

Once upon a time, the enemies were at the gates. The city was divided against itself. People destroyed food supplies and stabbed their enemies in the streets. No one knew what would happen next, but everyone knew that whatever it was, it would be bad.

Such was the situation in Jerusalem on the eve of the destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70 CE. Both rabbinic tradition<sup>1</sup> and historical documents portray a city that had devolved into sectarian chaos. Long-standing religious, political, and economic divisions intensified in the face of the threat of the Roman imperial army. Rather than unite against a common enemy, the Jews of Jerusalem turned on one another, in what rabbinic tradition remembers as the “senseless hatred” that characterized this moment.

The internal conflict became total, even as the Roman siege caused supplies of food to dwindle. People’s entire identities became centered around their approach to the Roman threat. They would stop at nothing to kill their fellow Jews who took a different approach.

But as always, no one actually wins a civil war. Abba Sikra, a leader of the Zealots who wanted to fight off the Romans or die trying, realized that the rebellion he had formented had gotten out of his or anyone’s control. It so happened that his uncle was Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, a proto-rabbi and leader of a more moderate faction that sought an accommodation with the Romans.

Uncle and nephew realized that something needed to be done. Otherwise, the warring factions would finish each other off while the Romans simply waited outside. So, they conspired to fake Rabban Yochanan’s death and whisk him out of the city in a coffin. Rabban Yochanan then negotiated with the Romans to establish a small house of study in an out-of-the-way town called Yavneh. There would Rabban Yochanan establish the foundations of what would become rabbinic Judaism, a Judaism that could thrive even without the Jerusalem Temple that was about to be destroyed.

Rabban Yochanan did not try to turn back the clock. He did not even bother to beg the Romans to spare the city or even the Temple. Instead, with the support of his former enemy, he prepared for the day after, for something totally new and unexpected to emerge.

This story about Rabban Yochanan is one of the core narratives of the Jewish people. It provides the crucial link between the sacrifice- and Temple-based Judaism we read about in the Bible, to the new form of Judaism we still practice today, based on study, prayer, and deeds of loving kindness. It is a story about resilience and rising from the ashes, a story about continually renegotiating the balance between preserving our distinctive Jewishness, and fitting in with the broader cultures in which we live.

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<sup>1</sup> Gittin 56a

But this is also a story about the danger of factionalism, of radical politics, of senseless hatred. It reminds us that when we turn a society into a winner-take-all, zero-sum game, everyone actually loses.

It was in this respect that the Israeli Member of Knesset Tehila Friedman recently referred to this story in a speech before the Knesset. Friedman entered the Knesset this summer as a member of the Blue and White party, which is part of a unity government with Netanyahu's Likud. There is a tradition in the Knesset that new members give an introductory speech. Conventionally, the new members speak about their life's journey to that moment, their basic values and goals, and their gratitude to their families, mentors, and supporters.

But Friedman used her speech to offer something more than boilerplate talking points. She centered her speech on a Talmudic story, the story of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai I outlined a moment ago.

Tehilah Friedman has made her career as an activist in her religious-Zionist community and well beyond. She even worked for several years as the Israel representative of the Jewish Federation of Central New Jersey, and brings a welcome familiarity with American Jewry to the Knesset. But she is no sectoral politician. Her speech was widely circulated in Israel across the spectrum of Israeli society.

In her speech, Friedman recounted that story of how Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai saved Judaism as we know it. She then compared the situation during the siege of Jerusalem to the present state of Israeli politics, an increasingly dysfunctional system that has resulted in three elections over the last 18 months. She identified in Israel's present, in her words, "the same destructive desire to defeat each other ... that causes us to spend most of our energy in internal conflict. And again, like then, the reserves of trust are being burnt to the ground. We... endanger in an unimaginably irresponsible way the very existence of this shared home."

Friedman was pointing to a trend that I also have noticed in my observations of Israeli society and culture. One of Israel's defining features is its diverse, multicultural population, with an extraordinary variety along political, religious, economic, and cultural lines. But even with this diversity, it would appear that a good deal of Israelis of all types walk around thinking: "You know, this country would be a lot better if only everyone were more like me." Religious Jews think that about secular Jews, and vice versa; left-wingers think that about right-wingers, and vice versa; and so on. Lots of people of all kinds feel that their group represents the real Israel and that eventually everyone will realize that.

For instance, I once met an American-born Jew, the daughter of a cantor, who made aliyah when she married her Israeli husband. Expressing her frustration with the political power of the Haredi or ultra-Orthodox sector of Israel, and with the culturally and politically conservative character of much of the country, she remarked, "I'm very committed to raising my kids in Tel Aviv, and not in Israel." Her Israel is proudly Jewish, but also cosmopolitan and generally secular, symbolized by that trendy city. Of course, an ultra-Orthodox Jew in down the road in

B'nai Brak would say that *he* represents what Israel actually should be, and that her lifestyle betrays what Judaism should be all about.

Exacerbating the problem is the highly fragmented nature of Israeli society. From a very early age, Israeli children are tracked into one of four major school systems: secular, religious, ultra-Orthodox, and Arab. While this arrangement allows families to educate their children according to their beliefs and values, in effect it means most Israeli children rarely encounter a peer with a radically different way of life. Military service once served to integrate all of these different identities, and still does to some extent, but certain groups, such as ultra-Orthodox Jews, Arabs, and religious women, generally do not serve in the army. Even universities and workplaces can divide along these same cultural lines, and mixed neighborhoods with residents from many different backgrounds are increasingly rare. This lack of familiarity only amplifies the mistrust and each group's sense of being embattled, fighting for its existence against all the others.

This result of these identity clashes, Friedman noted, is a total-war style of politics, where sectoral parties fight for the interests of their group, and not for a vision of what the common good looks like for everyone. It creates a system where each group tries to win, or, failing that, hinder the advance of its supposed adversaries. Thus the political dysfunction resulting in three successive elections with basically similar results, as each party and group tries to somehow outmaneuver the others. Thus a political system focused on dueling claims of corruption and a focus on largely symbolic issues like annexation of parts of the West Bank, rather than the problems most Israelis face in their daily lives.

As Friedman points out from her analysis of the Yochanan ben Zakkai story, such a politics is ultimately self-defeating. In a political culture where all that matters is defeating everyone else, no one actually wins.

Israelis came by this approach honestly. In the early days of the state, the founders of Israel needed a way to unite Jews who came from all over the world, who spoke many languages and whose political and religious beliefs varied widely. To this end, Jews who immigrated to Israel were encouraged and even coerced to shed their Diaspora identities, and assimilate into the melting pot of the new, Hebrew-speaking Israeli identity. They were to become sabras, like the desert plant: strong and tough on the outside, but sweet and warm on the inside. Ideally they would adopt the dominant ethos of Israel's founders: secular, Europe-oriented, socialist, and Zionist.

To some great extent, this did happen and perhaps was even necessary under the circumstances. But it set the precedent that Israeli society would be structured around one dominant group, with minorities who had rights, but also knew their place. However, in the decades since Israel's founding, demographic changes have made such a structure less tenable. As Israeli President Ruby Rivlin noted a few years back, current school-enrollment data suggest that there will soon no longer be any clearly dominant group in the Israeli population, the way secular Jews dominated in the early decades of the state. Rather, the four main sectors

of Israeli society--secular, national-religious, Haredi or ultra-Orthodox, and Arab--are approaching each other in size, with tremendous social and political implications.

But, as Friedman pointed out, Israel's political culture has not caught up. Instead, various groups imagine that, through demographic changes and political maneuvering, they will become the new dominant group. They will win the zero-sum game for power and be able to impose their priorities and their values on the rest of society. Each group feels under threat, that the country they love is in danger of becoming something else entirely. And they then act accordingly.

Instead, Friedman called for an alliance of passionate moderates, people like Yochanan ben Zakkai, who realize that the sectarian status quo cannot continue. The alternative involves a delicate balancing act of affirming one's own identity, while also making space for people with radically different values and lifestyles. As Friedman put it, "I'm Jewish, religious, a Religious Zionist, a nationalist, a feminist, a Jerusalemite...There's a lot of truth, and good and beauty in my world, but not *all* the truth, not *all* the beauty, not *all* the good. I don't want everyone to become like me... because I know that in other communities and worlds there's truth and beauty and good, and that I have a lot of things to learn from them," she said.

The challenge here is for all of the diverse identity groups within Israeli society to find a way to both affirm and continue to live out their identities, while also working together across those differences toward some sense of the common good. Surprising things are possible when people can be convinced to call a truce on the largely symbolic culture war issues, and focus instead on solving practical problems that cut across identities. The challenge is to build up the trust that allows for unexpected collaboration, and that also enables the inevitable conflicts among groups to be better managed.

The stakes could not be higher. Friedman concluded her speech saying: "These are the days of the Third Temple. And exactly like the two that preceded it, it's fragile. It's flammable. It cannot be taken for granted."

Friedman's remarks clearly struck a chord with Israelis who are tired of the seemingly endless rounds of elections and bare-knuckle identity-based politics, all while very real problems go unsolved. Prior to entering the Knesset, Friedman worked with an organization called Shaharit--the name of the Jewish morning prayers, with a connotation of a new dawn arising--with which I've had some exposure.

Shaharit is very much engaged in the kind of common good politics Friedman described. Their basic premise is that some significant portion of the emerging leaders in each sector of Israeli society are tired of the old arguments and the old barriers among communities. Shaharit is building a movement of such passionate moderates who are committed to their own values and identity, but also seek to work with, rather than against, other identities. For instance, they brought together neighbors of different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds in the Israeli city of Rehovot, along with local childcare workers, to get the municipality to expand subsidized

after-school programs. This allowed the parents of hundreds of children to work full-time jobs for the first time. That kind of organizing based on unlikely partnerships is quite something to behold, and I look forward optimistically to what could happen as more people like Tehilah Friedman gain political power.

I wonder, too, what such a politics could look like in this country. Our two-party system means that the coalitions are within, rather than among, political parties. But our country's population is just as diverse as Israel's and arguably more so. We too experience a politics that can be more concerned about winning a media cycle than bringing people together to solve problems. I would like to believe that beyond the bombast and bloviation on cable news and social media, there exists a reasonable center in this country of people who may disagree on certain culture-war issues, but who could, with the right leadership, put that aside to work together toward the common good.

What I most appreciate about this approach is its claim on a principled and passionate moderation, that is about practical problem solving and the common good. In a sense, that is what Yom Kippur calls on us to do in our personal lives and our communities. Indeed, a section in tomorrow's Avodah service calls Yom Kippur, "A day for restoring love and fellowship, a day of abandoning envy and strife."

Yom Kippur is a day for us each to set aside petty competition and return to our highest values and aspirations. It is a day for seeking out the common good. Perhaps among the vows we cancel out this evening through Kol Nidre are the vows that we would never cooperate with someone we consider our enemy, or that we would never reconsider our point of view on a controversial issue.

The chaotic final days of the Second Temple demonstrate what happens when a society fails to self-moderate, to inculcate a sense of mutual responsibility that minimizes sectarian strife. If we put in the work over these next 24 hours, we can accept the invitation to turn Yom Kippur into that day of restoring love and abandoning envy. And that feeling of restoration can echo like a shofar into the rest of this new year.

G'mar khatimah tova: May you all be inscribed and sealed in the book of life.