

"MEMAAYAN HACHAIM"

Mussar talks from the Masgiach Rabbi Chaim Walkin shlit"a

The Cause of our Long Exile: Sin and Inner Spiritual Decay

Our Sages tell us: "Any generation in which the Holy Temple is not rebuilt, is as if it was destroyed in its days." As we stand during this period of "Bein HaMeitzarim", the 3 weeks between the Fast of the 17th of Tammuz and Tisha B'av, we are confronted by the reasons for the destruction of the Second Beis HaMikdosh. It is incumbent upon us to reflect and introspect about why this tragedy occurred in order that we may better understand what is our obligation at this moment in our diaspora.

The Gemora says (Yoma 9b): **Due to what reason was the First Temple destroyed?** It was destroyed **due to** the fact **that there were three matters** that existed in the First Temple: **Idol worship, forbidden sexual relations, and bloodshed. . . However,** considering that the people during the **Second Temple** period **were engaged in Torah study, observance of mitzvot, and acts of kindness,** and that they did not perform the sinful acts that were performed in the First Temple, **why was the Second Temple destroyed?** It was destroyed **due to** the fact **that there was wanton hatred** during that period. This comes **to teach you that the sin of wanton hatred is equivalent to the three severe transgressions: Idol worship, forbidden sexual relations and bloodshed. . .**

It was **Rabbi Yohanan and Rabbi Elazar who both said:** In the case of **the former,** the people in the First Temple era, **whose sin was exposed** and no attempt was made to disguise their conduct, the **end of their punishment was exposed,** and the prophet informed them that they would return to their land in seventy years. In the case of **the latter,** the people in the Second Temple era, **whose sin was not exposed;** rather, they attempted to disguise their conduct, the **end of their punishment was not exposed. . .**

The Sages **asked Rabbi Elazar: Are the former greater or are the latter greater? He said to them: Look to the Temple** and see if it has been restored, as it was to our predecessors. **Some say** the exchange was slightly different: **He said to them: The Temple is your witness.** (The restoration of the Temple after the destruction of the First Temple, attests to the fact that the former generation was greater. — Sefaria. Org translation and explanation)

The simple understanding of the Gemora is: in the First Beis HaMikdosh, "their sin was exposed", that is, their sin was openly expressed by the prophet. As a result, "the end of their punishment was exposed", i.e. the length of their exile was announced by him as "seventy years." However, "in the case of the latter, whose sin was not exposed", in other words, regarding the sin of the generation of the Second Beis Hamikdosh, it was not known, or for that matter, explicitly written in Scripture what was the nature of their failing. Therefore, in the same way, the end of their punishment was not exposed", and we continue to endure in that exile.

In the Vilna Gaon's "Pirushei Aggados", his explanations of the homiletic passages of the Talmud, he offers a deeper explanation.

"In the earlier generation, their good deeds were hidden and their sins were in public; their hearts were fundamentally good. As for the later generation—the opposite was true. As the Gemora says, "Rachmana leeba boi", Hashem desires our heart."

The Gr"a explains here that while in the First Beis HaMikdosh the people sinned seriously, violating the cardinal aveiros of sexual impropriety, idol worship, and murder, nonetheless (as the Gemora explains), these faults were in the category of "their sin was exposed" that is, the lack was external, "revealed". Their inner nature, though, was good, as the Gr"a writes: "their hearts were good". Hence, measure for measure, their punishment was "revealed", i.e. expressed by the prophet to be of a limited, explicit amount.

In contradistinction, in the Second Beis HaMikdosh, the sin of wanton hatred was in the category of being "not exposed". In other words, their sin, their decay was of an inner, hidden nature. In the later generation, their heart was rotten, and "Hashem desires the heart". Therefore, in this situation, the end of their punishment was also hidden, it was not clear. The end was not made apparent until the coming of Moshiach, speedily and in our days.

From the Gr"a's explanation, we can understand the nature of the length of our current exile is due to the nature of the sin of wanton,

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baseless hatred—“sinas chinom”. Through this sin, as the Gemora says, the cause of the destruction of the Second Temple, our hearts were fundamentally rotten and decayed. In such a situation, even a relatively “lighter” sin will require more time to correct because the rot eats away at a person’s spiritual core. It is for this reason that “their punishment was not revealed”, though in truth, the sins of the First Beis HaMikdosh were more numerous. When determining the seriousness of sin, it is not the “amount” which is the most important factor, but the inner decay which the sin causes.

We thought to deepen our understanding of the concept of “measure for measure” cited in the Gemora above, describing the length of the current exile, “their sin was not revealed, so too was their punishment not revealed”, with the following analysis. In the First Beis HaMikdosh, the sin was external, “in the open” (i.e. sexual issues, idol worship, and murder) so that the people of that era could recognize that they had violated Hashem’s will. Their spiritual mechanism was still functioning, their hearts were still pure and unsullied. For this reason, their punishment was “in the open”; since they could perceive their flaws, they could in turn begin the corrective process to correct what they had done.

However, in the Second Beis HaMikdosh the nation’s sin was internal, hidden in their spiritual interior (sinas chinom, baseless hatred). As such, it was, and still is, significantly more difficult to honestly delve into one’s inner essence to reveal if he has sinned in his behavior. The individual’s heart, his spiritual driving force, itself was corrupted. Thus, it has taken much more time to truly realize the extent of the sin. Without such awareness of sin, the process of teshuva, of repentance cannot begin. It is for this reason “their punishment was not revealed”; it was impossible to estimate from the outset how much time would be required for the Jewish People to fully appreciate the errors of their ways and to correct their mistake. We can then understand, it is vital for us to perform this soul-searching to correct our hearts and complete our teshuva.

Along these same lines, we see in the words of the Mashgiach, Rav Yerucham Levovitz zt”l., in his work “Daas Chochma V’Mussar” (part 3):

“... concerning the sin of the generation of the First Beis HaMikdosh, about which the Gemora tells us, ‘their sin was revealed’, it was like an external sickness, like boils on the surface of the skin. In the Second Beis HaMikdosh, “whose sin was not revealed”, this means to explain that their sin was like a disease of internal organs... with this explanation we can understand the amazing truth that in the First Beis HaMikdosh, while their sins were of such a serious nature (the 3 cardinal sins!—transl.), nonetheless, they were always ready to confess and to return to Hashem in a moment’s notice. We this same fact with the sin of the Meraglim, the Spies. Even though they had committed a serious sin of a lack of emuna, faith in Hashem, they were always close to confession and were able to do teshuva in a moment.

Similarly, we see with the sin of the Golden Calf, after the revelation of the sin, the nation was able to do teshuva at once. How are we to understand this, that they were able to repent so easily and quickly? The answer is what we’ve described above, that is, that their sin was not a “Divine plague”, but like dust on a garment, while their hearts remained full of their spiritual sensitivity, as “broad as a hall,” in their deeds and their thoughts.

We see from the words of R’ Yerucham zt”l. the principles we’ve articulated: 1. In the First Beis HaMikdosh, unlike in the Second, the sin and its effect were external; they did not impair the spiritual essence of the nation. 2. Regarding the individual, if a person sins only on an external level, his holy sensitivities will not be affected and he will be able to recognize his sin and rapidly confess his failing, beginning the teshuva process. Further, the Mashgiach cited proof to these principles from the sin of the Spies and the sin of the Golden Calf (although this latter was a severe violation of actual idol worship!). Notwithstanding the terrible nature of the sin, in Rav Yerucham’s words: “they were always close to confession and were able to do teshuva in a moment”. Their failure was not a “Divine plague”, but like dust on a garment”, wiped away with an easy flick of the wrist.

Yet, it seems to us that there still remains to explain: How is it possible that the generation of the First Beis HaMikdosh could violate the 3 Cardinal sins while their hearts could remain “good”, as the Gr”a writes?! How can one maintain a healthy inner nature and a “good heart”, and yet, still sin with sexual violations, idol worship, and murder!?

We thought to explain this conundrum with the following insight into the Sages words in tractate Chibut Hakever (ch. 4) (included in Otzar Midrashim- transl.) :

(At a person’s judgement in the Afterlife) A person is asked: “Did you make your friend a king over you with gentle speech (Heb. “nachas ruach”)?”

What is the idea of being required to make one’s friend a king, that is, to honor him, but specifically, by doing so with gentle speech? What is being taught by specifying that the honor shown to one’s friend must be in the form of gentle speech?

The explanation is: even if we see someone honor and care for his neighbor, we still do not know whether these behaviors reflect true honor offered in honest respect, or whether they derive from pressure, social or self-imposed. Therefore, our Sages insisted that when one gives honor to his friend, it must be done with gentleness, that is, from a mental state of calm equanimity, and not from emotional agitation and excitement. Why? Because true honor for a friend can only come from the deep recesses of one’s heart, with no influence of false ecstasy. Only in this way can it be certain that one’s honest desire is to offer true honor. When one acts from an attitude of centeredness and repose, can we be sure those actions come from “penimius”, from one’s inner spirituality.

We can now understand the question we asked above: how could the generation of the First Beis HaMikdosh have committed such heinous aveiros while maintaining “a good heart”? The answer is what the source of these sinful actions was. Even though they had violated Hashem’s will through sexual sins, idol worship, and murder, they still could have “a good heart” because these sins did not stem from that heart. Rather, these sins came from outside pressures—the stress of poverty and suffering. A person can violate the most serious sins while still having a “good heart”, if those sins were inspired by an external pressure to sin, and not from a “choice” to sin. Thus, in the time of the First Beis HaMikdosh, the spirit of sin was not in truth “them”—their hearts remained “good”—if they had not been subject to the suffering and difficulties of their times, they would not have sinned. (This comports well with R’ Yerucham’s words above: the earlier generation of the First Beis HaMikdosh were therefore able to quickly turn to teshuva.)

During Purim-time, we often like to cite the Gemora in Megilla (12a) (Sefaria.org edition):

The students of Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai asked him: For what reason were the enemies of Jewish people, a euphemism for the Jewish people themselves when exhibiting behavior that is not in their best interests, in that generation deserving of annihilation? He, Rabbi Shimon, said to them: Say the answer to your question yourselves. They said to him: It is because they partook of the feast of that wicked one, Ahasuerus, and they partook there of forbidden foods. Rabbi Shimon responded: If so, those in Shushan should have been killed as punishment, but those in the rest of the world, who did not participate in the feast, should not have been killed. They said to him: Then you say your response to our question. He said to them: It is because they prostrated before the idol that Nebuchadnezzar had made, as is recorded that the entire world bowed down before it, except for Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.

They said to him: But if it is true that they worshipped idols and therefore deserved to be destroyed, why was a miracle performed on their behalf? **Is there favoritism expressed by God here? He said to them: They did not** really worship the idol, but pretended to **do so only for appearance**, acting as if they were carrying out the king’s command to bow before the idol. **So too, the Holy One, Blessed be He, did not** destroy them but **did act angry with them only for appearance**. He too merely pretended to desire to destroy them, as all He did was issue a threat, but in the end the decree was annulled. **And this is as it is written: “For He does not afflict from His heart willingly”** (Lamentations 3:33), but only for appearances’ sake.

We see from this passage of Gemora that all of the sins of the Jewish people during the period of Mordecai and Esther must be viewed as **“only for appearance”** (Heb. **l’penim**). The Jewish People only sinned due to fear and “klapeichutz”, that is, only from the outside, but not from their inner heart. Thus, the Gemora cites

the verse from Eicha; as the Jewish People did not sin willingly from the inner desires of their heart, Hashem did not punish them willingly too. **“The Holy One, Blessed be He, did not** destroy them but **did act angry with them only for appearance**. He too merely pretended to desire to destroy them, as all He did was issue a threat, but in the end the decree was annulled.” Thus, He sent Haman, who was called “mafchidi” (the one who scares)—his entire “mandate” was only to cause fear, not to destroy, because the Jewish People’s sin was only from the outside, external to their good nature. Further, this is a reason for the custom to wear costumes and masks on Purim, as all the sin was only from the outside, not an expression of who we really are.

The lesson we can learn from all the above is the serious implications of the sin of “sinas chinom”. While terrible aveiros such as gilui areios, avoda zara, and shefichas damim committed during the periods of the First Beis HaMikdosh and the time of Mordecai and Esther can be overcome and forgiven within a limited time due to the limited—external— aspect of their action, the internal sin—cheit penimi— of sinas chinom, wonton hatred, is a deep violation of the heart, and that punishment is not limited until today.

Yet, the advice to correct and avoid the decay and such inner destruction of sinas chinom is just this: limud ha-Mussar, enthusiastic study of mussar and cheshbon hanefesh, deep personal introspection. How? A person stops the “merri-go-round” of life and pauses—and thinks—about? About who he is and all that makes him special. When this thought process becomes a habit, he will attain the character trait of “histapkus”, of satisfaction with oneself. The main thought to focus on is the truth that everything that one has been given is exactly what he needs to fulfill his Divine mission in this world. Further, when one accepts this reality, it becomes obvious that what has been given to his neighbor has absolutely no connection to his unique task. By absorbing into his deepest heart these truths about himself, his friends, and his place in the world, a person is well-protected from the tremendous inner sin of sinas chinom.

We see these ideas again in the words of the Gr”a, who writes:

All sin, all violations of Hashem’s will, stem from chemda, illicit desire, as our Sages said that the Tenth Commandment of “Thou shalt not Covet” (Heb. lo sachmod) includes all of the Commandments and all of the Torah.

Therefore, as we have said above, the means to protect oneself from the sin of sinas chinom is “Tzadik b’emunaso yichye”, the righteous live with faith—and this is the mida of histapkus, the character trait of self-satisfaction. (Similarly, R’ Yerucham zt”l., writes: (What does it mean that in the generation of the First Beis HaMikdosh) their hearts were good? The explanation is that with their inner life they were believers in the Almighty and their hearts were healthy and full of trust of Him. Trust in Hashem compliments and brings one to the trait of self-satisfaction.)

Dedicated in memory of Yitzchak Binyamin Ben Yekutiel Yehuda Hershko נלב"ע ה' מנחם אב התשע"ח – ע"ה
memory of Sasa Leah bat Yehuda Leib Stern הי"ד - תמוז התשנ"ז - נלב"ע כ"ה

It is for us to know that one cannot attain these traits without serenity and peace of mind. Thus, a person should use his understanding of his inner nature, his own unique qualities and strengths, and how these contribute to the fulfillment of his role in Hashem's plan for the universe, to correct the decay in his heart. Truly, "Hashem desires the heart."

In Midrash Eicha (ch. 1) (Sefaria edition):

"How (eichah) does she dwell..." (Lamentations 1:1): There are three who prophesied with the language of "eichah": Moses, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. Moses said, (Deuteronomy 1:12), "How (eichah) will I carry alone..." Isaiah said, (Isaiah 1:21) "How (eichah) she has become a prostitute..." Jeremiah said, (Lamentations 1:1) "How (eichah) does she dwell..." Said Rabbi Levi: It is compared to a noble woman who had three friends. One saw her in her tranquility, one saw her in her recklessness, and one saw her in her degenerateness.

The S'fas Emes explains that the word "Eicha" connotes wonder or amazement. Yet, we need to

note that the "Eicha" used by Moshe Rabbeinu, who saw the Jewish People "in her tranquility" must be referring to all of their beauty, their spiritual strengths apparent until he had to utter—"How?!" The opposite was true for the Prophet Yishaiiah, who saw them in their recklessness (not their sinfulness, but recklessness!), his cry implies something else. When a person loses his serenity (as in the verse in Yaakov's blessing referring to Reuven's 'recklessness'), the implication is that he immediately loses his high standing, and thus, Yishaiiah's "How?!" And in the end, Yirmiyahu saw them in their degenerateness, recklessness brings one to sin, and thence—to degenerateness. Everything progresses according to the principle: "When the Jewish People are going up, they rise to the heavens, and when they are going down, they fall to the depths!"

In these days of the "Bein Ha-Meitzarim", we must strengthen and correct our hearts—hearts which have rotted and decayed since the destruction of the Second Beis HaMikdosh through the deep inner sin of sinas chinom. We do this by bolstering the inner good

within us, "making our neighbor kings with gentleness of speech" stemming truthfully from our hearts, not from any external pressure or excitement. We learn that when one acts with calm centeredness and focus, this is greatest proof that his actions flow from his heart.

Therefore, in the time of the First Beis HaMikdosh, even though they sinned grievously with the 3 Cardinal sins, their punishment was limited and apparent because their hearts were still good. As the Gemora tells us, Hashem desires our heart, and the penimius, the heart's inner life is the key to our spiritual growth. Even though they sin, they are still "gute menshen", good people. But, in the time of the Second Beis HaMikdosh, the heart of the people was lost, decayed, and in such a situation, even if one learns the entire Torah, the heart remains desiccated, void of any spiritual life force.

This is the lesson for us from the destruction of the Second Beis HaMikdosh: to turn ourselves within, to our hearts, to trust and faith in the Ribono Shel Olam. While we indeed sometime will stumble here or there, we will have kept our hearts pure, fulfilling "Return us, Hashem, and we will return", as we say at the end of Eicha. The key to our correction simply is: to turn our heart over to Hashem. We can do this by focusing on our unique qualities and strengths, our personal mission in this world. When one can be happy with who he is and comfortable with his gifts, he can be assured no longer to covet or lust after what belongs to another, for all sin derives from this inappropriate desire and from abandoning his self and setting his sights on that which belongs to his neighbor. The solution is to return one's focus within, to his heart, and in this way, he will merit "his punishment will be revealed and limited."



[Written and translated according to understanding of writers]

**The Essay for the month of Elul
will be published the week of
Parashas Ki Se'tsol**



"Lament, Zion and her Cities"

We would like to announce to the community of Bnei Torah and Mussar that the weekly Va'ad from the Mashgiach shlit"a will take place this week, on the topic of "Golus and Churban" Wednesday, July 29, 8 Av

Israeli time: 21:45 sharp - EST 2:45pm sharp

Zoom Telephone hook up: 03-978-6688

Meeting ID: 898 3186 9889 - ##

THE ENGLISH ESSAY IS DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF KAILA MENUCHA BAS DOVID YITZCHOK, THE WIFE OF RABBI ZVI BARUCH HOLLANDER, THE TRANSLATOR. SHE PASSED AWAY ON 8 TAMMUZ, WHOSE SHLOSHIM IS TISHA B'AV. MAY HER NESHAMA HAVE AN ALIYA FROM THE MASHGLACH SHLIT"AS TORAH WHICH SHE LOVED IN HER LIFE AND BE A MEILITZ YOSHER FOR ALL OF KLAL YISRAEL. AMEN!

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