

## A World Spinning Out of Control?

### Reflections on Rosh Chodesh Av and the Conclusion of the Book of Numbers

This is a time of transition and reflection. We certainly feel it and read about it and are often startled by it when we read the news of international, national and local events. Our world seems to be transforming before our eyes and, quite frankly, there is a helpless feeling that what is going on is beyond our control. To be brutally honest, much of it is beyond our control. But not all of it.

The calendar also points to a time of great transition and reflection in the observance of Judaism. On Thursday evening, the appearance of the new moon will conclude the Hebrew month of Tammuz and usher in the Hebrew month of Av. This Shabbat will conclude the last two *parashiot* of the Book of Numbers (*Matot* and *Masei*) and will then begin reading from the Book of Deuteronomy. The first nine days of Av are often observed as days of increasing sadness in anticipation of the saddest day of the Jewish year, *Tishah B'Av*, the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av, which this year is observed on Saturday night, July 21.

There are old traditions of avoiding certain pleasures during the first days of Av. But these were often debated lest the practice of self-denial turn into inflated self-righteousness and pious one-upmanship. The movement away from over-doing the sadness received an enormous boost with the recreation of the modern State of Israel and the in-gathering of millions of Jews to our ancestral homeland.

Well before modern Israel, Jews recognized that the best way to overcome sadness is through positive and loving action. Let me share one charming and uplifting example. The Chassidic Rabbi Pinchas of Korets devoted himself to restoring peace between people and especially between quarreling spouses. Once, on *Tishah B'Av*, when he might have been expected to be in *shul* praying, fasting and lamenting the loss of the Temples, Reb Pinchas's students found him instead visiting a house in order to make peace between a few people who were angry with one another. "But rebbe, he was asked, "can't you put off your visit until after *Tishah B'Av*?"

He replied, "The Temple was destroyed because of *sinat chinam*, senseless hatred. Therefore, is especially important that on *Tishah B'Av* we should engage in acts that bring peace."

When world events or local experiences raise our levels of anxiety, what can we do? When we are disappointed or even alarmed by what's going on in the world, what is there to do except to mourn and *shry gevalt*? Well, there's plenty a person can do. Each of us is empowered to participate in the system. We can write thoughtful and constructive messages. We can organize. We can lobby. We can vote. And most of all, we can treat each other with greater respect. Not just "tolerance." Respect. That means just because people may have different political views or disagree about this piece of legislation or that cause, we must still strive to treat each other humanely and with common decency and courtesy.

At one of our recent classes, someone admitted to having to “unfriend” on Facebook a number of people who were in the habit of sending inflammatory messages. This person was genuinely heartbroken. Indeed, some of the people who were “unfriended” are still considered friends in “real-life.” It is just that in the hyperbolic cyberworld, normative behavior is cast aside in favor of making an overly dramatic statement pitting one-side against another, creating enemies and dividing the community. It gets to be too much. It gets to be *sinat chinam*, baseless and senseless hatred.

It is taught, *mitzvah goreret mitzvah, averah goreret averah*, "one good deed will bring another good deed, one transgression will bring another transgression" (Mishnah Pirkei Avot 4.2). We positively or negatively change the world one act at a time. It is up to us. If we wish to build a kinder, more respectful, more thoughtful and sensitive, caring and joyful society, each one of us has the power to do so. We simply have to act with greater kindness, respect, thoughtfulness, sensitivity, caring and joy. And the blessings will be felt, with our friends and acquaintances; with our neighbors and the strangers we meet along the way. Indeed, the echoes of blessings could begin to transform this world of ours.

As we conclude the Book of Numbers, we read that Moses and the Children of Israel are just on the Eastern side of the Jordan River, near Jericho, overlooking the Promised Land. It has been a long and difficult journey. They knew that many mistakes were made along the way but by sheer grit and determination, here they were. They also knew that new challenges awaited them. There would be new tests, setbacks, and issues. Still, they were ready for this new chapter in their journey. And so are we! So when we read those final verses of the Book of Numbers we will lift the Torah and declare, “*Chazak, chazak v’nitchazek, Be strong, be strong, and be of good courage!*”

*Ken yihi ratzon. May it be God's will!*

*Shabbat Shalom!*

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