



THE SILENT TISHA B'AV GREETING

A truncated “hello.” Replaced by an affirming “head-nod.” Few moments in the Jewish calendar are as awkward as the social scene that follows the public reading of Megilas Eicha on Tisha B’Av night. Exiting the shul, we encounter our fellow community members and friends, and yet are restricted in acknowledging them with traditional social greetings (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 554:20*). It seems odd, that during a period in which we are so deeply focused on the cataclysmic impact of *sinas chinam*, that we would find ourselves engaging with each other from a disposition that seems to lack the basic embracing courtesies of social connections.

The very opening verse of Tisha B’Av — *Eicha yashvah badad*, Alas, she sits alone — conveys a deep sense of loneliness that underlies the

emotional dynamics of the day. The very void that is responsible for the calamities that initiated our exile is rooted in our inability to connect with others. How are we to balance the aspirational goal of re-unifying the Jewish people with the seemingly incongruent halachic expectation of avoiding greeting those around us?

The Source of Our Contemporary Galus

The Gemarah writes in *Maseches Yoma 9b*, that the rebellious antecedents of the first churban were drastically different than those of the second. The first Mikdash was destroyed on account of a total decay in the moral, ideological, and halachic fabric of the Jewish people. The Gemarah describes a society that tolerated overt violations of idolatry, promiscuity, and even murder. In contrast, the

second Mikdash was destroyed as a result of the fractured nature of the Jewish community and the baseless hatred that defined the communal culture. The Maharal, *Netzach Yisrael* ch. 4, asserts that the differential in the causes for churban are related to the nature and function of the Mikdash at each particular time. The defining element of the first Mikdash was *Hashraas HaShechina*, the overt and manifesting presence of G-d. The deterioration of the Jewish people’s faith and moral behavior resulted in a society that was entirely incompatible with a revealed presence of Hashem. Depicted by the Navi Yechezkel (ch. 9-10) the Shechina departed from the Beis HaMikdash, rendering the edifice devoid of any sacred and spiritual protection, thus susceptible to the deserving and inevitable conquest of our enemies.

In contrast, writes the Maharal, the initiating energy that led to the construction of the second Beis Hamikdash was the communal commitment and aspiration of the Jewish people themselves. As a result, the sanctity of the Second Mikdash emanated not from the overt presence of G-d, but from its role as a spiritual force in uniting the broader Jewish people. The intensifying sectarianism of the Bayis Sheini period, in addition to a more general breakdown of communal cohesion, emerged as an oppositional dimension to the underlying nature of the Mikdash at that time. As a result, the Jewish people were no longer worthy of the Beis Hamikdash within their midst.

It would follow that the core mandate for our own exile experience is to reconstruct the foundation of communal unity, whose void disrupted the nation-driven Mikdash from serving as our focal point of communal life and *avodas Hashem*. A renewed commitment to *ahavas Yisrael* is at the heart of our aspirational return to Zion, and therefore should emerge as a central motif in the commemoration of its destruction.

The Centrality of Ahavas Yisrael in Jewish Life

The Torah's mandate to love our fellow Jew is expressed in a curious formulation: *veahavta lera'yacha kamo'cha Ani Hashem* — you shall love your neighbor like yourself, I am Hashem (Vayikra 19:18).

It is striking that our “love of self” seems to be the metric by which we are expected to measure the level at which we project love for others. Moreover, the culminating phrase “Ani Hashem” seems to

insert an affirmation of faith that distracts from our focus of nurturing compassion and love between people. Rav Mordechai Lobert, in his sefer *Milchamos Yehuda* (Vayikra pg. 78), suggests that embedded within this seemingly more generalized phrase is a very specific and tactical directive in how to bring the Jewish people together. He writes that we are each comprised of two dimensions — our body and our soul. If we live life entirely to accommodate our physical needs, then we risk developing the egocentrism that repels the opinions and concerns of others, in deference to securing the satisfaction of our own desires. However, if we recognize that our “*kamo'cha*” entails a much broader dimension of human existence, namely the soul, then we strive for loftier ambitions that transcend our immediate physical needs of the moment.

“Ani Hashem” is not a coda to the expectation of interpersonal harmony; it's the central force in ensuring its success. Connecting and relating to the Godliness within ourselves is what allows us to reach beyond our own agendas and live for something greater than our own personal needs and desires. It is what enables us to expand our world of compassion and embrace and include others even at the expense of ourselves. True *ahavas Yisrael* begins with the ability to approach the world without the personal agendas of our own opinions and ideas as filters for caring engagement with others, and to recognize that in the ultimate quest of manifesting our inner Godliness in this world, we must discover the very same Godliness and potential that exists within others as well. *Ahavas Yisrael* means to live an interpersonal and communal life that is larger and broader than ourselves.

Love of Jews is Love of Hashem, Love of Hashem is Love of Other Jews

The Maharal, in his work *Nesivos Olam* (*Nesiv Ahavas Rei'a* no. 1) writes:

דבר זה שאוהב הבריות הוא אהבת השם ית' גם כן, כי מי שאוהב את אחד אוהב כל מעשה ידיו אשר עשה ופעל, ולפיכך כאשר אוהב את השם ית' אי אפשר שלא יאהב את ברואיו ואם הוא שונא הבריות אי אפשר שיאהב השם ית' אשר בראם. וכן כבוד חבירו אשר נברא בצלם אלקים נחשב כבוד המקום.

Loving other people is a form of loving G-d as well, because one who loves another loves all of the things that he makes. Therefore, when one loves G-d, it is impossible not to love His creations. And if he hates others, it is impossible to love G-d who created them. Similarly, honoring a friend who was created in the image of G-d is an honor to G-d.

Extending love to others is itself an expression of our love of G-d, as the entity Who created them. Conversely, harboring hatred for G-d's creations is tantamount to rejecting Hashem himself, as His creations are an extension of His essence and His will. The notion of bifurcating our commitment to the rituals and expectations of mitzvos, which express our relationship with Hashem, from those which shape the ethical conduct of our interpersonal relationships, is a fallacy. We cannot truly stand as servants of the Almighty without respecting and embracing the people he created. It stands, therefore, that we acknowledge the prominence of *ahavas Yisrael* as a central value within our broader spiritual pursuits, even as we reach to connect with the Almighty Himself.

Discovering Greatness in Others

The connection between “*veahavta lerayacha kamocha*” and “Ani Hashem” is expressed not only in the relationship between the Mikdash and the Jewish people, but in the internal functioning of the Mikdash itself. The Mishkan and the Beis HaMikdash were ministered by the Kohanim. This legacy of leadership originates with Aharon HaKohein. The Mishnah in *Avos* 1:12, states:

הלל אומר, הוי מתלמידיו של אהרן, אוהב שלום ורודף שלום, אוהב את הבריות ומקרבן לתורה.

Hillel says, be of the students of Aharon: love peace and pursue peace, love other people and bring them closer to the Torah.

The Maharal, *Derech Hachaim*, questions why Aharon’s peacemaking nature was necessary to fulfill his primary role in overseeing the vast and complex world of the Beis Hamikdash. The Maharal explains that in order for Aharon to represent the Jewish people, he must somehow “embody” the Jewish people. Aharon’s qualifications to succeed in such an ambitious reach of representation was the very notion that he managed to personally recognize religious capacity within the heart and soul of every Jew. As the Rambam there writes:

אמרו שאהרן עליו השלום כשהיה מרגיש באדם שתוכו רע או שהיו מספרים לו שתוכו רע ושבידו עבירה היה מתחיל לו לשלום והיה מתאהב אליו והיה מרבה לספר עמו והיה האיש ההוא מתבייש בנפשו ואומר אוי לי אילו היה יודע אהרן צפון לבי ורוע מפעלי לא היה מתיר לעצמו להסתכל בי כל שכן שידבר עמי ואמנם אני אצלו בחזקת אדם כשר לכן אני אאמת את דבריו ומחשבתו ואהיה חוזר למוטב ונעשה מתלמידיו הלומדים ממנו.

Our rabbis said that when Aharon

sensed that someone was not doing well spiritually, or they told him about a person who was struggling spiritually or who had sinned, he would greet him first and would be friendly toward him and would speak much with him. And that man would become embarrassed about himself and say, "Woe is to me! If Aharon knew what is hidden in my heart and the evil of my actions, he would not permit himself to [even] look at me, all the more so to speak to me. And yet he treats me with the presumption that I am a proper man. [Hence] I will confirm his words and his thoughts and I will return to the good." And this individual would become one of [Aharon's] students who learn from him.

Aharon would approach individuals who lacked commitment to the values and ideals of Torah and extend himself personally in greeting them. This type of unconditional engagement instilled a sense of self-worth within these individuals. It was that very confidence that ultimately propelled them to move forward in their spiritual growth, and to view themselves as having greater potential for religious success.

The very foundation of the Beis Hamikdash is the notion that everyone has access to the presence of G-d, because ultimately everyone has an inner potential to be worthy of such a connection. Core to the existence of the Mikdash within our midst is our own ability to appreciate the individual greatness of others. *Ahavas Yisrael* mandates that we relate to the inner greatness that can be discovered within every Jew.

Ahavas Yisrael as a Tool for Hatred

The Gemarah in *Gittin* 55b, shares a famous story that began a chain of events that resulted in the destruction of the Second Mikdash:

אקמצא ובר קמצא חרוב ירושלים דההוא גברא דרחמיה קמצא ובעל דבביה בר קמצא עבד סעודתא אמר ליה לשמעיה זיל אייתי לי קמצא אזל אייתי ליה בר קמצא אתא אשכחיה דהוה יתיב אמר ליה מכדי ההוא גברא בעל דבבא דההוא גברא אמר ליה הואיל ואתאי בעית הכא קום פוק אמר ליה הואיל ואתאי שבקן ויהיבנא לך דמי מה דאכילנא ושתנינא אמר ליה לא אמר ליה יהיבנא לך דמי פלגא דסעודתיך אמר ליה לא אמר ליה יהיבנא לך דמי כולה סעודתיך א"ל לא נקטיה בידיה ואוקמיה ואפקיה אמר הואיל והווי יתיב רבנן ולא מחו ביה ש"מ קא ניהא להו איזיל איכול בהו קורצא בי מלכא אזל אמר ליה לקיסר מרדו בך יהודאי.

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 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 against them to the king. He went and said to the emperor: The Jews have rebelled against you.

Translation adapted from The William Davidson digital edition of the Koren Noé Talmud

The Maharal, *Netzach Yisrael* ch. 5 asks, why did the Gemarah introduce this narrative with the claim that “*aKamtza ubar Kamtza charuv Yerushalayim*” — Jerusalem was destroyed on account of Kamtza and bar Kamtza? What transgression or crime did Kamtza commit that contributed to the destruction of Yerushalayim? Bar Kamtza is certainly guilty of reacting to his unjustified embarrassment by placing the entire Jewish people in peril. Kamtza is the individual who was supposed to be invited, and was omitted from the party. What role did he play in this catastrophe? He remained home throughout the entire episode, blissfully unaware that his absence was setting into motion a series of events that would result in the churban. He may have been the intended recipient of the invitation but truly had no meaningful part in the debacle.

The Maharal writes that there was

a toxic dimension to Kamtza’s relationship with the host. The invitation that was extended to Kamtza was in the context of an alliance of camaraderie that was entirely based upon its collective opposition to the group that included Bar Kamtza. The Maharal explains that when our friendships and relationships are formed as a coalition that stands in enmity of others, then not only is the antagonism toward others considered an expression of *sinas chinam*, but so is the love for the likeminded individuals as well. Disagreement and debate for the sake of heaven is noble. Unity as a strategy to advance one’s agenda in conflict with others undermines the fabric of the Jewish people. Indeed, it was the entire nature of the communal landscape that contributed to the collapse of the Second Commonwealth, and the impending exile of which we still suffer today.

Ahavas Yisrael is not simply a perfunctory gesture and expression of cordiality towards our fellow Jews. In fact, it extends beyond formal acts of chesed as well. It begins with a shift in mindset toward our engagement with others. This mindset views other Jews not through the prism of positions and issues, but rather more broadly as a reflection of an inner Godliness that projects a more complex and nuanced reality to the larger world. We may disagree vehemently on a particular issue while maintaining an appreciation for the larger greatness of an individual. *Ahavas Yisrael* means

we do not define people based on their opinions, ideas, and institutions. Rather, there remains an underlying connection that transcends even the most contentious issues. This connection coalesces the Jewish people into a unified nation, despite our differences.

As the sun sets on Tisha B’Av night, and we acknowledge the reality of our unredeemed world, we are prohibited from engaging with each other through the medium of “*sheilas shalom*” — greetings between people that are part of a habituated script for social engagement. “Hello” does not express a genuine appreciation for an individual’s self-worth. Rather, these expressions are simply a societal construct that frames our interactions with a surface level of politeness. Tisha B’Av is a day to look deeper. To drop the script and connect on a deeper level. To sit on the floor, reciting Eicha and Kinot, and experience the collective Jewish story. To remove the superficiality of “greetings,” and replace them with a larger appreciation for our shared destiny. The month of Av fundamentally depicts G-d as a loving father, and us as his children. *Banim atem LaHashem Elokeichem* — You are children of Hashem (Devarim 14:1). While siblings may fight, at the end of the day, an external threat will always accentuate the authentic and fundamental love that ultimately characterizes the family.



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