

Parashat VaEtchanan

This week, on Tisha B'av, many if not most Jewish minds consciously recalled the fateful day, some two thousand years ago, when our temple was put to flames by the invading Roman legions. In his brilliant book, "Ancient Rome," historian Simon Baker has provided us with a graphic account of the conflagration that engulfed Judea back then and which we are, in many respects, still reeling from today. "In mid-July AD70," he writes, "over three months since the start of Titus's campaign, the battle for the outer court of the Temple raged on. The heavy infantry lines of both Roman and Jewish armies were drawn up and warred with each other under a barrage of spears, arrows and missiles of every kind. Gradually the Roman lines, eight ranks deep, advanced and drove the Jews into the inner court. When, after some days, the Jewish army formations broke down and dispersed, the Romans broke through to the inner court. At that moment the battle boiled over and the legionaries cut loose. After the best part of four long, gruelling years of campaigning, the Roman soldiers vented their wild hatred on the enemy. Piling through all the entrances, they no longer distinguished between Jewish soldier and civilian. All were indiscriminately slaughtered. The steps of the Temple were awash with blood. In front of them and near the Holy Altar corpses were piled high, those on top sometimes slithering to the bottom. The din of butchery, however, was about to get a lot worse. In the chaos a Roman soldier seized a firebrand and threw it through a small opening into the Temple. Soon the building was on fire. A messenger reported the news to Titus. The general leapt up and, with his guard panting after him, dashed towards the sanctuary. Once inside, he saw that the fire could be stopped. He screamed at the soldiers to put it out, but no one paid him any attention. They were too consumed with greed, with getting their just desserts. The slaughter of the Jews had given way to mass looting. Darting through the blazing fires, soldiers raided the treasures of the Temple and carried off whatever they could get their hands on. Ancient cups and basins of pure gold, curtains and bejewelled garments, and, most precious of all, the holy seven-branched candelabrum, the shewbread table and the ritual trumpets all fell into the polluted hands of the Roman soldiers. The most sanctified part of the Temple, the iconic epicentre of the Jewish faith, was cleaned out and left to burn.... As a mark of Roman supremacy, pagan standards were brought into the Temple complex and erected opposite the east gate. Sacrifices were offered to the emperor and a single cry hailed the victor, Titus. As the city blazed, raucous shouts of 'Commander! Commander!' rose up. Each soldier was so laden with loot that when they later sold their gold for cash, they flooded the market and the value of gold in Syria was halved.... Over the next few days, the principal buildings of Jerusalem, including the Council Chamber, were all destroyed, the remaining treasures were handed over, and the survivors of the Roman terror were rounded up in a part of the Temple complex known as the Court of the Women. The old and sick were killed, and thousands of insurgents were executed, taking the total of those killed in the siege to 1,100,000, according to Josephus. The rest, numbering 97,000 were sold into slavery. The young were sent to hard labour in Egypt, or to become fodder for the gladiators and beasts of Roman arenas throughout the empire. The tallest and most handsome of the rebels, however, were saved for the triumph back in Rome."

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The verdict on all of this by Josephus, the one time leader of the Jewish revolt in the Galil, was uncompromising. Standing outside the ramparts and making an impassioned plea to his former comrades barricaded within to surrender to the besieging Romans, Josephus declared that the city and its Temple had already been abandoned by God because of the sins of the people and its leaders. "It is God then, God Himself," he exclaimed, "who is bringing with the Romans fire to purge the Temple and is blotting out the city brimful of corruption as if it had never been." No doubt those who still yet defended the city and the Temple would have been appalled by the suggestion that God Himself had brought the Roman legions to Jerusalem to do His bidding, but Josephus' thoughts on the matter were no doubt shaped by that of Yirmeyahu. Indeed, Eikhah, the Book of Lamentations, written by Yirmeyahu, is still read today on Tisha b'Av as we, like him, ponder the reasons for the destruction of our Temple. "In the days of her affliction and anguish, Yerushalayim remembers all the treasures that were hers, ever since ancient times. Now her people fall into the power of the foe, and she has no one to help her; her enemies are gloating over her, mocking her desolation. Yerushalayim sinned grievously; therefore she has become unclean. All who honoured her now despise her, because they have seen her naked. She herself also moans and turns her face away. Her filthiness was in her skirts; she gave no thought to how it would end. Hence her astounding downfall, with no one to console her. 'Look, Adonai, how I suffer; for the fore has triumphed!... My sins have been bound into a yoke, knit together by his hand. It weighs down on my neck, and it saps my strength. Adonai has put me into the power of those I cannot withstand.'" As we read these words of Yirmeyahu I am reminded of what the great Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch said: that on Tisha B'Av the Jew is not so much to mourn the fact that thousands of years ago the Temple was destroyed, but that it *had* to be destroyed. Indeed, way back in Devarim Moshe set out the terms of the covenant between God and Israel which determined that this would be so. As we read, ""Watch out for yourselves, so that you won't forget the covenant of ADONAI your God, which he made with you, and make yourself a carved image, a representation of anything forbidden to you by ADONAI your God. For ADONAI your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God. When you have had children and grandchildren, lived a long time in the land, become corrupt and made a carved image, a representation of something, and thus done what is evil in the sight of ADONAI your God and provoked him; I call on the sky and the earth to witness against you today that you will quickly disappear from the land that you are crossing the Yarden to possess. You will not prolong your days there but will be completely destroyed. ADONAI will scatter you among the peoples; and among the nations to which ADONAI will lead you away, you will be left few in number. There you will serve gods which are the product of human hands, made of wood and stone, which can't see, hear, eat or smell." (Devarim 4:23-28). In this passage Moshe makes it clear that Israel's infidelity to God would result in destruction of Jewish life in Eretz Yisrael and exile among the nations. The list of blessings and curses in Devarim 28 goes into more precise detail in this regard, making it clear that a failure to obey Torah would result in destruction and exile at Hashem's hand. As again we read, "All these curses will come on you, pursuing you and overtaking you until you are destroyed, because you didn't pay attention to

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what Adonai your God said, observing his mitzvot and regulations that he gave you." According to this our Temples, both first and second, were destroyed and we were twice exiled, by the Babylonians and the Romans, because we failed to keep the commandments. The precise nature of this failure to observe Torah was especially clear in the first instance. The rampant idolatry of pre-exilic Israel and Judah eventually caught up with them and according to the terms of the covenant Solomon's Temple was destroyed and Israel and Judah were carried off into exile. The nature of Second Temple Judaism's failure to observe Torah is less precisely ascertained however. After all, when our people returned under Ezra and Nechemyah, the imperative of keeping Torah above all costs in order to maintain Jewish life in the Land was widely understood. Even as work was begun on a Second Temple Ezra and Nechemyah made sure that the people attended public readings of the Torah. The great watchword of Second Temple Judaism was "Let us act in accordance with the Torah" (Ezra 10:3). Given that this was so it is little wonder that those who defended Jerusalem and the Second Temple against the Romans could not get their head around what Josephus was saying - that it was all being destroyed by God's hand because of a failure to keep the Torah. After all, as we have noted, Torah observance was something of an obsession among the Judeans. Indeed, the rabbis of that period were so fearful of transgressing against the Torah that a further system of laws, known as the Oral Torah, which were later written down and formed the Mishnah, was developed. The point of much of the Oral Torah was not merely to clarify obscure passages of the written Torah but to, in the Rabbis own words, "build a fence" around the written Torah by imposing stricter standards than called for in the Bible - thus preventing a breach of the written Torah. These fence making mitzvot are called khumrot. As Wikipedia helpfully explains, "A khumra (חומרה; pl. חומרות, khumrot; alternative spelling: chumra) is a prohibition or obligation in Jewish practice that exceeds the bare requirements of Halakha (Jewish laws). One who imposes a khumra on himself in a given instance is said to be מחמיר makhmir. The rationale for a khumra comes from Deuteronomy 22:8, which states that when one builds a house, he must build a fence around the roof in order to avoid guilt should someone fall off the roof. This has been interpreted by many as a requirement to "build a fence around the Torah" in order to protect the mitzvot." Indeed, even today the observant Jew is reminded of the specially important need to make a fence around the Torah as the very first passage of the Pirkei Avot (Sayings of the Fathers) which is found in most Siddurim says, "Moses received the Torah on Mount Sinai and handed it down to Joshua, Joshua to the elders, the elders to the prophets; and the prophets handed it down to the men of the Great Assembly. They said three things: Be deliberate in judgement, raise up many disciples and make a fence around the Torah." While, on the surface, the practice of making a fences so as to prevent offences against the written Torah sounds laudable, the reality for most Jews was that the burden of observance grew inexorably and intolerably. In fact, as we know, Yeshua critiqued the practice of making khumrot declaring: "'Woe to you Torah experts too! You load people down with burdens they can hardly bear, and you won't lift a finger to help them!" Thus he also declared, "Come to me, all of you who are struggling and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and

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my burden is light." These wonderful words have sadly been a little misunderstood in Christian hands for they can only be properly understood in the context of the practice of khumrot. Yeshua's appeal was to the ordinary Jew who struggled to keep the Torah as it was increasingly being defined by the Torah teachers, with fence built around fence, around fence. But Yeshua's promise, as many Christians have suggested, is not that the Torah would have to be done away with. Quite the contrary! His promise is that his understanding of Torah, what he calls "my yoke", is not like that of the Torah teachers with their burdensome khumrot, but is based upon empathy and compassion for us as human beings. Yeshua further contrasted his view of Torah with that of the Prushim and Torah Teachers when he said, "You pay your tithes of mint, dill and cumin; but you have neglected the weightier matters of the Torah — justice, mercy, trust. These are the things you should have attended to — without neglecting the others!" In other words, so Yeshua charged, the imperative to build fences around the Torah, had had the undesirable effect of causing the Prushim and Torah Teachers to devote undue focus on ritual minutiae within the Torah while at the same time obscuring from their sight the profound issues of the time upon which, in his opinion, Torah observance fundamentally stood or fell, i.e. issues of "justice, mercy and trust." Ironically therefore Second Temple Judaism's pre-occupation with making fences had exposed it to the fate which it most feared and sought to prevent - the destruction of Jerusalem, the Temple and exile among the nations. As Yeshua again charged, the Prushim and Torah teachers effectively strained out gnats but in the process managed to swallow camels! Indeed, history sadly tells us that in so seeking to be right about the matter of Torah observance Second Temple Judaism became increasingly sectarian, with each different party or sect readily accusing the others of destroying the Torah through misinterpretation. With nothing less than the perceived future of Jerusalem, the Temple and Jewish domicile in the Land on the line, the discourse between these groups became increasingly hateful and often broke out into violence. Thus the group of Essenes who lived at Qumran spoke pejoratively of the High Priest in Jerusalem as the Wicked Priest and of his followers as the Sons of Darkness. By way of contrast, of course, they thought of themselves as the Sons of Light! Don't we all? Second Temple Judaism was fractured and riven by violence, as in fact Josephus notes in his 'Jewish Wars', even as the Romans attacked from without, Jerusalem's erstwhile defenders were fighting bloody battles against each other within. How bizarre it is that those who are closest to us in terms of theology and practice are often those we fight with the most. This kind of crass, baseless hatred is known in Judaism as Sinat Chinam and it is rightly stated that it was Sinat Chinam, occasioned as we have seen, by zeal for Torah and a fear of divine judgement, of exile and destruction, that was the principle failure of Second Temple Judaism. The Torah demands that we love our neighbour as ourself, but the sectarian hatred of Second Temple Judaism which was an unforeseen consequence of a desire to protect the Torah and of Jewish life in the Land drove a cart and horses through this paramount demand. Yeshua correctly surmised the direction of Second Temple Judaism's travel when he told his talmidim, "They will ban you from the synagogue; in fact, the time will come when anyone who kills you will think he is serving God!" Indeed, as historians have demonstrated it was for this purpose that the Birkat Haminim was introduced into the Amidah. As the Encyclopedia

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Judaica reports, an early version of the Birkat Haminim stated, "For the apostates let there be no hope. And let the arrogant government be speedily uprooted in our days. Let the nozerim and the minim be destroyed in a moment. And let them be blotted out of the Book of Life and not be inscribed together with the righteous. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who humblest the arrogant." Later, the Church would claim that this curse was specifically directed against Christians, and since this became a source of mortal danger, particularly in Medieval times, to the minority Jewish community, this section of the Amidah was significantly modified so that references to notzrim and minim were replaced with the blander phrase of "slanderers" - malshinim. Today Reform and Liberal siddurim have removed the Birkat Haminim altogether. And well they might because non-Orthodox Jews themselves know what it is like to be called heretics by other Jews. The fact is that contemporary Judaism is just as diverse as that of the Second Temple. We have Ultra-Orthodox, Orthodox, Masorti, Conservative, Reform, Liberal, Progressive, Humanist and Reconstructionist Judaisms, to name but a few - and of course I would add Messianic Judaism to that list too. However, discourse between all these Judaisms isn't always constructive or kind. To the contrary, it often seems that the further right you go towards ultra-Orthodoxy the more heretics you see within the Jewish community and many are not afraid to say so. As Orthodox Rabbi Uri Sherki, a well-known figure in the religious Zionist movement, is reported to have said when he pulled out of a meeting with Conservative and Reform rabbis back in 2015, it was because Conservative and Reform rabbis are "total heretics". The irony is that the meeting had been called by Israeli President Rivlin to commemorate Tisha B'Av and to promote Jewish communal cohesion! Echoes of two thousand years ago perhaps? Nor was this an isolated incident, as was evidenced by the then Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' refusal to attend the funeral of venerated Reform Rabbi Hugo Gryn - who was the very definition of a mensch. Just the past week, ironically again as we commemorated Tisha B'Av, at the Kotel no less, Sinat Chinam raised its ugly head again as Nashot Ha Kotel, the Women of the Wall who simply wish to worship freely at the Kotel, were attacked by Orthodox haters. As one male witness of the event later noted, "I was at the Kotel for Rosh Hodesh Av. At the Kotel itself, it was a terrible experience. One of the Haredi men said in Hebrew: "I wish you all die". I found on the floor torn pages of a siddur obviously belonging to the Women of the Wall, pages with God's name on them in Hebrew. There was constant interruptions, shouting, whistling, jeering, comments like "who would marry them" etc. All this during Rosh Hodesh Av at the Kotel. Sacrilege." Sadly, the Orthodox authorities who have a strangle hold on religion in Israel, are doing their best to expunge every other form of Judaism from the Land which does not meet their particular criteria of Torah observance. And yet, as Yeshua said two thousand years ago, to do so is to run the risk of failing to keep the Torah oneself. What the disaster of two thousand years ago ought to have taught us is that if our version of Torah doesn't centre around "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility and self-control" then we need to think again. Whatever our disagreements are and however profound they may be about how to worship Hashem and observe His mitzvot, we must never be tempted to despise, hate or mistreat our Jewish brother or sister or to refuse to have discourse with them. As history has demonstrated, Sinat Chinam is in fact one of the greatest of all offences against the Torah

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and yet, as we have heard, it is the temptation to which religious folk are most vulnerable to. Thus in conclusion, since we, as Messianic Jews, look to Yeshua HaMashiach as the embodiment of the Torah to which we believe we are still called, let us follow him in eschewing the path of hate, of one upmanship, of being holier than thou, of turning the other cheek, and instead, walking in the path that he has shown us of forgiveness, compassion, justice and mercy, let us continue to strive for ahavat olam. For yes, we are our brothers keeper, and to love God is by definition to love your neighbour as yourself.

The great and much maligned Hebrew poet, Shaul Tchernichovsky, was a fierce critic in his day of ritualised religion and as a result he earned the lasting scorn of conservative poets and theologians. And yet in spite of their withering attacks Tchernichovsky maintained his belief in the beauties of friendship and self-redemption and held these virtues to be Zion's ideal. Many of his poems have been set to music and are sung by Israeli schoolchildren to this day. In one of his short and melodic poems set to music, he expresses the conviction of his life. "All the world may laugh at me and my dreams", he proclaims defiantly. But "I believe now and shall ever continue to believe and to dream". It begins in Hebrew, "Sachki sachki al ha chalomot..."

"Laugh at all my dreams, my dearest; laugh, and I repeat anew
That I still believe in mankind as I still believe in you.
For my soul is not yet unsold to the golden calf of scorn
And I still believe in man and the spirit in him born.
By the passion of his spirit shall his ancient bonds be shed
Let the soul be given freedom, let the body have its bread!
Laugh, for I believe in friendship, and in one I still believe,
One whose heart shall beat with my heart and with mine rejoice and grieve.
Let the time be dark with hatred, I believe in years beyond.
Love at last shall bind the peoples in an everlasting bond.
In that day shall my own people rooted in its soil arise,
Shake the yoke from off its shoulders and the darkness from its eyes.
Life and love and strength and action in their heart and blood shall beat
And their hopes shall be both heaven and the earth beneath their feet.
Then a new song shall be lifted to the young, the free, the brave
And the wreath to crown the singer shall be gathered from my grave".