



THE BITTERSWEET TRADITION: GRIEF AND THE DESTRUCTION OF THE BEIT HAMIKDASH

An apocryphal story is told of Napoleon Bonaparte entering a darkened synagogue and observing weeping Jews, sitting on low stools. Asking what misfortune had occurred to cause such behavior, he was informed that it was the ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av. On that day, as Napoleon learned, Jews commemorate the destruction of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem and the fall of the Fortress of Betar. On hearing that story, Napoleon exclaimed: “A people that cries these past 2,000 years for their land and Temple will surely be rewarded.”

These people were feeling grief at the loss of the Beit Hamikdash,

even thousands of years after its destruction. There are different types of grief that people experience and sometimes that grief can overwhelm us.

In her book *Bittersweet*, author Susan Cain focuses on how to take pain and sorrow that might otherwise destroy us, manage it, and make it meaningful. Sometimes when we experience pain, we want to run away from it or deny it. But this pain is actually what makes us whole. What framework do we have for handling the pain and making us whole as individuals and as a people?

One way to approach grief is to engage in the grief and in the emotional experience. How do we do this?

The Gemara, in *Chagigah* 5b, provides us with a way. The Gemara describes how Hashem cries. But a question arises about this:

ומי איכא בכיה קמיה הקדוש ברוך הוא?
והאמר רב פפא: אין עציבות לפני הקדוש
ברוך הוא, שנאמר: "הוד והדר לפניו עוז
וחדוה במקומו!" לא קשיא: הא בבתי גואי,
הא בבתי בראי.

The Gemara asks: But is there crying before the Holy One, Blessed be He?

Didn't Rav Pappa say: There is no sadness before the Holy One, Blessed be He, as it is stated: "Honor and majesty are before Him; strength and gladness are in His place" (I Chronicles 16:27)?

The Gemara responds: This is not difficult. This statement, that God cries, is referring to the innermost chambers,

where He can cry in secret, whereas this statement, that He does not cry, is referring to the outer chambers.

We learn from here that even Hashem cries. Yet He cried in private. We might learn from here that in certain circumstances we may want to keep our grief more private. That is valuable and still a way to approach the grief. The remainder of the Gemara provides us with another way to engage in grief:

וּבְבֵיתֵי בְרָאִי לָא? וְהָא כְּתִיב: "וַיִּקְרָא ה' אֱלֹקִים צְבָאוֹת בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לְבָכִי וּלְמִסְפַּד וּלְקִרְחָה וּלְחִגּוֹר שֶׁקִּי!" שְׂאֵנִי חֲרַבֵּן בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ, דְּאֶפִּילוּ מְלָאכֵי שְׁלוֹם כְּבוֹ, שְׂנֵאָמְרִי: "הֵן אֲרָאֶלְסָם צְעִיקוּ חוּצָה מְלָאכֵי שְׁלוֹם מֵרַ יִבְבְּיוּן".

The Gemara asks: And doesn't God cry in the outer chambers? Isn't it written: "And on that day the Lord, the God of hosts, called to weeping, and to mourning, and to baldness, and to girding with sackcloth" (Isaiah 22:12)? The Gemara responds: The destruction of the Temple is different, as even the angels of peace cried, as it is stated: "Behold, their valiant ones cry without; the angels of peace weep bitterly" (Isaiah 33:7).

This is public, unified grief. And while this is a healthy way to approach grief, how do we ensure that it does not become overwhelming? The Rambam teaches the following in *Hilchot Ta'anit* 5:1:

יֵשׁ שָׁם יָמִים שְׂכָל יִשְׂרָאֵל מִתְעַנִּים בָּהֶם מִפְּנֵי הַצָּרוֹת שְׂאֲרָעוּ בָהֶן כְּדִי לְעוֹרֵר הַלְּבָבוֹת לְפִתּוֹחַ דְּרָכֵי הַתְּשׁוּבָה וַיְהִיָּה זֶה זְכוּרֵן לְמַעֲשֵׂינֵנו הָרָעִים וּמַעֲשֵׂה אֲבוֹתֵינוּ שֶׁהָיָה כְּמַעֲשֵׂינֵנו עֵתָה עַד שְׂגָרָם לָהֶם וּלְנוֹ אוֹתָן הַצָּרוֹת.

There are days that all the people of Israel observe as fasts on account of the tragic events that occurred on them, the purpose being to appeal to the hearts and to lay open the paths of repentance. This serves as a reminder of our evil doings, and the deeds of our fathers which were

like ours now, resulting in the afflictions endured by them and by us.

We set aside specific times to grieve, and can appreciate the grief, and appreciate everything else in life.

In addition to this approach, or as an alternate approach to allowing our grief to be a learning experience, we teach the grief.

In the Gemara in *Brachot* 28b, we learn about Rabbi Yochanan's feelings on his deathbed.

וכשחלה רבי יוחנן בן זכאי נכנסו תלמידיו לבקרו כיון שראה אותם התחיל לבכות אמרו לו תלמידיו נר ישראל עמוד הימיני פטיש החזק מפני מה אתה בוכה? אמר להם... ועכשיו שמולכים אותי לפני ממ"ה הקב"ה שהוא חי וקיים לעולם ולעולמי עולמים שאם כועס עלי כעסו כעס עולם ואם אוסרני איסורו איסור עולם ואם ממיתני מיתתו מיתת עולם ואיני יכול לפייסו בדברים ולא לשחדו בממון ולא עוד אלא שיש לפני שני דרכים אחת של גן עדן ואחת של גיהנם ואיני יודע באיזו מולכים אותי ולא אבכה.

When Rabban Johanan b. Zakkai was sick, his disciples went in to visit him. On seeing them, he began to weep. His disciples said to him, "O lamp of Israel, right-hand pillar, mighty hammer! Why are you crying?" ... [he answered them:] "Now, when I am being led into the presence of the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, Who lives and endures for all eternity, Who if He is angry against me His anger is eternal. Who if He imprisoned me the imprisonment would be everlasting. Who if He condemned me to death the death would be forever, and Whom I cannot appease with words nor bribe with money — should I not be more worried? Before me lie two paths, one of the Garden of Eden and the other of Gehinnom (Hell), and I do not know which I am about to be led to, shall I not weep?"

What was bothering him so much? Why was he so worried? In the Gemara in *Gittin* 56a-b, we are told the story of the siege around Jerusalem. Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai is snuck out of Jerusalem so he can meet with the head of the Roman forces. At the end of a lengthy conversation, Vespasian offers Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai the opportunity to make a request. Rabban Yochanan requests three things: healing for Rabbi Tzadok, preserving the dynasty of Rabban Gamliel, and the town of Yavneh and its sages.

There are those who criticize Rabbi Yochanan, but his calculation is realistic, pragmatic, practical, and based on facts. However, we learn that his decision was always gnawing at him, and he never made peace with it fully.

It is important for us to read both the Gemara in *Gittin*, of the heroic and difficult choice that Rabbi Yochanan made, and the Gemara in *Brachot* about his emotional response. When we share these stories and the debate about good choices and bad choices in the face of pain and anguish, we can very much relate and learn about our own grief and how, despite the fact that Rabbi Yochanan was worried that he made the wrong decision, he continued to lead his people and try to help them to survive.

And finally, there is a third model for managing grief, and that is to try and make our lives more meaningful. After the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash, the rabbis were faced with a challenge: How would they bring the community together and maintain the identity of the Jewish people?

In response, they created a new center of Judaism — the city of Yavneh.

On the one hand, they never gave up hope of the rebuilding of the Beit Hamikdash. We see this through the various decrees that Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai makes in the Mishnah in *Rosh Hoshana*, including his decree that everyone must wave the lulav and etrog all the days of Sukkot, instead of just the first day, since this was the day it was done in the Mikdash. However, the Rabbinic leadership was not naïve, and they knew that there needed to be a new way to maintain a connection to Hashem and make Jewish life meaningful. And so, they shifted their focus to other practices and to learning.

In *Avot Derabbi Natan*, Chapter 4 we see what Rabbi Yochanan did:

אמר לו: אתה הוא רבי יוחנן בן זכאי, שאל מה אתן לך. אמר לו: איני מבקש ממך אלא יבנה. אלך ואשנה בה לתלמידי, ואקבע בה תפלה, ואעשה בה כל מצות האמורות בתורה.

He said to him: You are Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai. Ask and I will give you. He said to him: All I ask from you is Yavneh. I will go there and teach my students, and establish prayer there, and there I will fulfill all of the commandments that are written in the Torah.

After he requested Yavneh, he went to teach his students — we will establish tefillah in place of *korbanot* and we will fulfill all the mitzvot.

There were several other steps taken to ensure that Jewish life would continue and be meaningful.

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They completed *Edyot*, testimonies and teachings of rabbis in different areas of Torah. They reinforced Torah learning as central to Judaism — establishing the phrase: *ein lo laHakadosh Baruch Hu b'olamo ela daled amot shel halacha* — Hashem's

presence in this world resides within the four cubits of halacha (*Berachot* 8a). This gave new meaning and new purpose to the Jewish people, helping them manage their grief and live on as a people.

These three models for managing grief — approaching it in a healthy way, at a specific time; studying the grief; and finding new meaning after the grief — can help us in general manage sadness in our lives.

Grief is a part of life. We can be overwhelmed by it in an unhealthy way, or we can look to the different approaches relating to the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash to make our grief meaningful. The love we have lost — the physical building of the Beit Hamikdash, the closeness to Hashem — is the most difficult, and as the story of Napoleon shows us, something that we continue to weep over; but it is also what can save us. According to Cain, “Living in a bittersweet state, with an intense awareness of life’s fragility and the pain of separation, is an underappreciated strength and an unexpected path to wisdom, joy and especially communion.”

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