

THE FALL OF THIRD ISRAEL??

WILL WE EVER LEARN FROM HISTORY

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For Rosh Hodesh Av. A dated social/political essay with a timeless message. The original format of this essay was published in 2000 (ten years ago). I updated the dates and added some comments. I am greatly saddened to say that the issues I addressed ten years ago are even more acute and serious today. Rosh Hodesh Av this year (2010) falls on July 12th. The fast of the 9th of Av falls on July 20th, beginning at sunset the night before.

There is an old saying that everybody knows well - if you do not learn the lessons of history, you are bound to repeat its mistakes.

Here we are again in our national period of mourning, 1,942 years after the destruction of the Second Commonwealth of Israel (as it is called in academic circles). Here we are in the 62nd year of the Third Commonwealth, the present State of Israel.

Part of our Torah learning during this three week time period of Beyn HaMitzarim (between the fast of the 17th of Tamuz and the fast of Tisha B'Av) is a review of the relevant sections of the Talmud, (Gittin 56A-B, Shabat 119B) which describe the reasons why Jerusalem was destroyed in the year 3828 (68 C.E.).

In those days, certain elements within the nation of Israel, especially those concentrated in Jerusalem surely acted in such ways that it inevitably led themselves and the nation as a whole down a path towards national suicide. We all know what happened then.

Reflecting on the current situation in the Third Commonwealth (today's State of Israel), I contemplate and wonder if whether the government and the people have any idea about where their behavior is leading the nation. One does not have to be a Sage to recognize the validity of another old expression, "united we stand, divided we fall." Division destroys, it is that plain and simple. This is what happened 1,942 years ago, the divisions in Israeli society led to the destruction of the nation. In light of past, present and projected future events, I wonder, is it possible that can it happen again?

The eternally idealistic and optimistic religious will always believe that no matter how bad reality gets, G-d will somehow magically intervene and with a wave of his magic wand make all our problems vanish into thin air. This type of thinking is needless to say terribly removed from reality to the point that I question if such types of thinking are possibly indications of deeper mental illness. Yes, religious fantasies are a dangerous thing. Often, confused for faith, religious fantasies are not based upon religious facts but rather on highly personalized interpretations of singular or specific points of religion.

In the days of the Second Temple there were groups of religious Jews who indeed suffered from religious delusion, certain they were that Mashiah would come at any minute and save them from the folly they created when they provoked a civil war against the reigning Roman Empire. In their blind and misguided faith they persecuted other Jews who did not share in their vision. They

ruthlessly destroyed all survival supplies in Jerusalem which would have enabled the people therein to have faced and survived a siege by the Roman military. With such time on their side, a negotiated settlement could have been reached and Jerusalem along with the Temple not destroyed. Yet, misguided faith led the “faithful in their own eyes” to act for G-d and instead of G-d. They had no promises of Divine intervention, but acted as if such intervention was expected, and indeed demanded. Their deeds in misguided faith created a famine in Jerusalem that led to the death of thousands. G-d did not intervene. G-d never said that He would!

These are the lessons of history that if we do not learn from them, we may face the terrible future of repeating them. Zealots of all kinds abound in modern Israel and under the guise of faith and religion they arouse the people and spread seeds of what they believe is hope and faith. Like their zealot counterparts in Second Temple times, the modern zealots and proclaimers of the faith are adamant that we are living in the End of Days and that Mashiah is coming soon to magically redeem us and defeat all our enemies and remove all our problems with a wave of his magic wand. These modern views are as unfounded and misguided as they were 1942 years ago.

As part of our Torah faith, we do believe that Mashiah can come any day and indeed current events do appear to be a fulfillment of Biblical prophecy. Nevertheless, as Maimonides stated very clearly in his law code, the Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings, that with regards to the coming of Mashiah, no one possesses a reliable and accurate schedule of messianic events. No one can say for sure what are and what are not messianic signs of immanent revelation. Therefore all messianic talk, pro or con is unfounded and reliance upon it, exclusive of rational and logical decision making, is clearly misguided faith, dangerous thinking and very possibly an indication of deeper mental illness.

King Solomon, a man very familiar with Jerusalem in good times and bad wrote, “there is nothing new under the sun” (Koh. 1:9). In his profound, almost mystical understanding of human nature, he foresaw how everything in the universe and in man unfolds in cycles. Indeed, we do travel around in circles, each revolution bringing us only a short distance forward along the path of human destiny. We rise to great heights of civilization and sophistication, and then, crash! We are cast into the chasm of destruction by the unseen hands of Fate, Destiny, or what have you. After a time of despair, we again rise up and rebuild, even grander than was previous. We continue to ascend until again the Hands of Fate rise up against us.

This seesaw movement of social “ups and downs” correctly describes the history of the Jewish people ever since the exodus from Egypt. Whether in the days of Moshe Rabbeynu himself, or later in the days of Joshua, the Judges, the Kings or the Sages, the nation of Israel has risen to great heights only to be followed by great lows. King Solomon said it best, “there is a time and a purpose for everything under Heaven” (Kol. 3:1). While the Jewish people have contributed more to mankind than any other individual nation, in return, mankind has subjected the Jews to the severest of persecution, more than any other people.

What is the meaning of all this? Is the repetitive cycle of the rise and fall of Jewish fortune a sign to us, as a nation, from G-d? When I view the present state of affairs in modern day Israel, the Third Commonwealth, I am reminded of the words of the prophet Jeremiah, who wrote in Lamentations 2:14, “your prophets envisioned for you vanity and foolishness, and they did not expose your iniquity to bring you back in repentance, they prophesied to you oracles of vanity and deception.”

Today, Israel’s false prophets are her political and religious leaders. They continue to proclaim, “peace, peace, but there is no peace” (Jer. 6:14). Just because there may materialize an agreement of recognition between Israel and neighboring Arab States, this does not mean that

there will be an agreement of peace between peoples. In other words just because the State of Israel and neighboring Arabs will technically be at peace with the forced implementation of a political solution, does this necessarily mean that there will be peace between the Jewish and Arab peoples?

I do not believe that any Prime Minister of Israel has deceived himself into believing this. Indeed, anyone who believes that there will be peace between Jews and Arabs truly is "envisioning vanity and foolishness." Yet, the numbers of such "oracles of vanity and deception" are legion. As P.T. Barnum of circus fame has said, "there is a sucker (someone easily fooled) born every minute." As King Solomon has said, "there is nothing new under the sun" (Koh. 1:9).

One of the basic tenets (#11 of 13) of the Jewish religion as outlined by RaMBaM is that "God, blessed be He, gives reward to one who obeys the commandments of the Torah and punishes one who violates its prohibitions." This is a principle unfortunately not remembered often enough by Israeli politicians and layman alike. Israeli politicians would benefit from learning the wise words of one of the famous founding father of these United States, Thomas Jefferson, who said, "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, that his justice cannot sleep forever.

Indeed, G-d constantly sheds His grace over His people Israel. Yet, even so, we are not exempt from His Divine Wrath. Only a few short decades ago, Divine Wrath took the form of the Holocaust, where 1/3 of world Jewry was wiped out. Whether one was religious or secular, Sephardi or Ashkenazi, it did not matter. The unity of the Jewish people that escaped them in life, was found by them in death. This is one horrible history lesson that I earnestly pray that we will not have to learn again. Looking down the road that the State of Israel is now walking, I must wonder and be seriously concerned.

Aside from the popular insanity of believing that territorial compromise is a good and wise thing that leads to peace, modern Israeli society is plagued with anti-secular and anti-religious hostilities, ethnic racism against Sephardim and people of color. These are only a small number of the social ills that are contributing to the destruction of the Third Commonwealth State of Israel. The modern State is built upon a socialist model and has become highly overly bureaucratic, overly taxed and terribly corrupt. The secular Zionist fathers wanted to create a Jewish State that would be like every other secular State. Unfortunately, for its citizens but the modern State of Israel has fulfilled their wildest dreams. Modern Israel is a State like all others, with all the flaws, corruption and imbalances that states built upon such models always perpetuate.

The State of Israel is now full to its brim with every kind of larceny, sexual immorality, bloodshed, and drug abuse, in both secular and religious communities. This is the State of Israel, whom the Holy One, blessed be He, looks down upon from His lofty throne in Heaven and watches. Do you think HaShem likes what He sees? If not, what do you think He will do about it? I for one am afraid to ask. Like Thomas Jefferson, I too know that G-d is just and that His justice cannot sleep forever.

As we begin the nine-day period of mourning, we should not place emphasis on the sins of our past. Rather, we must focus on the sins of our present! We do not need another national reason to mourn on Tisha B'Av. We do not have to continue to provoke Divine Wrath because of the most immoral and quarrelsome of behaviors.

Rosh Hodesh Av is the beginning of our national period of mourning for all the great calamities that have befallen the Jewish people, "coincidentally" during this time. Both Temples, thus both (Commonwealths) States of Israel, the first and the second, fell on Tisha B'Av. If Mashiah does not

come, will we in one hundred years from now (or less) also be mourning for the destruction of the Third Commonwealth, the present State of Israel? I, for one, pray not. Yet, our Sages have repeatedly warned us since Biblical times that that we cannot rely upon miracles. If we create chaos, we cannot expect Heaven to miraculously intervene to clean up the mess that we ourselves have made.

If the State of Israel is to be saved, if the Jewish people are to avoid yet another expression of Divine Wrath, then it is the people themselves that must do something! Only the foolish and the dangerous sit back and do nothing waiting for Mashiah to save them. Real solutions require real efforts. Solutions must be found to the serious problems underlying Israeli culture and politics.

Don't go around crying about faith! Faith is not what you believe, faith is what you do! Only if and when there is a change of national consciousness, with full resolve to redirect the nation into becoming a more proper, moral and accepting society, can we expect to solve our own problems. This is real faith, and not the phoney blind kind. As another American founding father, Benjamin Franklin said, "G-d helps those who help themselves." These are wise words worthy to be heeded.

I only wish that the solutions to all Israel's problems would be a new government. However, what kind of new government will it be? One political party or the next makes no difference. It is the entire Parliamentary bureaucracy that is corrupt and must be replaced with a better form of government. But who is willing to stand up and call for, all the more so implement, such fundamental changes? There is no real strong leader anywhere on the Israeli political horizon.

The situation is very depressing and most desperate. In a way, we can understand those who believe that the only solution to the overwhelming problems can be a magical one appearing out of Heaven. But we know this will not be, so no matter how hard things are and no matter how bleak things look, real faith requires real people to get up and do real deeds with real wisdom. Solutions are found by addressing the realities of situations, not by looking at problems through the eyes of misguided faith.

During these nine days, we should keep focused on not whether there will or will not be a State of Palestine, but rather whether there will or will not be a State of Israel. The choice is ours. G-d is watching what we are doing. If we stray too far from where He wants us to be, His Hand will manifest and swipe us back into place. Learning from history the swipe of G-d's Hand can be a very painful thing. This is something we should seek to avoid, not encourage.

We cannot change the mistakes of the past, but we can avoid the mistakes of the future, by changing our present course of action. Let these nine days serve as a time for us to seriously reflect upon our behaviors and attitudes. Remember that a Divine Eye is upon us. Let us act wisely to avoid also having upon us a wrathful Divine Hand.