

Parshiot Matot - Massay, 5772, 2012:

*Understanding the Three Weeks*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Yehonatan Binyamin Halevy ben Golda Friedel, and Moshe Reuven ben Chaya.

If I were to ask you to briefly describe the dual aspects of Shabbat, many of you would readily respond with “*Shamor*” (“Protect”) and “*Zachor*” (“Remember”). The first term refers to refraining from the 39 categories of biblically proscribed creative activity (“*melacha*”) and their rabbinic extensions, whereas the second term refers to the positive actions that we undertake to ensure that Shabbat will be different in kind and degree from the other days of the week. The best-known example of *Zachor* is Kiddush on both Friday evening and Shabbat morning. Through Kiddush, the meal is transformed from the mere act of eating to something unique and holy – the active recognition and celebration of G-d’s presence in our lives, and the knowledge that it is He who sanctified, and continues to sanctify, the Shabbat.

I believe the Three Weeks, the period of time from the 17<sup>th</sup> of Tamuz through and including the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av, also has a dual nature. Based upon a variety of historical events, this period is equated with unmitigated misery and sadness. Moreover, it is labeled within the world of Halacha as “*avelut yeshanah*” (historical mourning) rather than, G-d forbid, “*avelut chadasha*” (present mourning for one's relative). It is, therefore, a period of public mourning in which we all are engaged. My rebbi and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B.

Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), noted on a number of occasions that *avelut yeshanah* follows the opposite pattern of *avelut chadasha* for one's parent. In the latter, the initial stringencies are the most restrictive and encompass, with the exception of eating and drinking, the same behaviors that are found on Yom Kippur. The periods of *sheloshim* (30 day demarcation point) and *yud bet chodesh* (year-long commemoration) witness a gradual attenuation of these strictures. The *avelut yeshanah* of the Three Weeks, however, proceeds in reverse. Until the Nine Days (Rosh Chodesh Av through the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av), it is customary to refrain from purchasing new clothes, having one's hair cut, and celebrating weddings. The Nine Days are more stringent, and the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av is the most demanding of all in its halachic prohibitions. Thus, the period of the Three Weeks is one of profound sadness that culminates in the poignant mourning and fasting of Tisha B'Av.

There is another aspect, however, to the Three Weeks that is far too often overlooked and perhaps even ignored, namely, that of introspection (*cheshbon hanefesh*). It is a time to look in the mirror of our souls and reflect upon where we have been, where we are, and where we should be going. It is a time to examine our thoughts and actions, and measure them against the bar of judgment of unflinching and uncompromising truth. It is a time, therefore, that prepares us to become better than who we are today, so that we may live lives that are more spiritually and religiously enlightened and authentic.

One way we can begin our introspective journey is to carefully focus upon the well-known Gemara in *Talmud Bavli, Yoma 9b*:

The first Holy Temple, why was it destroyed? This took place because of three different things that had become part of its being: idol worship, illicit physical relations and murder... The second Holy Temple wherein they were involved with Torah study, Mitzvot observance, and acts of loving kindness, why was it

destroyed? It was because of groundless and baseless hatred (*sinat chinam*). This comes to teach us that baseless hatred is the equivalent of the three cardinal prohibitions of idol worship, illicit physical relations, and murder.

It seems to me that our time is, in some ways, quite similar to the time of the Second Temple. On the positive side, there is ample evidence to suggest that more people are studying more Torah today than at any other time in Jewish History. Mitzvot observance continues to grow, and acts of loving kindness (*gemilut chasadim*) are performed by more agencies, organizations, and individuals than one could possibly count or know. In some ways, we are in a renaissance of Jewish growth and identity.

On the negative side, however, *sinat chinam*, the equivalent of the three heinous sins that destroyed the First Temple, and the sin that destroyed the Second Temple, seems to be growing stronger each day. Powerful and disruptive tensions abound between all facets of the Jewish community. Sadly, some of these conflicts have eventuated in violent animosities, verbal attacks, and worse. Sometimes one stops to wonder if we have really left very much for the anti-Semite to say, since we seem so ready and willing to make inflammatory statements against one another. Little wonder, then, that we have not yet merited the building of the Third *Beit Hamikdash* (Holy Temple).

There is a countermeasure to the pernicious sin of *sinat chinam*. To briefly explore this ray of hope, let us turn to a selection of the works of Rabbi Yitzhak Avraham Kook (1865-1935), the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Palestine under the British Mandate. His antidote for *sinat chinam* was *ahavat yisrael* (unconditional love for the Jewish people). He conceptualized *ahavat yisrael* in the following poetic manner:

Listen to me, my people! I speak to you from my soul, from within my innermost

soul. I call out to you from the living connection by which I am bound to all of you, and by which all of you are bound to me. I feel this more deeply than any other feeling: that only you - all of you, all of your souls, throughout all of your generations - you alone are the meaning of my life. In you I live. In the aggregation of all of you, my life has that content that is called 'life.' Without you, I have nothing. All hopes, all aspirations, all purpose in life, all that I find inside myself - these are only when I am with you. I need to connect with all of your souls. I must love you with a boundless love.... Each one of you, each individual soul from the aggregation of all of you, is a great spark, part of the torch of the Light of the universe which enlightens my life. You give meaning to life and work, to Torah and prayer, to song and hope. It is through the conduit of your being that I sense everything and love everything. (*Shemonah Kevatzim* 1:163, translation, Chanan Morrison)

It is crucial to realize that Rav Kook's boundless love for all Jews was not merely a theoretical construct. He embodied this principle (*ahavat yisrael*) in all aspects of his life, and in the most pragmatic of situations – as the following story amply illustrates:

A vocal group of ultra-Orthodox Jerusalemites vociferously opposed Rav Kook, due to his positive attitude towards secular Zionists. Often they would publicize posters along the city streets, attacking the Chief Rabbi and discrediting his authority. One day, Rav Kook returned from a brit milah ceremony in Jerusalem's Old City, accompanied by dozens of students. Suddenly a small group of hotheaded extremists attacked the rabbi, showering him with waste water. The chief rabbi was completely drenched by the filthy water. Emotions soared and tempers flared. By the time Rav Kook had arrived home, news of the attack had spread throughout the city. Prominent citizens arrived to express their repugnance at the shameful incident. One of the visitors was the legal counsel of British Mandate. He advised Rav Kook to press charges against the hooligans, and promised that they would be promptly deported from the country. The legal counsel, however, was astounded by Rav Kook's response. "I have no interest in court cases. Despite what they did to me, I love them. I am ready to kiss them, so great is my love! I burn with love for every Jew." (<http://ravkooktorah.org/KDOSHM62.htm>)

Moreover, for Rav Kook, the opposite of *sinat chinam* was not *ahavat chinam* (love of one's fellow Jew without cause) since, within his world-view, such a concept simply did not exist. For Rav Kook, every Jew, by definition, is worthy of love and respect simply because he or she exists and has a Jewish soul. Thus, he was famous for the following powerful statement: "There is no such thing as '*Ahavat Chinam*' - groundless love. Why groundless? He is a Jew, and I am obligated to love and respect him. There is only '*Sinat*

*Chinam*’ - hate without reason. But ‘*Ahavat Chinam*’? Never!” (Adapted by Chanan Morrison from Rav Kook's work, *Malachim Kivnei Adam*, pages 483-485)

As we struggle to understand the Three Weeks and their meaning, we should focus on the positive aspect that this period of time enables us to encounter. As we undergo the cathartic process of *cheshbon hanefesh*, we must search deeply within ourselves and try to expunge the remnants of *sinat chinam* that lurk within our hearts. Moreover, we must embrace Rav Kook's noble words and replace *sinat chinam* with *ahavat yisrael*. With Hashem's help may this be so. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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My audio *shiurim* on *Tefilah and Haskafah* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/7sp5vt3>

\*\*\* I have recently posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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