

Parshiot Matot - Masei 5775, 2015

The Three Weeks of Introspection

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 bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The Three Weeks preceding Tisha b'Av (the Ninth of Av) are preeminently a period of national mourning. We mourn for the loss of the *Beit Hamikdash* (the Holy Temple), we mourn for the loss of the Land of Israel, and we mourn the deaths of countless Jews who were slaughtered *al Kiddush Hashem* (as martyrs) throughout the millennia.

Given the pronounced emphasis on national mourning, there is another element of the Three Weeks that is far too often overlooked, namely, the introspective nature of this time. In my view, the Three Weeks are the ideal period to look into the mirror of our souls and reflect upon where we have been, where we are, and where we may be going. Then, too, we should examine our thoughts and actions, and measure them against the bar of judgment of unflinching and uncompromising truth. In sum, this is the time to prepare ourselves to become better than who we are today, in order to live more spiritual and authentic lives.

One way we can begin our introspective journey is to focus upon two well-known passages in the *Talmud Bavli*:

R. Johanan said in the name of R. Simeon b. Jehozadak: By a majority vote, it was resolved in the upper chambers of the house of Nithza in Lydda that in every [other] law

of the Torah if a man is commanded: 'Transgress and do not suffer death' he may transgress and not suffer death, with the exceptions of idolatry, forbidden physical relations and murder. (*Sanhedrin* 74a, translation, *The Soncino Talmud* with my emendations)

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. (*Yoma* 9b, translation my own)

Sinat chinam clearly emerges from these two Talmudic sections as the moral equivalent of idol worship, forbidden relations and murder. While at first blush it appears to be the sole cause of the destruction of the second *Beit Hamikdash* (Holy Temple), it is more likely that it was the *makeh b'patish* (metaphorically, "the last straw") in a long series of prohibitions that our ancestors violated at this time. No matter how we view it, however, *sinat chinam* represents the potential for consummate evil that lurks in the hearts of men.

Rav Avraham Yitzhak Hakohen Kook *zatzal* (1865-1935), the first Chief Rabbi of Palestine under the British Mandate, famously suggested the antidote for *sinat chinam*: "If we were destroyed, and the world was destroyed with us, due to baseless hatred - *sinat chinam*, we must return to rebuild ourselves, and the world with us, with love without cause - *ahavat chinam*..." (*Orot HaKodesh* vol. III, p. 324, translation, <http://ravkooktorah.org/TISHA-AV-70.htm>, with my emendations) Not too surprisingly, Rav Kook's writings are filled with singular love for the entire the Jewish people – past, present and future. One powerful example is found in his work, *Shemonah Kevatzim*:

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 from the torch of infinite light, which enlightens my existence. 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.

(Vol. I, sec. 163, translation, <http://ravkooktorah.org/TISHA-AV-70.htm>, underlining my own)

Significantly, Rav Kook did not limit his love for his fellow Jews to a unique group of people who honored his scholarship and personally followed his high ethical values and moral behavior. Instead, he unhesitatingly embraced “all of you, all of your souls, throughout all of your generations.” Indeed, it was only through the grand trans-historical community of *Kenneset Yisrael*, the Jewish people for all time, that Rav Kook was able to find “the meaning of my life.” Little wonder, then, that so much of his life was spent sharing his ultimate message: “I must love you [the Jewish people] with a boundless love.”

With Hashem’s help and our fervent desire, may this period of the Three Weeks be transformed into the Three Weeks of Introspection for each of us. In that way, may we boldly follow Rav Kook’s lead by rejecting *sinat chinam*, and once again become “*k’ish echad b’lav echad*” (“like one person with one heart,” Rashi, commentary to *Sefer Shemot* 19:2) *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdbe718@gmail.com.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have 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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