

Rosh Hashanah
5781
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As we go through the cycle of the year we have the opportunity to experience each holiday with all of its unique themes and messages. For example, when we come to Pesach we re-experience the process of going out of slavery and becoming free people. The same can be said of each of our special annual holidays.

The interconnection between certain holidays is a phenomenon that needs to be studied. For example, the 17th of Tammuz is deeply connected to Yom Kippur.¹ Pesach directly impacts Shavuot.² The 15th of Av is the answer to the 9th of Av.³

If we take a closer look at the 9th of Av, it is possible that it contains the answer for itself and perhaps it also comes to address the essential ideas of Rosh Hashanah and our general situation today.⁴ In order to understand the “Holiday” of the 9th of Av we need to understand the history of the day. The 9th of Av, Tisha B’Av, became the darkest day in our history when the spies brought back the negative report about the land of Israel. It was on that night that the children of Israel cried tears of חִינָם, (Chinam), and in response, Hashem said that he would give the children of Israel a reason to cry for the generations. The key word is חִינָם, which translates as baseless, for no reason, or free. In other words, their reason for crying that night was baseless. Perhaps there is more to the meaning of the word חִינָם than has been suggested.

If you were to take a poll of why the second Temple was destroyed, the most common answer would be because of חִינָם- שנאת חִינָם- baseless hatred. The story most referenced is that of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza. The story is found in the Talmud in tractate Gittin 55b.⁵ The conventional reading

¹ The first set of tablets were broken on the 17th of Tammuz because of the sin of the golden calf. It was on Yom Kippur that the children of Israel gained true atonement when Moshe brought down the second set of tablets- a sign that they had been forgiven for the sin of the golden calf.

² Hashem told Moshe at the burning bush that the sign that Hashem sent Moshe to take the children of Israel out of Egypt was that they would come to Mount Sinai to worship Hashem there (a hint that they would ultimately receive the Torah there)

³ It was at the end of the 40th year of the Children of Israel being in the desert that the dying caused by the sin of the spies ceased on the 15th of Av.

⁴ The fact that we do not have the Temple rebuilt in Jerusalem

⁵ Gittin 55b: The Gemara explains: **Jerusalem was destroyed on account of Kamtza and bar Kamtza.** This is as there was a certain man whose friend was named **Kamtza** and whose enemy was named **bar Kamtza**. He once made a large feast and said to his servant: **Go bring me my friend Kamtza.** The servant went and mistakenly brought him his enemy **bar Kamtza**. The man who was hosting the feast came and found **bar Kamtza sitting at the feast.** The host said to **bar Kamtza**. **That man is the enemy [ba'al devava] of that man, that is, you are my enemy. What then do you want here? Arise and leave.** **Bar Kamtza said to him: Since I have already come, let me stay and I will give you money for whatever I eat and drink. Just do not embarrass me by sending me out.** The host said to him: **No, you must leave.** **Bar Kamtza said to him: I will give you money for half of the feast; just do not send me away.** The host said to him: **No, you must leave.** **Bar Kamtza then said to him: I will give you money for the entire feast; just let me stay.** The host said to him: **No, you must leave.** Finally, the host took **bar Kamtza** by his hand, stood him up, and took him out. After having been cast out from the feast, **bar Kamtza** said to himself: **Since the Sages were sitting there and did not protest the actions of the host, although they saw how he humiliated me, learn from it that they were content with what he did. I will therefore go and inform [eikhul kurtza] against them to the king.** He went and said to the emperor: **The Jews have rebelled against you.** The emperor said to him: **Who says that this is the case?** **Bar Kamtza said to him: Go and test**

of this story is that Bar Kamtza was the victim of baseless hatred. The fact that the Rabbinic leadership was present and witnessed the public shaming of Bar Kamtza and did not protest was an indicator that they were complicit in the act of baseless hatred as well. There is one problem with this thesis. Based on the conduct of Bar Kamtza after his humiliation, we get the sense that he is a nasty and vengeful person. Perhaps the host's strong negative reaction to his presence at the feast was well founded. More importantly, the problem with the conventional reading of this story is that it is taken out of context. The gemara actually starts off with a teaching of Rabbi Yochanan and it is from this teaching that leads us into the story of Bar Kamtza and then an additional two stories that make a similar point to Rabbi Yochanan's thesis. **"Rabbi Yochanan said: What is the meaning of that which is written: "Happy is the man who fears always, but he who hardens his heart shall fall into mischief" (Proverbs 28:14)? Jerusalem was destroyed on account of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza. The place known as the King's Mountain was destroyed on account of a rooster and a hen. The city of Beitar was destroyed on account of a shaft from a chariot [rispak]."**

What is Rabbi Yochanan's teaching? Firstly, what is the meaning of - "the man who fears always?" What is the nature of this fear? Rashi explains that he is afraid of punishment, while Ibn Ezra explains that he fears Hashem. Either way they agree that this fear will prevent the person from coming to sin. It is the second part of the verse that I think captures the message of Rabbi Yochanan. The real danger is when a person hardens their heart and becomes entrenched in a certain mindset. It is at that point, that they can no longer see things objectively and make adjustments that are necessary. It is at the end of the Bar Kamtza story that **"Rabbi Yochanan says: The excessive humility of Rabbi Zekharya ben Avkolas destroyed our Temple, burned our Sanctuary, and exiled us from our land."** Rabbi Zekharya's focus was on maintaining the sanctity of the Temple worship. It never entered his mind that his focus should be on saving the Temple from destruction. This is where the true danger lies. We get caught up in our assumptions and this leads to dangerous endings. This idea is found in the next two stories of the gemara as well. ⁷ The second story was that Tur Malka was destroyed because the Jews rebelled

them; send them an offering to be brought in honor of the government, and see whether they will sacrifice it. The emperor went and sent with him a choice, three-year-old calf. While bar Kamtza was coming with the calf to the Temple, he made a blemish on the calf's upper lip. And some say he made the blemish on its eyelids, a place where according to us, i.e., *halakha*, it is a blemish, but according to them, gentile rules for their offerings, it is not a blemish. Therefore, when bar Kamtza brought the animal to the Temple, the priests would not sacrifice it on the altar since it was blemished, but they also could not explain this satisfactorily to the gentile authorities, who did not consider it to be blemished.

⁶ אֲשֶׁר־יֵאָדָם מִפְּחָד תִּמְיֵד וּמִקֶּשֶׁה לָבוֹ! פֹּלֵל בְּרַעְיָה:

⁷ Gittin 57a -It was previously mentioned (55b) that the place known as **the King's Mountain [Tur Malka]** was **destroyed on account of a rooster and a hen.** The details of what happened are as follows: **It was customary in that place that when they would lead a bride and groom to their wedding, they would take out a rooster and a hen before them, as if to say in the manner of a good omen: Be fruitful and multiply like chickens. One day a troop [gunda] of Roman soldiers passed by there while a wedding was taking place and took the rooster and hen from them. The residents of the city fell upon them and beat them. The soldiers came and said to the emperor: The Jews have rebelled against you. The emperor then came against them in war.**

because the Romans took away their rooster and hen from the wedding ceremony. The Jews had a custom which they had become so dedicated to that they were not able to see past the fact that their protest against the Romans would lead to their ultimate destruction. Again, we see the tendency to get so devoted to certain ways of doing things that we lose sight of the bigger picture. The third story was very much the same.⁸ The town of Beitar had a beautiful custom of planting trees when a child was born with the intention of using the wood to make the child's wedding canopy. One day while the Romans were passing through the town, they cut these special trees to fix the princess's chariot. The people of Beitar, in response to the cutting of the trees, attacked the Romans which led to the complete destruction of the town. This is another example of where they were so dedicated to their way of doing things that they would not allow themselves to see that their entire existence was in jeopardy.

This brings us back to the mitzvah of Tisha B'Av- Avelut- mourning. The goal of Avelut is to see the truth and to see things for how they really are. This I believe is the answer to the tragedy of Tisha B'Av. It is the חינוך that is the problem. It is more than total baselessness. Its deeper meaning is Illusion. We get so attached to our way of doing things that we get lost in the illusion. It is the stark truth of Tisha B'av that is supposed to be the remedy. When we are brought to the abyss we are forced to reconsider our assumptions. (This is true as well when we mourn for a relative as we are forced to see who they were and what type of life they led.)

As we approach Rosh Hashanah it is this lesson of Tisha B'av, forcing ourselves to see things for what they are, that becomes most important. Rambam in Hilchot Teshuva Chapter 3 Halacha 4 states⁹ “Even though the sounding of the shofar on Rosh HaShanah is a decree, it contains an allusion. It is as if [the shofar's call] is saying:

Wake up you sleepy ones from your sleep and you who slumber, arise. Inspect your deeds, repent, remember your Creator. **Those who forget the truth in the vanities of time and throughout the entire year, devote their energies to vanity and emptiness** which will not benefit or save: Look to your souls. Improve your ways and your deeds and let every one of you abandon his evil path and thoughts.”

As we approach the new year, after experiencing a year that forced us out of our regular routine, we have a major opportunity. How can we do things differently? One thing is certain: it is not easy to re-calibrate. But as we understand from Tisha B'Av, we need to try to see the bigger

⁸ Gittin 57a It was stated earlier that the city of **Beitar was destroyed on account of a shaft from a carriage**. The Gemara explains that **it was customary** in Beitar that **when a boy was born they would plant a cedar tree** and when **a girl** was born they **would plant a cypress [tornita]**. **And when they would later marry** each other **they would cut** down these trees **and construct** a wedding canopy for them with their branches. **One day the emperor's daughter passed by** there and **the shaft of the carriage** in which she was riding **broke**. Her attendants **chopped down a cedar** from among those trees **and brought it to her**. Owing to the importance that they attached to their custom, the residents of Beitar **came and fell upon them and beat them**. The attendants **came and said to the emperor: The Jews have rebelled against you**. The emperor then **came against them** in war.

⁹ אף על פי שתקיעת שופר בראש השנה גזרת הכתוב רמז יש בו קלומר עורו ישנים משנתכם ונגרדמים הקיצו מתרדמתכם וחסשו במעשיכם וחתרו בתשובה וזכרו בוראכם. אלו השופרים את האמת בהבלי הזמן ושוגים כל שנתם בהביל נריק אשר לא יועיל ולא יציל, הביטו לנפשתיכם והיטיבו דרכיכם ומעלליכם ויעזבו כל אחד מקם דרכו הרעה ומחשבתו אשר לא טובה.

picture. Are we any better than the Jews of the time of the destruction that were so caught up in their ways that they were not able to see outside of their world? The opportunity is to take the time to consider how we can do things better. What are our goals as Torah Jews? Are we doing everything in our power to maximize our potential that will get us to have a closer relationship with Hashem? What are our priorities and values? Are we living balanced lives with a focus on growth? Are we too focused on materialism and not enough on spirituality? May Hashem bless us with the ability to have the strength to take a hard look at ourselves and be able to make the necessary changes in all aspects of our lives. May Hashem also bless us with a happy and healthy new year, filled with clarity, a genuine sense of purpose, and the ability for us to fulfill our true potential.