

Parshiot Matot-Massay, 5770, 2010:

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*The True Meaning of the Three Weeks*

Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

There is both a plus and a minus to reoccurring calendar events. On the plus side, we know what to expect at the same time each year. Unfortunately, however, the yearly repetition of these events and designated time periods, tends to inure us to their significance and meaning. Quite often, the knowledge that we are about to celebrate or commemorate something, “just like we did last year,” tends to devalue the event in our minds and prevent us from looking at it in the conceptual and analytical manner that it deserves. It seems to me that the Three Weeks between the Fast of the 17<sup>th</sup> of Tamuz and Tisha b’Av may well be subject to the “just like we did last year” phenomenon, perhaps more so than any other time of the year. If that is the case, we need to pause and ask ourselves, “What is the true meaning of the Three Weeks?”

In my view, the Three Weeks are primarily a period of introspection and self-judgment. It is a time to look into the mirror of our souls and reflect upon where we have been, where we are now, and where we potentially might be going. It is a time to examine our thoughts and actions, and measure these against the bar of judgment of 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 authentic and meaningful.

One way we can begin our introspective journey is to carefully focus upon the well-known Talmudic passage 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. (Translation my own)

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 students are studying more Torah today than at any other time in Jewish History. Mitzvot observance continues to grow, even though most Jews today are not yet religiously committed. Acts of loving-kindness (*gemilut chasadim*) are performed by more agencies, organizations, and individuals than one can 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 abominable sins that destroyed the First Temple and the sin that destroyed the Second Temple, seems to be growing stronger each day. Within the Orthodox world, tensions exist between nearly all sub-groups and ethnicities. Indeed, the recent *chilul Hashem* (defamation of G-d's name) that unfolded in Emmanuel, Israel due to the public refusal of Ashkenazi Haredi Jews to have their girls attend a government-funded yeshiva with girls of Sephardic origin speaks volumes about the divisiveness that typifies religious Jewry today. Here is how J.J. Goldberg presents this frightening situation in his June 21, 2010 blog published under the auspices of *The Jewish Daily Forward*:

The Emmanuel story was the number-one news event in Israel last week, at times knocking the flotilla fallout off the front pages. The case involves a small girls' elementary school, operated by the Slonim Hasidic sect, that was ordered to take in a population of Sephardic Haredi girls. The school first refused on orders from the Slonimer rebbe, then walled the school building into Sephardic and Ashkenazic sections with no passage between. Even the playground is divided in two by a high wall.

The Supreme Court ordered the school integrated following a complaint brought by Sephardic parents charging that their children are victims of racial/ethnic discrimination. The parents chose to go to prison rather than disobey the rebbe. There were mass demonstrations by tens of thousands of Haredim, including an estimated 20,000 chanting and by some accounts violent Haredim who accompanied the fathers as they walked to police headquarters to turn themselves in. At last report the court had backed down and lifted the mothers' prison sentences.

The mainstream press was full of angry articles all week denouncing the medieval, racist, scofflaw behavior of the Ashkenazic Haredim, including tough editorials by both the left-wing Haaretz and the right-wing Jerusalem Post. (<http://blogs.forward.com/jj-goldberg/128870/>)

Given stories of this nature, 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 and destructive statements against ourselves. 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 the 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>)

In addition, for Rav Kook, the opposite of *sinat chinam* was not *ahavat chinam* (love of one's fellow Jew without cause) since, within his worldview; such a concept simply did not exist. Every Jew, by definition, is worthy of love and respect simply because he or she exists and has a Jewish soul. Thus, he was very well known for the following powerful statement: "There is no such thing as '*ahavat chinam*' – love without cause. Why without cause? 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 comprehend the Three Weeks and their meaning, we should focus upon

the positive aspects that this period of time enables us to encounter. As we undergo the cathartic process of introspection (*cheshbon hanefesh*), we must search deeply within ourselves and try to expunge every remnant of *sinat chinam* that lurks within our hearts. Moreover, we must embrace Rav Kook's noble words and replace *sinat chinam* with *ahavat Yisrael*. This, I believe, is the true understanding and meaning of the Three Weeks. May Hashem bless our efforts to grow and become better than who we are today, and bring *Mashiach Tzidkeinu* (the Righteous Messiah) soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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[http://home.mindspring.com/~rdbe/parashat\\_hashavuah/index.html](http://home.mindspring.com/~rdbe/parashat_hashavuah/index.html) .

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