



Avoiding Destruction by Doing Good

As Tisha B'Av passed us by, we no doubt reflected on the reasons for the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash and the consequent exile. Several reasons have been explicated, especially with regard to Bayit Sheni, the Second Temple.

Ari Zivotovsky reminds us that the reasons expounded by the rabbis are scattered throughout rabbinic literature, referring to the First Temple, sometimes to the Second, and also to the destruction of Yerushalayim. Moreover, it is not always clear whether a specific sin was attributed to the destruction, per se, or whether the particular wrongdoing was the “last straw” that sealed the fate of the Beit Hamikdash and the people.

The cardinal sins, worthy of such a punishment, are the prominent trio – idol worship, prohibited sexual relations, and bloodshed – while the neglect of the sabbatical year has also been cited as a cause of exile (Mishnah Avot, 5:8-9). The Tosefta

(Menachot) refers to the three former misdeeds as sufficient cause for the downfall of the First Temple and adds that the Second Temple was destroyed because of love of money and hate of one’s neighbor. Two other sources describe this “hate” as “Sinat Chinam,” unnecessary hatred (Yerushalmi: Yoma 1:1 and Bavli: Yoma 9a-b, among others), best described by the famous incident involving Kamtza and Bar Kamtza.

Notably, Tosafot suggests that Jerusalem was (also) destroyed because judges ruled by the strict letter of the law, rather than ruling beyond the letter of the law. Other reasons played out in the Talmud include: Desecration of the Shabbat, neglect of reciting Shema, and neglect of school children (Shabbat 119b). Several other sources cite the neglect of Torah study and even the neglect of uttering the Berachah Birkat Hatorah.

Rambam combines two novel reasons for the destruction, namely, the sin of idolatry (reading astrology) and the natural consequence of not studying self-defense. The Netziv cites excessive “righteousness,” that is, “righteous” individuals who treat others who do not exactly conform to their beliefs as heretics (apikorsim) – a form of Sinat Chinam. So too, the

Chofetz Chaim views Sinat Chinam as the starting point for the destruction; the consequent Lashon Hara (gossip) that followed was the direct cause of the destruction.

Today, in our uncertain times, we could pick and choose from all these causes. And as we reflect on hard times, we might want to concentrate on one or more of these. At least we might internalize what is written in this week's Parsha: "And you shall do what is right and good in the sight of Hashem" (Devarim 6:18).