**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT VAETCHANAN**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

One of the tragic stories told in the Gemara about the time of the destruction of the Second Temple is that of a wealthy woman named Marta bat Baytos (Gittin 56a). The Gemara describes Marta as “the wealthiest woman in Jerusalem,” and tells that during the siege of Jerusalem, she instructed her servant to buy her fine flour for baking. By the time the servant arrived in the market, the fine flour had all been sold out. He reported to Marta that flour was not available, but there was bread made from fine flour. She instructed him to purchase bread, but by the time he arrived back at the market, no such bread was left. He returned to Marta and reported that only bread from coarse flour was available, and so she told him to purchase some. Once again, he returned to the market only to find out that this supply, too, was depleted. Marta then sent him back to purchase the lowest quality option – barley flour. But by the time he returned to the market, there was none left.

Finally, in desperation, Marta needed to leave the home herself to find food. On the way, she accidentally stepped in animal dung, and she was so repulsed that she died. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai, the leading rabbi at the time, applied to this tragedy the verse in Sefer Devarim (28:56) which warns of the calamity that would befall even “the most delicate and most dainty among you, whose foot had never even stepped directly on the ground.”

On the simplest level, of course, this story highlights the scope of the tragedy suffered at the time of the fall of Jerusalem, how even the city’s wealthiest residents were driven to poverty. It does so in dramatic fashion, depicting an aristocratic woman who was unaccustomed to the filth of crowded city streets, who found herself needing to venture out without knowing to take precautions to avoid animal refuse.

But additionally, it has been suggested that this tragic story warns of the tendency to refuse to accept and adapt to changing realities. Living in her luxurious home, oblivious to the dire crisis unfolding in her city, Marta assumed that she could enjoy the same fine bread that she always had. Her loyal servant, knowing her strict standards, did not allow himself to purchase the lower quality product upon seeing that the one she desired was unavailable – because he realized how inflexible she was. Tragically, when Marta finally realized that drastic changes in her material standards were needed, and she stepped outside to do her own shopping for the first time, she was ill-prepared and failed to make the necessary adaptations. In all areas of life, we must remain aware of, and attuned to, the changes occurring around us, so we can know how to adapt. We must remain flexible and openminded, ever mindful of the occasional need to make changes, even uncomfortable and difficult changes, in light of new realities. The tragedy of Marta bat Beytus reflects not only the painful conditions that developed during the Romans’ siege of Jerusalem, but also the dangers of unreasonable rigidity, of the refusal to make necessary life changes when confronted by new, unfamiliar circumstances.

Sunday

The Gemara in Masekhet Yoma (9b) famously teaches that the first *Beit Ha-mikdash* was destroyed on account of the people’s violating the three grievous sins of idol-worship, murder and illicit sexual relationships. The second *Beit Ha-mikdash*, the Gemara states, was destroyed due to *sin’at chinam* (“baseless hatred”). The Gemara adds, “This teaches that *sin’at chinam* is equivalent to the three sins of idol-worship, illicit relationships and murder.”

The Chafetz Chaim, in the introduction to his famous work on *lashon ha-ra* for which he was named, boldly asserts that when the Gemara here mentions *sin’at chinam*, it actually refers to the particular offense of *lashon ha-ra* – negative speech about others. It was this particular manifestation of hatred, the Chafetz Chaim writes, which became rampant in the final years of the Second Commonwealth, and because of which God destroyed the Temple and Jerusalem.

The Chafetz Chaim suggests drawing two proofs to this theory. First, he notes the Gemara’s conclusion that “*sin’at chinam* is equivalent to the three sins of idol-worship, illicit relationships and murder.” Elsewhere, in Masekhet Arakhin (15b), the Gemara teaches, “Whoever speaks *lashon ha-ra* incurs guilt for sins equivalent to the three sins of idol-worship, illicit relationships and murder.” It stands to reason, the Chafetz Chaim writes, that when the Gemara in Yoma equates *sin’at chinam* with these three sins, it refers to *lashon ha-ra*, which is equated with these sins in Masekhet Arakhin.

Secondly, the Gemara (there in Yoma) notes that *sin’at chinam* appears to have been rampant also during the First Temple era, citing a tradition that during that time, there were people “who ate and drank together, and then pierced each other with the daggers on their tongues.” Why, the Gemara asks, does tradition imply that *sin’at chinam* plagued the people of the Second Commonwealth, but not the first? The Gemara answers that this description was given about specifically the leadership, and it does not characterize the masses, which did not engage in such conduct during the First Temple era, as they did during the Second Temple era. The Gemara seeks to prove the prevalence of *sin’at chinam* in the First Temple era from the depiction of people speaking evil about one another, indicating that the term *sin’at chinam* in this context refers to the particular ill of *lashon ha-ra* – inappropriate talk about other people.

It has been suggested that the Chafetz Chaim’s theory might also answer a question that arises from the Gemara’s formulation in describing the people’s conduct during the Second Commonwealth. The Gemara writes, “In the Second Temple, when they were involved in Torah, *mitzvot* and ***gemilut chasidim***, why was it destroyed? Because there was baseless hatred.” The people of this time are described as having involved themselves in, among other virtuous pursuits, *gemilut chasidim* – kindness and charity. They did favors and assisted one another, and yet they are said to have been guilty of “baseless hatred” to such an extent that Jerusalem was deemed worthy of destruction. Various explanations could be and have been offered for how the Jews of the time were simultaneously generous and hostile to one another. According to the Chafetz Chaim, however, the answer perhaps is that people acted kindly but spoke inappropriately. They were generous towards others, but they also indulged in gossip and talebearing. And thus there is no contradiction in the Gemara’s description of the people of that time, who performed favors and provided assistance, but then spread negative information about the beneficiaries of their kindness, thereby generating widespread hatred and animosity.

(See Rav Asher Anshel Schwartz’s [*Ma’adanei Asher*, Parashat Devarim, 5779](http://beinenu.com/sites/default/files/alonim/32_44_79.pdf).)

Monday

The Gemara in Masekhet Berakhot (33a; also in Sanhedrin 92a) comments, “Any person who has knowledge [*dei’a*] is considered as though the *Beit Ha-mikdash* was built in his lifetime.” The basis for this association between “*dei’a*” and the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, as the Gemara explains, is the fact that both terms appear in a verse in *Tanakh* surrounded by Names of God. A verse in Sefer Shemot (15:17) speaks of “*makhon le-shivtekha pa’alta* ***Hashem, mikdash Hashem*** *konenu yadekha*” – “An established place for Your residence, **O God; the Sanctuary, God,** which Your hands have set.” In this verse, the word “*Mikdash*” is surrounded on either side by the Name of God. And in a verse in Sefer Shemuel I (2:3), Chana exclaims, “*Ki* ***Keil dei’ot Hashem***” – “For **the Lord** is an **all-knowing God**.” In this verse, the word “*dei’ot*” – the plural form of the word “*dei’a*” – is surrounded by Names of God (“*Keil*” and “*Havaya*”). The Gemara finds it significant that both “*dei’a*” and the *Beit Ha-mikdash* have this unique quality – being mentioned in between the Name of God – and infers from this common feature that a person with “*dei’a*” is considered as though the *Beit Ha-mikdash* was built in his time.

What precisely does the Gemara mean by the word “*dei’a*” in this context, and what is the connection between this kind of “knowledge” and the *Beit Ha-mikdash*?

One explanation (cited by Rav Elimelech Biderman, [*Be’er Ha-parsha*, Devarim, 5779](http://beinenu.com/sites/default/files/alonim/177_44_79.pdf), pp. 7-8) is that this comment should be understood in light of the Gemara’s famous remark elsewhere (Yoma 9b) that the Second Temple was destroyed because of the sin of *sin’at chinam* (baseless hatred). We overcome hatred and resentment when we live with firm faith in Providence, trusting that everything we endure is God’s will and intended for our ultimate benefit. If we internalize this belief, then we will disregard wrongs committed against us without carrying with us the debilitating baggage of resentment and hostility. And thus the Gemara associates “*dei’a*” – which this approach interprets as a reference to the wisdom of understanding that everything which happens has been decided by God – with the rebuilding of the Temple, as this mindset has the ability to rectify the ill of *sin’at chinam* on account of which the Temple was destroyed.

[Rav Baruch Weintraub](http://etzion.gush.net/vbm/archive/yomyom/dafyomyomi/2010-05-15.php) explained the Gemara’s comment by focusing on the significance of the notion of a term being surrounded by the Name of God. The Gemara perhaps viewed a word’s position between two instances of God’s Name as symbolic of connecting to Godliness, of extending beyond the confines of our physical existence to the realm of spirituality. This is, in essence, the function of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, as expressed in a number of statements by *Chazal*. For example, tradition speaks of a heavenly Temple situated directly parallel to the Temple in Jerusalem – symbolizing the merging of heaven and earth at the site of the Temple. *Chazal* understood that Yaakov dreamt his famous dream of the ladder extending from the ground to the heavens at the future site of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. Yaakov described the spot where he slept and beheld this vision as “the gate to the heavens” (Bereishit 28:17), the place on earth where one can experience the heavens. The *Beit Ha-mikdash* is “surrounded” by God in the sense that its purpose is to connect the physical earth to the Almighty. And, when the Gemara speaks of “*dei’a*,” it might refer to transcending our physical impulses and instincts, and living our lives governed by the mind, by our rational understanding of right and wrong. Living with “*dei’a*” means living “surrounded” by God, extending beyond our physical existence to connect to Him. “*Dei’a*,” according to this understanding, refers to directing our behavior based on the dictates of our mind, rather than the dictates of our physical being, and thereby living a life of spiritual meaning, connecting to our Creator. When we live this way, we take a step toward the rebuilding of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, as we help make the world holier, and Godlier, and worthier of His presence in our midst.

Tuesday

One of the more famous *kinnot* (poems of lament) which we recite as part of the Tisha B’Av prayer service is *Arzei Ha-levanon*, a lament for the *asara harugei malkhut* – the ten great sages who were murdered by the Romans for violating the ban against teaching Torah. A parallel hymn – *Eileh Ezkera* – is customarily recited during the *musaf* prayer service on Yom Kippur. That hymn, too, speaks of the ten martyrs.

However, although the *asara harugei malkhut* are mentioned on both these occasions, Rav Soloveitchik (cited by Rav Michel Shurkin in *Harerei Kedem*, vol. 2, p. 309) noted that the purpose and nature of these two recitations fundamentally differ from one another. On Yom Kippur, he explained, we invoke the *asara harugei malkhut* as part of our petition for forgiveness. The Gemara (Moed Katan 28a) teaches that the death of the righteous brings atonement like sacrifices, and so as we beg God for forgiveness on Yom Kippur, we bring to mind the merit of the righteous sages who were brutally murdered. As Rav Soloveitchik noted, throughout *Eileh Ezkera* we repeat the refrain, “*Chatanu tzureinu selach lanu yotzereinu*” – “We have sinned, our Rock; forgive us, our Creator,” because this is the purpose of our invoking the memory of these saintly martyrs. Likewise, Rav Soloveitchik added, this hymn concludes: “Gracious One, look down from the upper spheres upon the spillage of the blood of the righteous… See from Your residence and wipe away the stains [of sin], O King who sits on the throne of mercy.” We beseech God to take the loss of these great men into account as He judges us. We might also mention that *Eileh Ezkera* is recited at the conclusion of the *avoda* section of the Yom Kippur prayer service, when we recall the special atonement sacrifices which were offered in the *Beit Ha-mikdash* on Yom Kippur. We recite this section in lieu of the actual offerings, which cannot be brought in the absence of the Temple, because, as our Sages tell us, speaking of the sacrificial offerings when they cannot be offered brings some degree of atonement. Appropriately, then, we note in this context the loss of righteous people, whose death brings atonement like the sacrifices.

On Tisha B’Av, however, we recall the deaths of these righteous martyrs because, as the Gemara teaches in Masekhet Rosh Hashanah (18b), “The death of the righteous is equivalent to the burning of the house of our God.” As we mourn the tragedy of the loss of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, we mourn also the loss of the righteous *tzadikim*, whose lives resemble the *Beit Ha-mikdash* in the sense that their conduct and religious devotion represent God’s presence and heighten our spiritual awareness, just like the *Mikdash*. Rav Soloveitchik added that for this reason, we refer to the *asara harugei malkhut* in this *kinna* as “*chemdat Yisrael kelei ha-kodesh neizer va-atara*” – “the treasure of Israel, the sacred vessels, diadem and crown.” We compare them to “the sacred vessels” – emphasizing that their death is comparable to the loss of the *Mikdash* and its furnishings. Later in this *kinna*, we speak of Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, one of the ten martyrs, as “*menorah ha-tehora*” – “the pure *menorah*,” referring to the *menorah* in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, which the Torah describes with this expression (Vayikra 24:4). Once again, we emphasize the comparison between the martyred sages and the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, because we reflect on their death as part of our lament of the Temple’s destruction and, more generally, the rift between God and His people, which is expressed also through the loss of our righteous leaders.

Wednesday

In Yirmiyahu’s mournful prophecy (Yirmiyahu 8-9) read as the *haftara* on the morning of Tisha B’Av, he wails, “*Ha-tzori ein be-Gilad? Im rofei ein sham?*” – “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?” (8:22). He then asks, “Why has my nation’s wound not been healed?”

At first glance, Yirmiyahu refers here to the disastrous state of the kingdom on the eve of the Babylonian conquest. As he cries in the previous verse, “Over the calamity of my people, I am broken.” He mourns the tragic state of affairs in the country, comparing it to an ill patient who has no medication or no physician to administer treatment. Yirmiyahu finds it baffling that there is no “balm” or “physician” for the Judean Kingdom, no solution for repairing the country.

Rashi, however, explains that Yirmiyahu refers to the nation’s spiritual maladies. The cry of “*Ha-tzori ein be-Gilad*,” according to Rashi, means, “Did they not have righteous people from whom to learn to improve their conduct?” Just as the Gilead region was known for having large supplies of medical *tzori* (balm), and physicians, similarly, *Am Yisrael* has no shortage of righteous individuals from whom the others can learn and take example. Yirmiyahu thus wonders, “Why has my nation’s wound not been healed” – meaning, why have they not improved their conduct?

Malbim similarly explains:

The nation’s cure depends upon their improving their deeds and once again following God’s Torah, and both Torah and the commands which I have given them, which are the “balm,” are found in their midst, among the prophets and the scholars who set them straight and teach them the ways of God, who is the “physician.” So why have they not been cured? They are thus guilty in this matter, for they did not agree to be cured from their illness.

The people might have defended themselves against the prophet’s criticism by arguing that their sinfulness was not their fault, because they had no spiritual “balm” or “physicians” – no sources of guidance for how to properly conduct themselves. The prophet preempts this claim by noting that they had scholars and prophets from whom to learn, but they chose to continue along their path of evil, and not to learn and discover how God wanted them to live.

We occasionally have a tendency to delay self-improvement until we receive some external inspiration, as though we are waiting for the “balm” or the “physician” to “heal” us. We wrongly assume that we do not have the capacity in our current condition to “heal” ourselves, to make ourselves better. The prophet here reminds us that the “balm” and “physician” are already with us and readily accessible. We have the information and resources, and we have the inner strength and ability, to grow and to improve. Instead of waiting for our “cure” to arrive, we should find the “balm” within ourselves and trust in our ability to make positive changes even in our current condition, right here and now.

Thursday

In the prophecy of Yirmiyahu read as the *haftara* on Tisha B’Av, the prophet relays to the people God’s exhortation, “*Hitbonenu ve-kir’u la-mekonenot u-tvo’ena, ve-el ha-chakhamot shilchu ve-tavona*” – “Understand well, and call for the dirge-singers that they should come, and send for the wise women that they should come” (9:16). Yirmiyahu then explains that these women should be told to quickly come to sing dirges and evoke tears (9:17). The simple explanation of these verses is that as part of the prophet’s warning of the impending calamity, he advises the people to prepare in advance for the eulogies and dirges which will become necessary after the catastrophic fall of the kingdom.

A number of questions, however, arise from these verses. First, why does God introduce this exhortation with the word “*hitbonenu*” – “understand,” or “contemplate”? What exactly required deep understanding? Additionally, we might wonder if perhaps there is some difference between the two terms used here in reference to the women who are to be summoned – the “*mekonenot*” (“dirge singers”) and the “*chakhamot*” (“wise women”). Are these two different groups, or synonyms for the same women?

In light of these questions, Malbim offers a creative interpretation of these verses. He explains that the people are told to go about the process of mourning wisely – focusing less on the tragedies of the past, and more on the potential calamities that could yet occur in the future. The prophet here tells the people to “understand well” that the tragedies of the past are less pressing than the crisis that is still unfolding and could lead to more disaster. And therefore, when they summon “*mekonenot*” – dirge singers to lament the fallen, they should also ensure to call upon “*chakhamot*,” wise women capable of motivating the people to make the changes they need to make in order to avert further suffering. This admonition begins with “*hitbonenu*” precisely because the message to the people is to wisely focus less attention on the past, which cannot be changed, and more attention on the present situation, which can be changed for the sake of preventing more tragedies.

For this reason, Malbim explains, God calls upon the people to have these women come quickly – “*u-tmaheirna*.” Just like physicians must rush to treat a grave ill patient while he can still be saved, the people must call to the wise women to immediately come and guide them so they can avert the impending catastrophe. The verse continues, “…that our eyes may shed tears, our eyelids drip with water.” Malbim explains this to mean that as their eyes shed some tears for the fallen, the eyelids – symbolizing the closing of people’s eyes so they could think and contemplate the situation – would pour forth copious amounts of tears. According to Malbim’s reading, the verse here contrasts the shedding of a few tears for the fallen, with pouring rivers of tears over the present condition – emphasizing to the people that rather than just lamenting what was lost, they must address their current situation to prevent further losses.

Ironically, these verses are read on Tisha B’Av, the day which is indeed focused almost exclusively on mourning past tragedies. Tisha B’Av is specifically not about our hopes and aspirations for the future, and is directed instead towards evoking sorrow and anguish over the calamities that have befallen our people. Particularly during the first part of Tisha B’Av, we only mourn and lament, reciting hardly any prayers for redemption and a brighter future. Nevertheless, Malbim’s reading of these verses perhaps reminds us that the ultimate goal of this experience is not to feel trapped by sorrow and angst, but rather to motivate ourselves to make the necessary changes that we need to make in order to be worthy of our final redemption and the arrival of *Mashiach*, when we will see the end of suffering and experience unbridled joy and fulfillment.

Friday

Parashat Vaetchanan includes the first section of the text which we recite as the daily *Shema* reading, in which we are commanded, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul…” (6:5). The Gemara in Masekhet Berakhot (61b) cites Rabbi Akiva’s understanding of the obligation to love God “*be-khol nafshekha*” (“with all your soul”) as a requirement to love God “even if He takes your life.” Under all circumstances, even when facing tragedy, we are to remain devoted to the Almighty.

In this context, the Gemara relates the famous, heartrending story of Rabbi Akiva’s execution. Rabbi Akiva was caught by the Roman authorities violating the ban against teaching Torah, and was publicly tortured to death. As he was being tortured, the Gemara tells, “He was accepting upon himself the yoke of divine kingship with love,” affirming his love for the Almighty despite the tragic, horrific death he was now experiencing because of his devotion to Torah. His students turned to him and said, “Even now?”

Rabbi Akiva replied, “All my life I was distressed over this verse – ‘[You shall love the Lord your God…] with all your soul…’ saying, ‘When will I have the opportunity to fulfill it?’ And now that I have the opportunity, shall I not fulfill it?” He told his students that he was reaffirming his love for God at this moment in fulfillment of the command to love the Almighty “even when He takes your life” – a command which he had longed to fulfill his entire life.

What exactly were Rabbi Akiva’s students asking? Did they not already know Rabbi Akiva’s interpretation of this verse, as requiring us to continue loving God even in the direst and harshest circumstances? And did it surprise them that a person of Rabbi Akiva’s level of piety would display such faith and unbridled devotion even at this horrific moment? Moreover, how should we understand Rabbi Akiva’s remark that he was yearning his entire life to fulfill this command? Was he really eager to suffer this fate so he could show his love for God under these tragic circumstances?

[Rav Asher Weiss](https://www.torahbase.org/%d7%90%d7%a4%d7%99%d7%9c%d7%95-%d7%a0%d7%95%d7%98%d7%9c-%d7%90%d7%aa-%d7%a0%d7%a4%d7%a9%d7%9a/) suggests that Rabbi Akiva’s students were not questioning why their esteemed mentor continued expressing love and devotion to God at that moment, but were rather asking how this can be done. How is it possible, they wondered, for a human being to reach this level of pristine piety, where he can wholeheartedly express his love to God at the moment he is tortured to death for teaching God’s Torah?

Rabbi Akiva responded, “**All my life** I was distressed over this verse…” In other words, Rabbi Akiva clarified that the unbridled love he displayed at that moment did not signify a spontaneous outburst of religious commitment, but was rather the product and culmination of a lifetime of spiritual growth. Rabbi Akiva did not suddenly feel inspired to proclaim his love for God as the executioner flayed his skin with iron rakes. This inspiration came as the result of years of hard work and devotion.

The Gemara elsewhere (Avoda Zara 17a) tells the famous story of Elazar ben Dordaya, a man who spent his life indulging in forbidden pleasures, until he experienced a sudden spiritual awakening which triggered a moment of deep introspection and profound remorse. He sat and wept, and died. The Gemara states that Elazar earned his share in the next world by virtue of his repentance during those final moments of his life. Rabbi Yehuda Ha-nasi exclaimed upon hearing this story, “There can be a person who acquires his [share in the next] world in but a moment!” While there is much to learn from this episode about the power of repentance, it marks the very rare exception, rather than the rule. Rabbi Yehuda made this pronouncement precisely because this is so rare and unusual – that a person transforms himself and becomes righteous in but a brief moment of sudden inspiration. The standard route to personal change and spiritual growth is a long, difficult, steady process of advancement. Inspiration seldom arrives spontaneously; it is developed and engendered through consistent hard work and the day-to-day effort to improve and raise ourselves higher.

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