

INSIGHTS

Into The Weekly Parsha

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This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Avram Abish ben Menachem Mendel. "May his Neshama have an Aliya!"

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Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

PARSHAS DEVARIM

Everyone's a Critic

These are the words that Moshe spoke to Israel, on the other side of the Yarden, in the desert, in the plain, between Paran and Tophel... (1:1)

This week's *parsha* opens with Moshe addressing the entire nation. Both Rashi and Targum Yonason (ad loc) point out that Moshe isn't merely speaking to *Bnei Yisroel* - he's actually criticizing them. In fact, all the places listed in the *possuk* are locations where the Jewish people transgressed and angered Hashem.

The Talmud (*Bava Metzia* 30b) states that the reason Jerusalem was destroyed was because the inhabitants went according to the strict letter of the law and didn't act in ways that would have gone beyond the letter of the law. In other words, they didn't treat one another any better than the Torah required them to. Tosfos (ad loc) asks that the reason given for the destruction seems to contradict the Gemara (*Yoma* 9b), which states that the reason for the destruction was because of "baseless hatred." Tosfos answers that both those reasons played into the cause for the destruction. Seemingly, Tosfos is explaining that the baseless hatred led them to only do for each other what was required and nothing beyond the strict letter of the law.

Yet, the Gemara in *Shabbos* (119b) states that the reason for the destruction was because people failed to criticize one another. This, once again, seems to contradict the Gemara in *Yoma* that states the destruction stemmed from baseless hatred. Presumably, if baseless hatred was rampant in the city

of Jerusalem then harsh criticism couldn't be far behind. What does the Gemara mean when it says that people didn't criticize each other?

Almost everyone is familiar with the Torah command "*hocheach tocheach es amisecha*" - the obligation of criticizing a fellow Jew. Sadly, many people have no idea what this really means or when to apply it. As an example: Most of us feel it is our sacred obligation to (loudly) shush the person in *shul* who is talking

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too loudly or is disruptive in some way. However, this does **not** fall under the obligation of criticizing a fellow Jew.

Maimonides (*Hilchos Deyos* 6:7) lays out very clearly what this *mitzvah* entails: "It is a *mitzvah* for a person who sees that his fellow Jew has sinned, or is following an improper path, to return him to proper behavior and to inform him that he is causing himself harm by his evil deeds - as the Torah (*Vayikra* 19:17) states: '*You shall surely admonish your colleague.*'"

Clearly, according to Rambam, the prime motivation for criticism of another Jew should be your interest in his well being.



In fact, as Rambam points out, one of the key elements of criticism is the explanation of how the person's behavior is harmful to themselves. In other words, the main driving force of criticism of another has to be your love of them and your desire that they don't hurt themselves.

Most of us only criticize the behaviors of others that bother us, not the behaviors that are harmful to them. We would prefer to blithely ignore the behaviors of our friends that are clearly detrimental to them - unless, of course, their behavior or something they do is disruptive to our own lives. At that point, we jump into action. But until that point is reached we would rather ignore their shortcomings and "leave well enough alone." In other words, we effectively only criticize when their behavior is about us, not when their behavior is about them. In addition, we should carefully consider what that says about our "friendships."

That's what the Gemara means by saying that Jerusalem was destroyed because we didn't criticize one another. This was a direct result of the baseless hatred. Because of the baseless hatred we had for one another we didn't care about each other and therefore didn't make any attempt to prevent other people from harming themselves.

The Death of Disconnection

How can I alone carry your trouble and your burden and your quarrels? (1:12)

Parshas Devarim is read every year on the Shabbos before *Tisha B'Av*. In this *parsha* Moshe laments: “*eicha esa levadi* - how can I myself bear the burden of *Bnei Yisroel's* quarrels and arguments.” It is customary to read this *possuk* in the special melody of *Megillas Eicha*. Chazal, in the prologue of *Midrash Eicha*, give an interpretation to the meaning of the word *eicha* and the connection to *Tisha B'av*:

“R. Abbahu taught ‘But they like men [Adam] have transgressed the covenant’ (*Hoshea* 6:7). This refers to Adam Harishon, of whom Hashem said, ‘I brought him into the Garden of Eden and I imposed a command upon him, but he transgressed it so I punished him by driving him out and sending him away.’ ‘*V'kinati alav eicha* - and lamented over him,’ [...] as it is said, Therefore Hashem God sent him forth, and lamented over him. ‘Where art thou? (*ayeka*).’ Similarly with his descendants. I brought them into the land of Israel, [...] I gave them commandments, [...] they transgressed my laws [...] so I punished them by driving them out, and by sending them away, and I lamented over them, how (*eicha*) she (referring to *Yerushalayim*) sits solitary” (*Eicha* 1:1).

This, of course, refers to Adam’s sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge and violating the only commandment given to him at the time, which led to his banishment from *Gan Eden*. The parallel to Adam’s sin is the sins of *Bnei Yisroel* that caused them to be driven out of *Eretz Yisroel*. These two words, *eicha* and *ayeka*, appear identical in the non-vowelized text as they are the exact same letters. Just as Hashem used the word *ayeka* when He banished Adam, He uses the word *eicha* when He banished *Bnei Yisroel* from *Eretz Yisroel*.

Maimonides (*Hilchos Teshuvah* 6:1-3) states that one of the core tenets of understanding Hashem’s providence is the

knowledge that all evil that befalls us, whether individually or as a community, comes from consciously using our free will to transgress sins. These punishments often come to us in the most horrific ways, but they are all meted out in accordance to Hashem’s divine knowledge of the proper way to exact punishment to fit the sin. But all of these punishments are only if the person doesn’t do *teshuvah*. However, if a person repents in a conscious manner and of his own free will, then this acts as a shield to protect him from punishment.

In light of this, we must examine how we, as a people, react to the devastating loss of the *Beis Hamikdash*, the destruction of Jerusalem, and the death and banishment of the Jewish people, which is poignantly memorialized by the three weeks and *Tisha B'Av*.

Our sages instituted the custom to begin a period of mourning on the 17th of *Tammuz*. This gets progressively more intensive, culminating with *Tisha B'Av*. Towards the end of *Tisha B'Av* we begin to console ourselves, and over the next seven week we experience what is known as the “seven weeks of consolation.” This is highlighted as such by the weekly *haftorahs*. Only after this process do we begin to embark on the *teshuvah* process. This seems a little backwards. According to Maimonides it seems we should be immediately embarking on *teshuvah*. What is this process of mourning? What are we trying to internalize?

Most people think that the period of mourning is the process of internalizing the terrible tragedies that happened to the Jewish people and feeling a sense of loss. This is really only part of the purpose, and perhaps, only a small part of it.

Of course Maimonides is right, we need to constantly focus on doing *teshuvah*. But the real issue in doing *teshuvah* is that we are often distracted from the root cause of

our problem. We often look at *teshuvah* as our apology for a transgression, as in “please don’t punish me (i.e. my family, my business) for my sins, I am sorry that I behaved in such a terrible manner.” This is, at best, an incomplete perspective.

What we really should focus on is the severing of the relationship with Hashem due to our misbehavior. We need to begin to fathom the true effect of our transgressions – the disconnection from our source. When we are disconnected from Hashem that is when all the terrible things happen to us. Being disconnected from Hashem is literally death, because we are now merely finite beings.

That is why when Adam sinned he brought death to the world and that is what Hashem said to him “*ayeka* – where are you?” If we are disconnected from Hashem we are nowhere. Gone. Banished. The loss of the *Beis Hamikdash* and *Eretz Yisroel* is the manifestation of the severing of the relationship with Hashem that had been restored, in part, after the sin of the Golden Calf.

This is also why it is prohibited to study Torah on *Tisha B'Av*; the Torah and its infinite connection to Hashem masks this sense of disconnection. It is this death, the severing of our relationship with Hashem, that we must mourn during this time period. We have been banished from the relationship. It is for this reason that all the stories of the destruction, those that we are permitted to study on *Tisha B'Av*, appear in the tractate of *Gittin* – laws of divorce.

Only after suitably internalizing this loss, and its ramifications, do we begin to console ourselves. Even after all that we have done to Hashem, He **still** wants a relationship with us. When we begin to understand his yearning for us to return, then we can properly return to him with a complete *teshuvah* – a return to the relationship.



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