

Thoughts Before Tisha B'Av: Agreement and Disagreement

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Dear Friends,

This Shabbat is known as *Shabbat Chazon*, the Shabbat of Foreseeing. This strange moniker has its origins in the first words of the Haftarah read this Shabbat, the passage from the beginning of the Book of Isaiah. There, the prophet shares with the people his vision of the imminent destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem. This passage is always read on the Shabbat prior to Tisha B'Av, the day on the Hebrew calendar on which both the First and Second Temples were destroyed. Although the prophetic passage we chant this week speaks only of the First Temple, as we observe Tisha B'Av, it is the tragedy of the destruction of the Second Temple, over six centuries later, to which I turn my attention.

When the First Temple was destroyed (586 BCE), the sins and corruption among the people served as ample justification for the Temple to be destroyed. But when the Second Temple was destroyed, sin and corruption had not polluted the Temple's sanctity. How then could a God of Justice justify the destruction and resulting exile of the Jewish People? The answer to this question is not explained by the Prophets, who had stopped prophesying by that time in history. The Rabbis of that time, and during the centuries following, provided their own more subtle and nuanced answers. Perhaps the most well-known answer is provided in the story of "Kamza and Bar Kamza." That story, and others, recount situations in which destruction was caused, not by military defeat, but by moral failure. The Talmud calls it *Sinatra Hinam*, baseless hatred.

Hatred, and its precursor, anger, are emotions which are all-consuming. Most other emotions are generated by things which occur to us (sometimes individually, sometimes collectively). We can share those emotions. We can appropriately express the emotion and we can explain its origins. Anger and hatred, however, consume all else. A pervasive, underlying anger knows no boundaries within one's interior life. Like a raging fire, it can destroy indiscriminately. Repair cannot begin until the fire subsides.

Once again, the Jewish community is engaged in what some are calling a "discussion over existential matters." As the "Agreement" is being discussed, there is an endless stream of articles and analyses circulating. Most are very certain that they are right and that the other side is wrong (if not altogether crazy). When a position is promoted with unwavering certainty, one may acknowledge facts presented (which rarely convince anyone) and the passion of those with whom we may disagree. But resolution and compromise are nowhere in sight.

Before engaging in discussions regarding the Agreement, it seems that the first question asked should be: What is the purpose of the discussion? If one discusses with the intent of convincing the other side, that discussion will generally end on a note of disappointment (I should have made my case better./They weren't listening to me.), or frustration, (How can they not see that I am right and they are wrong?). From disappointment and frustration grows anger. And when anger continues to burn it can generate hatred; that hatred tends to remain and burn and fester.

Explaining why the Second Temple was destroyed, our Sages pointed to baseless hatred as a reason. This hatred became lethal because it had overtaken personalities, because the community became divided between "us and them," each side claiming to be right. And, when a community becomes divided, the "other" becomes vilified, ostracized,

demonized or victimized. When discussion becomes argument, when being right becomes all that is important, when you refuse to agree with me, anger is ignited with hatred not far behind.

It seems to me that there are three issues being discussed/debated:

1. What exactly was agreed?
2. Is this agreement good for Israel?
3. Why can't they see that I am right and they are wrong?

As I see it, the first conversation may be informative, the second may be interesting. But the third is divisive, detrimental and destructive.

Next Shabbat is called, *Shabbat Nachamu*, the Shabbat of Comfort. Comfort does not imply that the divisions are gone or that the destruction has been repaired. Comfort begins when the raging fires are extinguished, and warmth remains. Comfort is sensed when the focus moves from what has occurred to how does this make me feel? Comfort resides in the knowledge that the responsibility, no matter who is right, to support and to rebuild will be shared by us all.

As I return from this lengthy stay in Israel, I enter into the vortex of an issue which seems, from this position, increasingly divisive. And, so, I wonder, in our Jewish Community in Wynnewood, is it possible to discuss that which divides us? Is it possible to speak of our differences in a way which generates warmth rather than fire? Is it possible to relinquish our hold on truth in order to find peace?

I believe it is important for us, for me, to try. I have come to believe that, if we cannot discuss our differences without generating anger, without expressing self-righteousness, then we keep reconciliation at arm's-length. Mutual appreciation is relegated to a thing of the past and peace floats away, further and further, like a fading dream.

I hope that next Shabbat, my first upon returning from Israel, we can begin such a discussion. I hope you will join me. I look forward to seeing you soon.

Shabbat Shalom from Israel and may you have an easy Tisha B'Av Fast,

Rabbi Neil Cooper