

The Best of Times, The Worst of Times

Rabbi Ariel Rackovsky

It's one of the classic movie tropes. As tongues of fire rage and billow, someone- usually a firefighter-runs into the inferno. The music turns urgent as he or she is silhouetted against the fire that grows ever more treacherous. Gradually, the music switches to a triumphant theme as the film turns into slow motion; our hero runs out of the building, carrying a person, often a child, to safety. Now imagine that the hero is not wearing a firefighting uniform, but a uniform of a different kind- kippah and tzitzis. And imagine if the precious cargo in this case was not a person, but an extremely sacred item. That is what happened this past April in Cape Town, South Africa. As wildfires raged through Table Mountain National Park, many buildings on the campus of the University of Cape Town were destroyed, forcing the evacuation of hundreds of students and incinerating numerous irreplaceable artifacts. As the fire grew in intensity, it began to approach the Kaplan Center for Jewish Studies, which features a full service shul¹. Rabbi Nissen Goldman, the Chabad *shaliach* at the University of Cape Town, began receiving a flood of alarmed Whatsapp messages that the building was in danger. Not thinking twice, Rabbi Goldman pulled up in front of the building, wearing no protective gear and having no training in firefighting. His only armor was the Talmudic promise that anyone carrying out a mitzvah will meet no harm². Running into the building, he emerged with several pairs of Tefillin and a Sefer Torah.

1

https://www.chabad.org/news/article_cdo/aid/5107997/jewish/Rabbi-Braves-Flames-to-Rescue-Torah-Scroll-at-Cape-Town-University.htm

² Pesachim 8a

Now, as a matter of strict Jewish law, Rabbi Goldman was probably not required to endanger his life to run into the building and save the Torah scroll, but his actions were instinctive. The sight of a burning Sefer Torah evokes memories in a Jewish heart of centuries of pogroms, massacres and carnage. In fact, one of the most serious fasts on the Jewish calendar commemorates, in part, the burning of a Sefer Torah. Tomorrow is the fast of the Seventeenth of Tammuz, and the burning of a Sefer Torah by the wicked general Apostemos is one of several events the Mishnah³ tells us happened on that day.

תַּמְזָה דְּכָרִים אָרְעוּ אֶת אַבֹּתֵינוּ בְּשַׁבְעָה עָשָׂר בְּתַמּוּז וְחַמְשָׁה בְּתַשְׁעָה בָּאָב. בְּשַׁבְעָה עָשָׂר בְּתַמּוּז נִשְׁתַּבְּרוּ הַלְוִיִּים, וּבִטְלָה הַתְּמִידָה, וְהַבְּקֻעָה הָעִיר, וְשָׂרְף אֶפֹּסְטֵמוֹס אֶת הַתּוֹרָה, וְהָעַמִּיד צֶלֶם בְּהִיכָל. בְּתַשְׁעָה בָּאָב נִגְזַר עַל אַבֹּתֵינוּ שְׁלֹא יִכְנָסוּ לְאֶרֶץ, וְחָרַב הַבַּיִת בְּרֵאשׁוֹנָה וּבִשְׁנֵינָה, וְנִלְכְּדָה בֵּיתָר, וְנִתְחַרְשָׁה הָעִיר. מִשְׁנַכְנָס אָב, מִמְעֻטִּין בְּשִׁמְחָה:

On the seventeenth of Tammuz, Moses broke the tablets, the daily offering was nullified by the Roman authorities and was never sacrificed again, **the city of Jerusalem was breached**, the general **Apostemos** publicly **burned a Torah scroll**; and Manasseh **placed an idol in the Sanctuary**.

I can understand and feel the sense of sadness that the desecration of a sacred text, like a Torah scroll, should engender- the kind that would lead one to fast as a result. The same with the kind of profanation demonstrated by placing an idol in a sanctuary. I recall once seeing a video of a well-known Cantor and Choir performing one of my favorite cantorial

³ Taanit 4:6

selections from the High Holidays davening. It is a setting by Morris Goldstein, a Hungarian Cantor who served for many decades in Cincinnati, of the closing of the *kedushah* in the repetition of the Shemoneh Esrei of the High Holidays:

וְיָבִינָה יְתַקְדֵּשׁ שְׁמֶךָ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל עַמְּךָ וְעַל יְרוּשָׁלַיִם עִירְךָ עַל צִיּוֹן מְשֻׁכָּן כְּבוֹדְךָ וְעַל מַלְכוּת בֵּית דָּוִד מְשִׁיחֶךָ וְעַל
מְכוּנָה וְהִיכָלְךָ:

And thus may Your Name be hallowed, Hashem our God, over your nation Israel, your city of Jerusalem and Zion, the dwelling place of Your glory, over the kingship of the House of David, Your anointed, and over Your [holy] Dwelling, and Your Sanctuary.

It was a phenomenal rendition that captured the yearning and feeling for closeness to God this text is supposed to evoke, but something was off- and as I looked closer, I realized what it was. As this cantor was describing God's sanctuary, he was doing so in quite a different sanctuary... this performance was recorded in an ornate church, under the watchful eye of an enormous crucifix. When confronted with scenes like this, how can one not want to fast?

But the cancellation of the *Korban Tamid*, the daily offering, seems not to fit in with the other shocking events. The Talmud⁴ tells us violating prohibitions passively is less severe than violating them actively; cancelling a daily sacrifice is not the same as introducing an idol into the sanctuary, breaching the walls of a holy city, breaking tablets and burning a Torah scroll. Why is this commemorated on the same level, and the same way, as the others?

⁴ Eruvin 101a

I'd like to suggest that the cancellation of the daily offering is, indeed, worthy of lamenting and fasting because it represents the loss of one of the key ingredients to a successful connection with God, with Torah and with religion: consistency. It speaks to the end of a routine, to not having one, or to losing one's rhythm in life. It is usually not the major transgressions that throw a person off their religious and spiritual momentum. To paraphrase the ancient Chinese proverb, the journey of a thousand spiritual miles away from Torah starts with a small step. When a person who normally goes to shul begins rationalizing why not to go a certain week, when a person who typically attends a class decides that this week she will not- that is the disruption of a routine that leads to disarray. This extends to other areas of life as well. One of the symptoms of depression is the cessation of routine, especially when one has difficulty getting out of bed- a sign of anhedonia, in which regular activities no longer give one pleasure, or some other disordered way of thinking. Think as well of the disruption to the rhythm of life represented by a catastrophic illness, a traumatic divorce, financial difficulties, professional challenges or a global pandemic. The cessation of the Korban Tamid- the sacrifice that set the rhythm and the tone for the day of the Jewish people- was as much of a disruptor as the other cataclysmic events the Mishnah describes. And so, for the next three weeks, we respond to a change in routine by changing our routine- no weddings, no live and festive music, and other restrictions as time goes on- to show that we yearn for holiness once again as a regular part of our lives.

At the same time, the Three Weeks begin a period of patterns- three weeks of mourning that intensify for the final nine days. Three weeks after Tisha B'Av, we begin the patterns of the month of Elul- a month of preparation, introspection and supplication- followed by the

Aseret Yemei Teshuvah and the Chaggim. Even as we disrupt our routines temporarily, we begin to adjust to the intensifying rhythms of the Jewish calendar, so now is a wonderful opportunity to incorporate new and positive measures into our lives to ensure consistency. Perhaps now is the time to take on some form of exercise, for a few minutes a day. Perhaps it is setting aside some time each evening for uninterrupted conversation with your spouse, without the distractions of electronic devices. Maybe it is to introduce a Torah thought to the Shabbos table- or begin daily Torah study. In 10 days, the Daf Yomi will complete the study of Masechet Yoma and begin the study of Masechet Sukkah, all about the many laws of the holiday of Sukkot. If you stick with the Daf Yomi for the next eight months, you will finish seven tractates, whose subjects cover holidays that span the Jewish calendar. It doesn't really matter which of these exalted ideas you choose to take on, and of course, the more the better.. From a therapeutic standpoint, routine is an insulator against counterproductive behavior and a disruption is an extraordinary opportunity to make healthy and beneficial change. Let us respond to the message of the worst time on our calendar by making the best changes in our lives.