

Weekly Teaching

July 13, 2018

We are presently observing a three week mourning period which traditionally commemorates the destruction of Jerusalem and the two Holy Temples.

These three weeks began on the 17th day of the Hebrew month of Tammuz, known as Shivah Asar B'Tammuz.

The last day, known as Tisha B'Av, is on the 9th day of Av.

The 9th of Av is considered the saddest day on our Jewish calendar. We observe a complete fast, and spend the 24 hours in communal prayer, and reading from the Book of Lamentations.

The Talmud cites why our two Temples in Jerusalem were destroyed:

Why was the first sanctuary destroyed? Because of three evil things that prevailed there: idolatry, immorality and bloodshed... But why was the second sanctuary destroyed, since in that time they were occupying themselves with Torah, observance of God's Commandments and the practice of charity? At that time causeless hatred prevailed. This teaches us that causeless hatred is considered of equal gravity with the three sins of idolatry, immorality and bloodshed put together. (Yoma 9b)

"Causeless hatred" remains one of the greatest challenges for us as both Jews and Americans.

On issues related to Israel, "Jew vs. Jew" often dominates the headlines.

I frequently observe, with sadness, that too often caring Jews cannot civilly disagree on the very complicated Israeli issues, and what is lost is any chance for productive dialogue.

This is the same when discussing American challenges.

People become mired in being absolutely right, and thus become unable to even listen to any ideas different than their own.

Partisan fundamentalism makes it impossible to find common ground; the American family is becoming more and more dysfunctional.

Once leaders asked difficult questions, and knew that there were only complicated answers.

Today, the questions are often asked simplistically, and the answers more in the form of slogans than anything else.

Our three weeks of mourning observed within our Jewish calendar reminds us as to what occurs when we demonize others in our communities.

The consequences for those who scorn others always lead to bad results.

We have the opportunity during these three weeks of mourning to re-examine our willingness to consider the diversity of people's views, backgrounds, fears, etc.

In the end, we might stick with what our original instincts prompted.

However, even more likely, if discourse comes from a place of sincerely respecting others, our own ideas undergo subtle, if not larger, changes.

Judaism has historically embraced the radical acceptance that life is complex.

Jewish law has never been simply a black and white code, but rather, it is a soulful discourse that recognized the nuances of any given situation.

As Jews, we are supposed to be able to “argue for the sake of heaven,” and not for the sake of our own personal sense of righteousness.

As Americans, we are never supposed to forget that we all our part of a society that collectively is supposed to be “We the People”.

Conviction is always important, and morality is paramount.

But, in most cases challenges are not simplistic, and potential solutions will call for compromise, or at the very least, respectfully validating the feelings of the “other”.

As we approach the 9th of Av, I urge us all to reflect on the consequences that can come when we fail to see that the other person we may disagree with is also equally created in the image of God; that the Golden Rule is supposed to govern every aspect of our lives.

If we care more about being right than being effective, we almost always will fail to achieve success in our interpersonal relationships, and with our communal goals.

I pray that for both the Jewish People and our fellow Americans, we can lift ourselves above the fray, and discover the means by which to bring greater peace to our lives.

Shabbat Shalom,

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