand the connection between baseless hatred and *Churban HaBayit* (the Temple's destruction). In quoting the Talmud's (*Yoma 9b*) comparison between *sinat chinam* and the three cardinal sins of murder, idolatry, and sexual promiscuity, the Chafetz Chaim highlights the severity of *sinat chinam* and also looks to better understand how and why this served as the basis for the Temple's destruction.

The Chafetz Chaim explains that *sinat chinam* not only refers to the internal emotional experience of baseless hatred, but also to its external manifestation, namely, lashon hara. He strengthens this claim by quoting a Gemara in *Arachin* (15) that explicitly equates lashon hara with the three cardinal sins (similar to the equation depicted in *Yoma* (9b) comparing *sinat chinam* with the three cardinal sins), pointing to the egregious nature of lashon hara and to the harshness of the punishment that would ensue from committing this offense. Indeed, the Chafetz Chaim associates this sin with the core of *Churban HaBayit*. For the Chafetz Chaim, the problem with *sinat chinam* is not only the internal hatred that we carry, but the behavioral ramifications of harboring this ill will. Our thoughts and emotions directly frame the speech we express, and the natural extension of negativity toward others is destructive forms of communication, including words that corrode relationships and social standing.

Within this approach, how can we avoid baseless hatred and the lashon hara that ensues? Perhaps the most obvious answer is to properly learn the Chafetz Chaim's works on lashon hara, including both his halachic works as well as his works of mussar that encourage people to carefully monitor and purify their speech.³ Proper knowledge of the halachot, as well as a deep sense of the import of this mitzvah, are necessary to navigate the many challenging and complicated interpersonal situations that arise.

An additional dimension is shared in the Chafetz Chaim's sefer, *Ahavat Yisrael*. In this work, the Chafetz Chaim offers a variety of additional insights for those who wish to rid themselves of any form of *sinat chinam*. He lists four potential causes for *sinat chinam* (*Ahavat Yisrael* chapter 3), many of which have to do with different forms of jealousy. In this context, baseless hatred does not mean that we have no reason for our emotions. Rather, similar to Rav Hirsch, it refers to enmity that is essentially unjustified and unwarranted, in this case rooted in jealousy and pettiness.

Though the Chafetz Chaim didn't use these precise terms, many Jewish thinkers extend these concepts to describe what perhaps can be termed a "culture of competitiveness." In such a culture, we feel that the success of others stands to threaten our own success. This may be because the resources under discussion either are or feel finite, and therefore I experience someone else's success as limiting the assets available to me. Examples may include someone else's child being accepted into a prestigious institution, leaving one less spot for my child who is also applying; an

acquaintance purchasing a “dream house” in a neighborhood with limited availability, and precisely the neighborhood where I had hoped to move; a friend’s engagement, leaving me with the feeling that there is one less eligible bachelor in the pool of singles that travel in my circles; or even a trusted friend becoming increasingly close with a different acquaintance, causing me to worry that my friend will now have less need for or interest in me.

Another manifestation of the “culture of competitiveness” may relate not to instances where assets feel limited, but to situations where we define our self-worth directly in relation to others. In this form of competitiveness, I assess my strengths and traits based on others’ position and condition. The degree to which I view myself as intelligent/generous/professionally successful/spiritually ambitious/an effective parent is directly informed and characterized by my (self-perceived) position relative to those around me. By definition, that would mean that someone else’s advancement automatically triggers a downgrade for me.

A possible antidote to this culture of competitiveness may involve a paradigm shift that reframes how we perceive and interpret our reality. When we believe and internalize that Hashem’s bounty is unlimited, and that Hashem has enough parking spots/scholarships/kind-hearted and socially comfortable eligible bachelors/professional opportunities/ (fill in the blank) for everyone, then we no longer experience resources as finite, and thus cease to experience the success of others as threatening. Many Jewish thinkers encourage us to internalize the idea that G-d gives

us what He believes we need to thrive in this world, and if someone else has something that we don’t, it is because, based on His G-dly calculation (one that we are not usually privy to understand), He believes it is not in our best interest. Once we stop viewing others’ successes as a threat, it becomes a lot easier for us to unite, to support each other, and to promote each other’s success. This orientation carves out the space for us to feel like we are on the same team as others, rather than competitors in the race of life.

Furthermore, when we assess our own accomplishments, not just in terms of socially-normed barometers of success (which are, by definition, relative to others), but by our efforts to fulfill the G-dly mandate to be kind and generous of spirit, then our sense of self-worth remains untouched by the external success and advancement of others. If we truly believe that we are on the same team, and that our efforts should be directed internally toward becoming kinder, more compassionate, and more empathic toward others, then de facto we are better equipped to celebrate the success of our friends and community members. In this way, lashon hara melts away because we are no longer threatened by others and searching for subtle ways to bring them down. The root cause of lashon hara is thus weakened and hopefully eliminated.

Building Toward the Future

The Talmud tells us that the Beit HaMikdash was destroyed because of *sinat chinam*, baseless hatred. The purpose of this article was to increase our understanding of this particular sin, including both its root cause and pathways for rectifying the problem.

The Chafetz Chaim (*Zechor LiMiryam* Perek 4) notes that in particular in our generations, the ones prior to the coming of Mashiach, it is all the more important to invest effort in repenting and correcting the sins that caused Churban HaBayit. For Rav Hirsch, this may demand the willingness to overlook the misdeeds of others or to openly and sensitively communicate about them, and for the Chafetz Chaim, we are charged with shifting our perspectives and, by extension, polishing the quality of our speech. In both cases, we are carefully tending to our interpersonal relationships so that small fissures in relationships are managed in a healthy, productive, timely manner, thus promoting close bonds predicated on authentic mutual respect and support.

It is often said in the name of Rav Kook that the proper antidote for *sinat chinam* is *ahavat chinam*. May we be zocheh to feel the positivity that we direct toward others reverberate back to us, resulting in a continuous cycle of constantly improving, strengthening, and deepening relationships. May we be zocheh to build a society characterized by love, support, and the genuine celebration of each other’s success, ultimately leading to the joint celebration of the rebuilding of Bayit Shlishi (the Third Temple).

Endnotes

1. See, for example, *Yibaneh HaMikdash* pg. 141.
2. This fits with Rav Hirsch’s powerful explanation for some of the *arayot* found in Parshat Acharei Mot. See his commentary to Vayikrah 18:6. See, as well, Rav Hirsch to Shemot 15:13 for more on this general approach.
3. See his sefer *Shemirat HaLashon* at length.