

As The World Burns- Matot Masei 5783

Rabbi Ariel Rackovsky

Every now and then, there is a passage in the Daf Yomi that expounds on the Parsha of the week or that is seasonally relevant. Sometimes it is obvious, like when we made a Siyum on Mesachet Pesachim on Erev Pesach. But other times, it is unexpected. When a passage in the Talmud is relevant to the Parsha of the week, I call it “Parsha Points.” The popular *Maggid Shiur*, Daf Yomi teacher Rabbi Eli Stefansky calls these confluences a “kiss from Hashem.” This past week, as we commenced the Three Weeks in which we mourn for the destruction of the Battei Mikdash, the Daf Yomi studied the passages in Masechet Gittin that deal with the destruction of the second Beit Hamikdash. As I prepared and taught them, I was struck by something curious.

The Talmud introduces its account with a statement of Rabbi Yochanan:

אמר רבי יוחנן, מאי דכתיב: “אשרי אדם מפחד תמיד ומקושה לבו יפול ברעה?” אקמץ א ובר קמץ א חרוב? וישלם, אמתרגולא ותרגולתא חרוב טור מלכא, אשקא דריספק חרוב ביתר.

§ *Apropos the war that led to the destruction of the Second Temple, the Gemara examines several aspects of the destruction of that Temple in greater detail: Rabbi Yohanan said: What is the meaning of that which is written: “Happy is the man who fears always, but he who hardens his heart shall fall into mischief” (Proverbs 28:14)?*

Jerusalem was destroyed on account of Kamtza and bar Kamtza. The place known as the King's Mountain was destroyed on account of a rooster and a hen. The city of Beitar was destroyed on account of a shaft from a chariot [rispak].

When we think of the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash and its underlying causes, we tend to think in terms of broader societal trends, as did our sages. In many different places, they describe the rampant violation of the cardinal sins- murder, idolatry and sexual immorality- as the reason for the Churban. Around this time of year, we are subject to endless entreaties about *Ahavat Chinam* and *Ahavat Yisrael*, baseless love of fellow Jews, to counteract the *Sin'at Chinam*, the baseless hatred that destroyed the Beit Hamikdash. At face value, though, none of the stories the Talmud tells here address societal failings explicitly. Instead, the Talmud describes isolated incidents as the proximal causes for catastrophic events of destruction. Bar Kamtza's humiliation at the hands of the unidentified host is the event that precipitated the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash. It was the attack against the Roman forces for stealing a chicken from a wedding that caused the destruction of *Tur Malka*. And Beitar? That, too, was the result of an attack. A Roman officer cut down a cedar tree that had been planted in honor of someone's birth, and used it to fashion an axle for a wagon. Angry Jewish observers attacked the Roman, precipitating a retaliation. All these stories that the Talmud tells are

about *individual* actions. Where is the rampant sexual immorality? Where is the societal *sin'at chinam*?

I think the answer can be found by listening once again to the verse with which Rabbi Yochanan began his account of the destruction:

“אֲשֶׁרִי אָדָם מִפְּחַד תָּמִיד וּמִקְשָׁה לְבוֹ יִפּוֹל בְּרָעָה”

Happy is the individual who fears always, but he who hardens his heart shall fall into mischief”

With this verse, Rabbi Yochanan tells us what the problem was at the time of the destruction- and what we need to be mindful of now. The Jewish people failed to be fearful; they failed to see the warning signs of societal decay, and failed to see the far-reaching implications of their own actions. Instead, they hardened their hearts, pretending that everything would turn out well in the end. When individuals misbehave, make poor choices and fail to see the broader ramifications of their actions, society as a whole is deleteriously impacted. To illustrate this point, the Talmud tells stories about specific people, and seemingly isolated incidents- to show how far reaching the destructive impact of these can be. It works in the other direction, too. The Talmud's stories about *salvation* during the time of destruction

are also about the choices of individuals. Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai had himself smuggled out of Jerusalem disguised as a corpse, to obtain an audience with the Roman emperor, who allowed him to ask for whatever he wanted. Rabban Yochanan asked to save the city of Yavneh and its Torah scholars, the family of Rabban Gamliel, and the doctors who tended to Rav Tzadok. The Talmud describes this as a wrongheaded decision born from God's intervention, but also offers justification for it: Rav Yochanan felt he couldn't ask for too much, like sparing Jerusalem altogether, or he would get absolutely nothing. Rabban Yochanan was one person, and while his decision didn't save Jerusalem, it saved the tradition and the transmission of Torah among the Jewish people.

The lesson from the stories of the destruction is that we need to keep our eyes open for warning signs, and act. It's easy to think that we can do little, personally, to change our collective fate. I imagine that's how the people who listened to Yirmiyahu's scathing words of rebuke of the Jewish people felt, too. When they heard his dire warnings of impending doom against Jerusalem and the Beit Hamikdash should they fail to change their ways, they thought to themselves, "what can I do already? I'm just one person. Even if I change, no one else will!" And since they felt themselves powerless, they convinced themselves that nothing was wrong after all, that Yirmiyahu was just Jeremy Downer who was a *bissel meshuggeh*, and

they continued on the path of destruction. For those who feel that there is little they can do as individuals, the Talmud tells us stories of both destruction and salvation that were caused by individuals.

This is our challenge during the three weeks- to be on the lookout for warning signs of various kinds, and not to be scared to act on them, no matter how insignificant we may consider our actions. Anyone who is even remotely attuned should be able to see warning signs all around us.

On July 4th, I had the honor of officiating at the wedding of Liad and Ayelet Guttman, at the splendid Waldorf Astoria hotel in Jerusalem. I had been looking forward to this wedding for so many reasons. It did not escape me that the Waldorf has a space on their roof for Chuppot that overlooks the expanse of the city- especially the Old City. In the text of my prepared remarks, I made reference to the spectacular view, to the poetry of a chuppah in the presence of the ruins of Jerusalem- there wouldn't have been a dry eye in the house. I was a tiny bit disappointed, therefore, when I arrived early for the wedding and saw that the chuppah had been set up indoors. But then I thought about it some more. That day was exceedingly hot, and blazingly sunny, in Jerusalem; I had the sunburns to prove it, sustained while trekking up Har Hazeitim. Having sat through seemingly interminable chuppot in the summer that took place outdoors, I realized it would

have been annoying at best, and more likely quite dangerous, for people to sit through an outdoor chuppah in that kind of heat, no matter how magnificent and poetic the view. It turned out that July 4th was not just hot in Yerushalaim. It was the hottest day ever recorded, since records of temperature began to be kept. Sure, some of this may be attributed to the return of the El Nino pattern and the beginning of summer in general, but global warming is certainly a contributing factor because it exacerbates the effects of El Nino. Of course, one insanely hot day isn't the only warning sign of which we need to be concerned. At the moment, some 8 million Americans are living under temperatures of 110 F for days on end. According to the climate nonprofit First Street, that number will balloon to 100 million people by 2053¹. Ice is disappearing at alarming rates² in the north and south poles, at a rate of 12.6% per decade, leading to rising sea levels and temperatures. This week, the water off the coast of Florida reached a shocking 98 F³; warm water kills coral reefs and deeply impacts the food chain, as some 25% of all aquatic creatures rely on coral for sustenance in some form. It also exacerbates already extreme weather events all over the world, and in all seasons. Consider the sustained and powerful rain and the resulting catastrophic flooding that occurred in New York State and Vermont this past week, or crippling snow storms in Buffalo a few months ago. I can assure you, it takes a LOT of snow to cripple Buffalo. Forest

¹ <https://firststreet.org/press/press-release-2022-heat-model-launch/>

² <https://climate.nasa.gov/vital-signs/arctic-sea-ice/>

³ <https://apple.news/AOUbLzXljRH2i0V0MRc5iag>

fires in Canada are part of an annual occurrence; when controlled, they are even good for plant growth and the regeneration of forests. The current iteration, though- the ones that are sending soot particles into the atmosphere, turning the skies over major American cities grey and orange and sending millions of people indoors, are an extreme and unprecedented version of this. When the atmosphere dries out, as is happening throughout the drought stricken western US and Canada, there is more tinder for fires and a more extreme fire season. Whenever I read these kinds of statistics, I feel helpless. What can I do about it? Much of what we actually do to save the environment is ineffective- for example, recycling plastics⁴ doesn't actually work for most plastics, if they even get recycled at all. It is especially frustrating since most environmental discussion these days is heavily politicized; if you are in favor of governmental action to curb emissions, reduce our carbonization and be more environmentally friendly, you are a virtue signaling, tree hugging humorless Greta Thunberg. If you are not, you are a destructive troglodyte with your head in the rapidly receding sand. It shouldn't be this way. Making even small changes, on an individual level, to preserve our planet-- like using more paper and less plastic, or even eating meat just a bit less often- is not a political statement. It is a Jewish value, one described in countless sources, especially in commentaries on Beresihit. It is even mentioned in this week's Parsha, when the

4

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/05/single-use-plastic-chemical-recycling-disposal/661141/>

Torah⁵ commanded the Jewish people to plan green belts around each city, for the health of the residents and the beautification of the cities.

But if we must heed and act on the warning signs about our physical environment, we must do the same with regard to our spiritual and communal environment. The Netziv explains that the reason Moshe installed half the tribe of Menashe with the members of the tribes of Gad and Reuven is that these members of Menashe were phenomenal Torah scholars and served to educate the Gadites and Reuveintes. It was essential for these tribes, especially- living away from the centers of Jewish learning, to have Torah personalities in their midst. It is essential for us, too, to have Torah personalities in our midst, to create Torah structures and opportunities for learning for as many people as possible in our community. But we don't just need the demand- we need the personnel. Last year, before Eichah, I spoke about the warning signs regarding the impending crisis in the Rabbinate and Jewish education. It hasn't gotten any better since. For example, this past year, we were blessed with an outstanding Rabbinic Intern in Rabbi Yehuda Rosenberg. His engaging demeanor won us over, and we were honored to be the place where he honed his already impressive teaching and speaking skills. Rabbi Rosenberg, in turn, loved his time in Dallas and raved about it to everyone. The time came to find a new intern, and I must tell you that I have encountered more challenges than I ever

⁵ Numbers 35:2

expected. I thought that the opportunity to develop a connection with a wonderful, warm and welcoming out of town shul with outstanding lay leaders and a truly spectacular Rabbi, where you get to travel on someone else's dime a few times a year, would be an enticing offer. I myself interned at the Riverdale Jewish Center in the New York area, but seized every opportunity to leave New York for opportunities to speak, teach and meet terrific Rabbis in other communities, many of whom I am still connected to. I was told, instead, that those who are entering the Rabbinate these days are not particularly interested in inconveniencing themselves. Of course, we face similar challenges in filling the youth director position. I am ever the optimist that we will find who we need, and that we will surmount this challenge, but I am realistic about the scope of that challenge. After I spoke last year about this, someone came over to me and said, "Rabbi, you are good at diagnosing the problem, but you never offer solutions." This is a valid criticism, but the solution is found on an individual level. Each of us needs to believe for ourselves and teach our children, by word and example, that learning Torah is a stimulating, enjoyable and spiritual way of spending time, and a great way to connect to one another, and to God. We need to show that we consider serving the Jewish people in spiritual leadership positions is a noble endeavor, and that teaching Torah in any way possible, especially to children, is one of the most meaningful and important ways to contribute to the future of the Jewish people.

It is up to each of us to act- the warning signs are all around us- let us heed them,
and do our part.