

Because of This, The Temple Was Destroyed
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One of the most monumental catastrophes of Jewish history was the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in the latter half of the first Christian century. Just as the prophets of ancient Israel had attempted to interpret the reasons for the destruction of the first Temple 650 years earlier, the rabbis of the Talmud struggled to provide a theological rationale for the second devastation, one that would preserve group identity in an era of loss and exile.

A Talmudic story that purports to explain the reason that the Temple was destroyed tells us of a certain unidentified man who “had a friend named Kamza and an enemy by the name of Bar Kamza. This man threw a party and said to his servant, go and bring Kamza back to the party. The servant, however, went and brought Bar Kamza. When the host found Bar Kamza there at his party, he said, “Look, you gossip about me; what are you doing here? Get out.”

Bar Kamza replied: “Since I am here, let me stay, and I will pay you for whatever I eat and drink.”

The host said, “I won't.” Bar Kamza then said, “Let me give you half the cost of the party.” “No,” said the host. “Then let me pay for the whole party.” The host still refused, and he took Bar Kamza by the arm and put him out.

Bar Kamza said to himself, “Since the Rabbis were sitting there and did not stop him, this shows that they agreed with him. I will go and inform against them, to the Government. He went and said to the Emperor of Rome, the Jews are rebelling against you....”¹

Note from this incident, the Talmud concludes, how serious a thing it is to put a person to shame, for God espoused the cause of Bar Kamza and as a result God destroyed His own House and burnt His own Temple (and we ourselves have been exiled from the land.)² The rabbis seize upon this most painful historical event in their experience, the destruction of the Temple, and identify it as a divine consequence of the humiliation of an enemy.

A second Talmudic passage declares that the second Temple was destroyed “because of *Sinat Hinam*, literally, “free-floating hatred,” that is, a prevailing climate of hatred without cause. I believe that when the rabbis spoke of *Sinat Hinam*, groundless hatred, that they were describing what we would identify in contemporary parlance as *incivility*. For the rabbis this *incivility* was as dangerous to society as the combination of the most grievous sins in their moral universe: idolatrous materialism; sexual immorality; and criminal violence.³

¹ Babylonian Talmud Tractate Gittin 55b-56a

² Babylonian Talmud Tractate Gittin 572

³ Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 9b

It is virtually impossible to ignore the rising clamor and din in the public political sphere of this country. Freedom of Speech, the enlightened doctrine guaranteed by the First Amendment, is a cornerstone of our democracy, but its value and purpose is degraded by those who exercise it as a license for what our tradition calls *lashon hara*, speech that derides and dehumanizes. The accelerated speed and extended reach of cyber-space and a 24/7 news cycle ensure the infinite proliferation of provocative language. It is as if a warrant has been given allowing us to demonize those with whom we disagree. These behaviors make us recall the prophetic voice of the Irish poet, William Butler Yeats:

“Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;...
...everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.”⁴

The Huffington Post reports: Days ago, in an interview on Fox News’ show, Fox and Friends, country music star Hank Williams, Jr., speaking of a golf match shared this summer by President Obama, Vice President Biden, Speaker of the House, John Boehner and Ohio Governor John Kasich, exclaimed: "That would be like Hitler playing golf with Netanyahu. Not hardly. In the shape this country is in?"

“When host Brian Kilmeade said that he didn't understand the analogy, Williams was non-plussed. ‘I'm glad you don't brother, because a lot of people do. They're the enemy... Obama! And Biden! Are you kidding? The Three Stooges.’”⁵

Lest you think that this kind of expression resides only with those on the right, consider this rant against President Bush by Keith Olbermann, then of MSNBC, during the run-up to the 2008 Presidential election:

“(this) is about how you accomplished the derangement of two nations and how you helped funnel billions of taxpayer dollars to lascivious and perennially thirsty corporations like Halliburton and Blackwater and how you sent 4000 Americans to their deaths, for nothing!... and sir if you have any hopes that next January 20 will not be celebrated as a day of soul-wrenching heartfelt Thanksgiving because your faithless stewardship of this presidency will have finally come to a merciful end, this last piece of advice when somebody asks you sir about Democrats who must now pull this country back from the abyss you have placed us at, when somebody asks you sir about the cooked books and faked threats you foisted on a sincere and frightened nation when somebody asks you sir about... the families and the war dead; this advice Mr. Bush: shut the hell up!”⁶ Now if you are a Republican, you might have silently cheered at the first story and squirmed in

⁴ William Butler Yeats, “The Second Coming”

⁵ The Huffington Post, October 3, 2011.

⁶ Keith Olbermann on MSNBC’s “Countdown,” May 14, 2008

your seat at the second. Democrats, I suspect, simply reacted in reverse order. An objective observer would recognize easily that the behaviors in the two stories are identical. Note that in each instance, the speaker believes unequivocally that the moral universe is on his side, that the other side is immoral.

It has often been observed that our American-Jewish community behaves as a microcosm, assimilating the behaviors and tendencies of the larger American society. This is particularly true at this moment in time when we consider the careless invective that the American-Jewish left and the American-Jewish right apply to one another around the question of our relationship with and responsibility toward the State of Israel. Jewish conservatives, in this case, often characterize their liberal counterparts as naïve or even treasonous; Jewish liberals, in turn, often view their conservative counterparts as opponents of justice and human rights.

Addressing the human tendency in individuals and in groups to perceive their own opinions and attitudes as “moral” and the opinions and attitudes of those who disagree as “immoral,” Social Psychologist Jonathan Haidt of the University of Virginia cited the work of Psychologists Emily Pronin of Princeton and Lee Ross of Stanford. In an experiment dealing with bias, Pronin and Lee revealed that people were quite willing to use new information to discover and expose the biases of others, but were largely unable to use such information to address the biases in their own thinking. As Haidt explains:

“Pronin and Ross trace this resistance to a phenomenon they call ‘naïve realism’: Each of us thinks we see the world directly, as it really is. We further believe that the facts as we see them are there for all to see, therefore others should agree with us. If they don’t agree it follows either that they have not yet been exposed to the relevant facts or else they are blinded by their interests and ideologies. If I could nominate one candidate for “the biggest obstacle to world peace and social harmony,” it would be naïve realism because it is so easily ratched up from the individual to the group level: My group is right because we see things as they are. Those who disagree are obviously biased by their religion, their ideology or their self-interest. Naïve realism gives us a world full of good and evil, and this brings us to the most disturbing implication of the sages’ advice about hypocrisy: Good and evil do not exist outside of our beliefs about them.”⁷

One of the central tenets of this most sacred day in our Jewish calendar is the admonition that one must begin with oneself, that is, to begin with *cheshbon hanefesh*, a personal spiritual inventory. As I thought more deeply, I was forced, reluctantly, to acknowledge that I am not immune to this tendency toward naïve realism. I can see it reflected in certain sermons, in emails and in casual conversation. Increasingly, I have asked myself what measures are necessary to compensate for the fact that my liberal sensibilities are compounded by the

⁷ Jonathan Haidt, [The Happiness Hypothesis](#), Basic Books, NY, NY, 2006, (Nook version) pp. 82-83

circumstance that for most of my adult life I have worked in a Jewish community that is disproportionately liberal, led and served this disproportionately liberal congregation and lived in Brookline, a bastion of liberalism within in the bluest of blue states. My perception of those conservatives who live “deep in the heart of Red Texas,” is a function of the degree of segregation and separation that is an inherent reality of our lives, subject to stereotype and prejudice in the absence of relationship.

In search of a corrective, I pursued further reading of the work of Jonathan Haidt and his collaborators. They have analyzed moral culture in societies throughout the world and developed what Haidt calls Moral Foundation Theory. Haidt and his co-authors, pursued a theory which would enable them to identify the primary psychological foundations upon which cultures create their moral systems and to explain the underlying causes for tension between liberals and conservatives on moral issues. What leads people, they asked, to perceive actions and agents as praiseworthy or blameworthy,... what are the psychological foundations upon which cultures build what we would call moral life: values, norms, virtues, vices, institutions, even religions...?⁸

Haidt writes: “An important dictum of cultural psychology is that each culture develops expertise in some aspects of human existence, but that no culture can be expert in all aspects. The same goes for the two ends of the political spectrum....research confirms the common perception that liberals are experts in thinking about issues of victimization, equality, autonomy and the rights of individuals, particularly those of minorities and non-conformists. Conservatives, on the other hand, are experts in thinking about loyalty to the group, respect for authority and tradition and sacredness. When one side overwhelms the other the results are likely to be ugly. A society without liberals would be harsh and oppressive to many individuals. A society without conservatives would lose many of the social structures and constraints that...are so valuable....A good place to look for wisdom, therefore, is where you least expect to find it: in the minds of your opponents.”⁹

Two recent polls determined that 95% of the American public believes that civility is critical for a healthy democracy¹⁰ and that 87% of those questioned believe that the entire citizenry is responsible for improving civility.¹¹

I would not, for a moment, argue that political and cultural passion should be checked at the curb of the public square nor that spirited argument and principled disagreement should be eschewed. Our society would be depleted without a lively discourse and the expression of deeply held values. I would, however,

⁸ Jonathan Haidt, Jesse Graham and Craig Joseph, “Above and Below, Left—Right: Ideological Narratives and Moral Foundations,” *Psychological Inquiry*, 20, pp. 110-119, 2009

⁹ Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, pp. 242-244

¹⁰ Zogby International Poll, March 24, 2010

¹¹ KRC Research Poll, April 20-24, 2010

encourage a vocal expression of disapproval whenever the conversation steps over the line and differences of opinion engender demonization of the other. For that disapproval to have genuine moral power, it must be applied irrespective of whether we are in sympathy or in disagreement with those who are guilty of infractions of civil speech.

George Washington, in his Farewell Address to the People of the United States warned that “the alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened by the spirit of revenge, natural to party dissension,...is itself a frightful despotism....”

He warned that this kind of demagoguery “agitates the Community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms; kindles the animosity of one part against another, foment occasionally riot and insurrection....”¹²

We live in anxious and insecure times. On this eve of Yom Kippur, may we come to understand that the words that we speak, when distilled by wisdom are like dew that falls on thirsty ground, when unrestrained, they are like a match thrown upon dry tinder. May we be guided by the private meditation of Rabbi Mar written more than 1600 years ago:

Adonai n'tzor l'shoni meira u'sefatai midabeir mirmah, v'limkal'lai nafshi tidom, v'nafshi ke-afar lacol t'hiyeh. Adonai, guard my speech from evil and my lips from deception. Before those who slander me, I will hold my tongue: I will practice humility.¹³

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¹² George Washington, Farewell Address to The People of the United States

¹³ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Berachot 17a

¹⁴ I was privileged to read a number of studies by Jonathan Haidt and his collaborators in addition to those that I've footnoted above. The work can be referenced by searching Jonathan Haidt via Google or another search engine. Dr. Haidt is a professor of Psychology at the University of Virginia. He is exceedingly generous in making his research readily available to all those who are interested (ditto for his colleagues/collaborators).

