

Tisha B'Av through Josephus's Eyes

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When something goes terribly wrong, it is likely that someone will ask why. Figuring out how things went south is important in order to prevent similar disasters in the future. So, when the Romans destroyed the Temple in the year 70 CE and brought an end to Jewish independence, we can imagine inquiries into what caused this tragedy.

The answers found in the Talmud blame the destruction of the Temple on the baseless hatred said to have existed at that time and are the most frequently shared explanations. These answers even tell a story of an invitation delivered to the wrong person, resulting in an unwanted guest being embarrassingly evicted from a gathering. According to the rabbis, the revenge of the shunned guest is what sets in motion the process that ultimately leads to the Roman destruction of the Temple.

One concern you might have with this explanation is that it is found in a text written 300–500 years after the *churban*, or the burning, occurred. Skeptics say this explanation may reflect more about concerns in the later era than about the true history of the original time period.

But what if we had records from someone who lived at the time? Perhaps even from someone who was there at the gates of Jerusalem as the Roman army advanced?

Well actually, we do have these records. They are the histories written by one Yosef ben Matityahu, later called Flavius Josephus. He was originally a general in the Judean army in the Galilee, but after being captured, he defected and became an aide-de-camp to the Romans and, eventually, an important historian.

Questions about how he balanced his loyalty to the Jewish people with his willingness to save his own skin at all cost will be addressed at our trial, Saturday night, September 21, when Santa Clara County District Attorney Jeff Rosen, acting as counsel for the defense, will try to save Josephus from charges of treason, crimes against humanity, and genocide. Judges Jeremy Fogel, Jamie Jacobs-May, and Jerry Nadler will make sure that all the evidence is presented clearly and fairly. Some very theatrical witnesses guarantee that an educational and entertaining time will be had by all.

In the meanwhile, I would like to talk about Josephus's views on the cause of the destruction, because they are a little different from the views of later rabbis. Josephus came from a well-to-do, priestly family and was a descendent of the Hasmonean High Priest. Politically, he represented a more moderate stream of thought, with his family being Sadducean and his early leanings more Pharasaic. He must have been highly regarded, for at age 26 he was sent to Rome to plead before the Emperor Nero for his fellow Judeans who had been arrested. With his

good connections, he succeeded in getting the charges dropped. This experience left Josephus with the confidence that if justice were pursued with the Romans, it could be received. However, while he was in Rome, the political situation in Judea began to disintegrate.

Rome had been resented for the past century, ever since it had taken control of politics in Judea at the request of two Hasmonean brothers fighting for the throne. Josephus would have King Agrippa refer to this, saying, "If you wished to be free, you should have thought of that before bringing in Pompey." Under direct Roman control, there were abuses and times when the Romans were more sympathetic to other ethnic groups in the area. There was also assimilation and accommodation within the Jewish community.

By the time of the Great Revolt, the Essenes had already fled from Jerusalem to seek refuge and purity in the Judean desert. The Zealots had been pursuing a policy of confrontation and terrorism, but when Josephus left for Rome, it seemed that cooler heads would prevail on both sides and a compromise would be reached. Surely no Judean could fail to see that Rome ruled the entire world and that its power was insurmountable. Similarly, wouldn't Rome pursue the same good government policies with which they ruled in other places, avoiding confrontation with local customs while collecting the taxes on which the empire stood?

Unfortunately, when Josephus returned from Rome, things had changed substantially. The dramatic difference would be like falling sleep right after

President Obama's successful second election—and then waking up in January 2017. At first, more moderate leadership prevailed, and it is perhaps for this reason that Josephus accepted the command of Yodfat, a large city in the Galilee. But as the political situation became more strained, the Zealots and parties sympathetic to their views took control. Yodfat was under siege by the Romans for 47 days, and when Josephus tried to convince the leaders to open the gates in order to avoid the destruction of the city, his life was in danger from more radical proponents.

Josephus viewed the revolt against Rome as irrational and blamed the Zealots, whom he termed a reckless minority—irresponsible, murderous, and thuggish. He compared himself to Jeremiah, who at the time of the Babylonian conquest had urged surrender so as to save Jerusalem and the First Temple. In speeches that he put in the mouths of important people such as King Agrippa, Josephus expressed his view that there was no reason to die when they could live under the Romans.

Was his viewpoint totally self-centered? Was it simply self-justification?

Interestingly, in other recollections of the time period, written in Greek and not influenced by Josephus's books, Jewish leaders agree with Josephus about the Zealots. These recollections describe a reign of terror and a civil war during the war with Rome. They blame John of Gischala, a leader of the Zealots, for inspiring a fanatical position that led to the Temple's destruction, and they call the Zealots, *biryonom*—boorish, wild men—whose blind militarism would lead to disaster.

These recollections particularly remember the Zealots burning necessary food and

firewood during the siege in order to force the reluctant people to fight the Romans.

To me, the term *sinat chinam*—groundless hatred—is like saying there are good people on both sides. It suggests an equivalence of views with the problem being just their failure to get along. Sometimes that is indeed the case. Many programs of dialogue within the Jewish community take this approach.

Josephus, however, suggests that some views were more productive and others more destructive. Such extreme views can make compromise impossible and can have dire consequences. Maybe the views of real extremists—the Kahanists of today, Jewish racists, or the *tag mechir*, price payers, who attack innocent Palestinians within the Green Line after attacks by Hamas in the territories—are not just other viewpoints that we need to understand, but a danger to our future.

We will never really know if the destruction of the Temple could have been avoided with calmer, more measured leadership on both sides, Judean and Roman, but there still may be a lesson to learn in terms of the future of this third foray into Jewish national independence.