

A Shabbat Message of Torah from Rabbi Rheins

***Sinat Chinam*: The Hatred That Divides and Destroys Societies Looms Once Again**

This Thursday night and Friday coincide with the beginning of the Hebrew month of Av. It is taught in the Mishnah: Once the month of Av begins, joy is to be lessened (*Taanit* 4.6). Why? Because on the ninth day of the month of Av (*Tisha B'Av*) the most horrific calamities have occurred, including the destruction of both the First and the Second Temples. *Tisha B'Av* is saddest day of the Jewish year, a day of mourning, and its observances include fasting and the recitation of *Eichah*, the Book of Lamentations. Many Jews begin to “lessen their joy” from the beginning of Av until the 9th. (Note that since the 9th of Av falls on Shabbat this year, the fast day and observances are delayed until Saturday night, August 10 (*motzaei Shabbat*). Some of the customs that begin this Thursday night include abstaining from eating meat and drinking wine and avoiding purchasing luxury items.

While the rituals and customs associated with the beginning of Av are meaningful, the true significance of *Tisha B'Av* cannot be evoked by pietistic gestures. The Talmud records the opinions of great sages who pondered why the First and Second Temples were destroyed. They came to the conclusion that the First Temple was destroyed (c. 586 B.C.E.) because of idolatry, immorality and bloodshed (*Yoma* 9b).

However, the Talmud came to a different conclusion about the Second Temple. Indeed, it was an era during which people studied Torah and were observant. So why was it destroyed in the year 70 C.E.?

Because the people, though observant, engaged in *sinat chinam*, baseless hatred of one another. People of different social circles and followers of different philosophies belittled one another. There was little tolerance and mutual respect. Arrogance mixed with defensiveness as groups competed against each other. Each claimed the throne of moral, ethical and judicial authority. Each group declared that only they had the answers

and the vision to lead. They talked **at** each other without hearing a word. (See Talmud *Gittin* 55b and the tragic story of Kamza and Bar Kamza for an example of that era's social breakdown.) While the Jews of the Second Temple era fought each other, the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and forced our people to be exiled from Judea and our ancestral homeland.

Unfortunately, the blare of civil strife that plagued our ancestors 2,000 years ago can be heard in frightening tones in our own day. We hear representatives of various political parties belittling one another. We are witnessing our society dividing into smaller and fiercely partisan tribes. How astonishingly ironic it is that while groups are wrestling with one another to claim the mantels of patriotism and caretakers for the well-being of the masses, they pit neighbor against neighbor and citizen against citizen.

Tisha B'Av is an eternal reminder to us that the strength, security and vitality of a society is dependent on people acting with respect, sensitivity and decency toward one another.

As we enter the month of Av, let us commit ourselves to ending the rancor, temper and anger that threaten all of us. The first steps toward healing our society is not by pointing fingers at others and noting their flaws. Rather, the first step is by taking ownership of our own actions.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rick

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