

A Message from Rabbi Fasman



Mark Fasman - Rabbi

When our distant ancestors asked themselves why the Temple was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian army, they refused to consider “natural forces,” that the natural (human) power of the Babylonian army simply overwhelmed the defenders of the city and burned the Temple. The Babylonians had defeated the Judeans in 597 BCE, but after a Judean revolt eleven years later, Nebuchadnezzar came back to Jerusalem and, as a punitive act, destroyed the Temple of Solomon in 586 BCE, after plundering much of its enormous treasure. Was this occurrence natural or was it super-natural? Well, it is one thing to have conquered the nation, but another thing altogether to have destroyed the House for God’s Name. If God was, well, God ... then no force on earth could have burned the Almighty’s House – unless God Himself had ordained that it happen. So the question became: why would God cause the destruction of the one place on earth in which His Name dwelt? Their answer: the Children of Israel had turned to other gods. Infidelity was the most heinous of sins – recall the sin of the golden calf.

After about fifty years of exile – punishment for their infidelity – the Judeans were allowed to return and to rebuild the Temple. And they did. But about 570 years later, that Temple, too, was pillaged and burned to the ground – this time by the Roman Army. But no, to be theologically consistent, it couldn’t have been the Romans – again, it must have been God’s Will. Why this time? The midrashic answer to this question is that God was fed up with *sinat chinam* – “baseless hatred” – running rampant among the various Jewish sects of the first century. Somehow, Tom Lehrer’s “National Brotherhood Week” comes to mind: “Oh the Sadducees hate the Pharisees, and the Zealots hate the Essenes, and the Christians hate the Romans, and everybody hates the Jews.”

We live in dangerous times. So do our children and grandchildren. It’s bad enough when individuals harbor their petty grudges – bad enough for God to have decreed the destruction of the Second Temple condemning His People to live in exile for nearly 2,000 years. We were apparently able to atone for the sin of the First Temple, to make national *teshuvah* and restore our loyalty to just One God (at least, enough to warrant the rebuilding of the Temple and an end to the Babylonian exile. Of course, if that is an accurate understanding of God’s role in the Temple’s destruction, then we would have to admit that we have not yet conquered *sinat chinam*. I can just imagine the Jewish people sitting in the back seat of the car, with God (the Driver) yelling out: “If you kids can’t get along, then we are not going to travel anywhere together as a family any more!”

Isn’t it bad enough that most of the world hates the Jews? Do we really need to add to that ugly mix through our inter-denominational squabbles? It wasn’t a failure of ritual that caused the destruction of either Temple. It wasn’t a failure of faith that caused the second destruction, leading to our current exile. It was a failure of civility, a failure of community, a failure of family. We are, when all is said and done, our brother’s keeper.

Simon Anholt, a U.S. government advisor, has conducted a study, called the National Brands Index (NBI). An article in *Israel Today* (www.israeltoday.co.il), described the study, in which 25,903 online consumers across 35 countries were surveyed concerning their perceptions of 36 countries across six areas of national competence: Investment and Immigration, Exports, Culture and Heritage, People, Governance, and Tourism (only Israelis were not polled, for some reason). Simon Anholt states, “Israel’s brand is by a considerable margin the most negative we have ever measured in the NBI, and comes at the bottom of the ranking on almost every question.” There is nowhere that the respondents would like to visit less than Israel; and the survey indicates that Israel’s people were voted the most unwelcoming in the world. Finally, if we think that the United States is Israel’s best friend and that Israel is loved in the US, we might be upset to learn that Americans ranked Israel just slightly higher than China in terms of its conduct in the areas of international peace and security.

There is precious little that we can do about world opinion. There is precious little that Israel can do (other than to go away).

But there are things that we can do. We can become educated about the attitudes and threats that surround us (“... and everybody hates the Jews”). Clearly not everybody hates us, but we need to be much more aware of the dangers to Jews and to Israel that are bubbling over throughout the world. We also need to find ways to reduce (if not to eliminate) the *sinat chinam* that so poisons our community. Why are we in competition with other Jews and with other Jewish congregations and denominations?

Pirke Avot 5:19 teaches, “A controversy (*machloket*) for heaven’s sake will have lasting value, but a controversy not for heaven’s sake will not endure. What is an example of a controversy for heaven’s sake? The debates of Hillel and Shammai. What is an example of a controversy not for heaven’s sake? The rebellion of Korach and his associates.” When both seek the same ultimate goal, then everyone wins by engaging in the controversy. But when we seek only our own selfish goals, then there can be no two winners. And that is *sinat chinam* – baseless hatred.

So let’s work to build bridges this year ... for heaven’s sake.