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 ASBI Congregation
 Devarim 5779

Why We Fast

Today is the 9th of Av. Because it is Shabbat, the fast day is postponed to tomorrow and we are left with an ominous date on the calendar and a bit more time to prepare for the darkest and saddest and most somber day of the Jewish calendar.

Why do we fast? We fast because on this day the First Temple and the Second Temple were destroyed. On this day, the spies shared a negative report from their reconnoitering in Eretz Yisrael, and our ancestors sat and wept - for no good reason - bemoaning their fate as Jews and plotting to return to Egypt. From that evening of tears unto today, Tisha b'Av has been a day for recalling the tragic elements of Jewish history, and to mourn the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash which symbolizes the estrangement between God and humanity and, ultimately, the estrangement of humanity from one another.

This is not why we will fast tomorrow.

Three weeks ago, at the very beginning of the Jewish summer mourning season - the “anti-holiday season” if you will - I heard Rabbi Shlomo Dov Rosen say, quite clearly that we do not fast because of the destruction of the Temple, the destruction of Yerushalayim, and the tragedies of Jewish history. We do not fast because of anything that happened in the past. We fast because of what happens now. Although this counter-intuitive position is the clear implication of a Talmudic passage I have encountered dozens of times, I had never understood this significance of that passage:

דאמר רב חנא בר ביזנא אמר ר"ש חסידא מאי דכתיב (זכריה ח, יט) כה אמר ה' צבאות צום הרביעי וצום החמישי וצום השביעי וצום העשירי יהיה לבית יהודה לששון ולשמחה קרי להו צום וקרי להו ששון ושמחה בזמן שיש שלום יהיו לששון ולשמחה אין שלום צום

“Rav Hana bar Bizna said in the name of Rabbi Shimon Hasida: What is the meaning of Zechariah 8:19, “Thus says the Lord of Hosts: the fast of the fourth month and the fast of the fifth month and the fast of the seventh month and the fast of the tenth month shall all become to the House of Yehudah as days of rejoicing and merriment.” These days are called fast days and they are called days of rejoicing and merriment? How can this be? At a time when there is peace, they are days of rejoicing and merriment. When there is no peace, we fast.”

So, why do we fast? Not because of anything that happened in the past. The reason why we fast here and now, in 5779, is because we are not living in a time of peace. The Talmud provides no definition of what it means to live in a time of peace and there are multiple opinions among the commentaries. This may be one of those situations where “if you have to ask the question...you already know the answer.” If we need to scour the commentaries, the works of rishonim and acharonim to determine what “peace” means, then we don't live in a time of peace and we need to fast.

There is something about the world in general, and the condition of the Jewish people in particular, that is unredeemed. Something is course and oppositional instead of harmonious.

I can't readily imagine what peace looks like. So, instead, I'm going to share a story that describes a very brief moment which is nonetheless perhaps the closest I have come to experiencing redemption.

When I was 19 years old I shared a car ride with a small group of yeshiva classmates. We had all spent a year together in Israel and each of us would be enrolled in an American college or university in just another few months. As we sat together in the car we began to talk about a mutual acquaintance of ours in a disparaging way, poking fun at that person and laughing at that person's expense. The conversation was entirely in line with hundreds of conversations that I have had with friends up until that point, and that conversation was entirely in line with hundreds of conversations I have had since then. It was not crude or vulgar, but it was derogatory and with no valuable purpose and it was clearly and undoubtedly forbidden according to the halakhot of ethical speech.

And then, one of my classmates said, "this isn't the right way to talk." And, just like that, in an instant, each of us realized that he was correct, and the conversation turned on a dime and was redirected in a more innocuous direction.

For the past twenty years I have thought about that moment and why that ethical intervention was effective and what that moment has signified for my life. After spending most of a year in a yeshiva, studying Torah and developing our characters, we had formed a community built around a common mission and with common values and dedicated to introspection and self-improvement. We spoke the same ethical language and shared a commitment to strive for excellence in mitzvah observance. Once our behavior had been identified and named, we pivoted, and our conversation continued without shame and in an entirely benign direction.

That's a moment of redemption. From that moment to this day, I have yearned to be a part of communities that are organized around common values, ethical excellence, and Torah study as a tool for growth in ethical sensitivity and kindness.

That was a moment of redemption that that was a distant echo of a moment in this morning's Torah portion in the first verse of Sefer Devarim as Moshe begins his farewell address to his people.

אלה הדברים אשר דבר משה אל כל ישראל בעבר הירדן במדבר בערבה מול סוף בין פארן ובין תפל ולבן וחצרות ודי זעהב:

These are the words that Moses addressed to all Israel on the other side of the Jordan.—Through the wilderness, in the Arabah near Suph, between Paran and Tophel, Laban, Hazeroth, and Di-zahab.

The place names that Moshe uses are not mentioned anywhere else in the Torah and Rashi informs us that each one is an allusion to an episode of Jewish history, each one refers to one of the sins of the generation that left Egypt. Moshe chose to offer his chastisement in a gentle and hidden way out of respect for the Jewish people.

לפי שהו דברי תוכחות ומנהג כאן כל המקומות שהכעיסו לפני המקום בהו, לפיכך סתם את הדברים והזכירם ברמז מפני כבודו של ישראל

Professor Avraham Grossman, the great scholar of medieval Jewish history, has pointed out, Rashi begins his commentary to each of the five books of the Torah with some nice statement about the Jewish people and this seems to be no exception. To show honor to the Jewish people, Moshe couched his words and employed hints to describe the sins of the prior generation in order to warn his audience.

But last week I read a short reflection in a book by Rabbi Daniel Lifshitz which asked, what in retrospect, is an obvious question: why is it a sign of respect to offer chastisement in coded and obscure language? How does that reflect the honor of the audience? Rabbi Lifshitz suggested that demonstrating that one is in a context where a subtle critique will be understood and taken to heart is a demonstration of the respect that one has for the audience of that chastisement. When Moshe offered a hidden rebuke, he was also teaching us that he understood that a hidden rebuke would be sufficient. We had the spiritual maturity to understand the message. We were a community, on the cusp of entering Eretz Yisrael and already possessing enough of a shared mission and commitment to common values that a hidden message of chastisement would be taken seriously.

That's a world of redemption. That is who we were at the end of Moshe's teaching career. It is who my classmates were in that car twenty years ago. It is a vision each of you can strive towards in your own lives, among your friends and families. It is who we, together, can try to become. It is not a vision of perfection, but it is a vision of life that is lived with common values so that we can be called upon to listen to our better angels. That could be what peace looks like.

Each Shabbat we recite Rabbi Nachman of Breslev's prayer for peace and on this 9th of Av, I wish to conclude with his words:

יהי רצון מלפניך, ה' אלהינו ואלהי אבותינו, שתבטל מלחמות ושפיכות דמים מן העולם ותמשיך שלום גדול ונפלא בעולם ולא ישאר עוד גוי אל גוי חרב ולא ילמדו עוד מלחמה. רק יכירו וידעו כל יושבי תבל האמת לאמתו, אשר לא באנו לזה העולם בשביל ריב ומחלוקת ולא בשביל שנאה וקנאה וקנטור ושפיכת דמים רק באנו לעולם כדי להכיר ולדעת אותה מתברר לנצח. וכן יהי רצון. ונאמר, אמן.

May it be your will, Lord our God and the God of our ancestors that you cancel all warfare and bloodshed from the Earth and spread a great and wondrous peace over the world that nation shall not lift sword against nation nor any longer study warfare. Every inhabitant of the planet should only recognize and know the truth unto its innermost parts, that we have not come into this world for conflict or argument, and not for hatred or jealousy or tormenting, or bloodshed. We have only come into this world to recognize and know you, may you be blessed for ever. And may this indeed be God's will. Amen.