

Talmud Passage of the Week

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Secular Freedom; Sacred Desolation

Dear Friends,

It is traditional to study laws about a holiday on that day and so we will bring a passage from another place in tractate Taanit (26a-b) that outlines why we observe the fast of the seventeenth of Tammuz. This year it falls on July Fourth and I thought we might contrast our secular freedom and our sacred desolation on this day.

Marian Moore and Dottie Clemmer have sponsored this passage in memory of their Hebrew teacher and dear friend, Michael F. Alpha. They write:

A Jew by choice, Michael was Shammash for many years at Temple Sinai in New Orleans and a self-taught Hebrew scholar. Shammash doesn't begin to cover the tasks he performed from arranging flowers, directing weddings, preparing children for their bar and bat mitzvahs and above all, volunteering to teach adult Hebrew classes for all who wanted to learn. May his memory be for a blessing.

Thank you for your act of tzedakah as a memorial to him.

Judy Abrams

Mishnah Taanit 26a-b, Steinsaltz Volume 14, p. 169:

Five misfortunes befell our fathers on the seventeenth of Tammuz and five on the ninth of Av. On the seventeenth of Tammuz (26b) the tablets [of the law] were shattered, the daily offering was discontinued, a breach was made in the city and Apostomos burned the scroll of the law and placed an idol in the Temple.

Background

Cycles of Jewish History

The sages consistently link every holiday to a narrative in the Torah. Thus Pesach, a shepherding and harvesting festival becomes linked to the exodus from Egypt. The festival of the first fruits, Shavuot, is tied to the giving of the Torah at Sinai. This fast day of the seventeenth of Tammuz is likewise tied to a Torah narrative. Here, the breaking of the first tablets of the law on this day provides the cosmic wound, as it were, that resurfaces time and again. (I would once more recommend the book *Zakhor* by Yerushalmi (Schocken Books) for a larger, longer view of this phenomenon.) The gradual encroachment of the secular upon the holy is marked on this holiday: the daily sacrifices stop, the walls are breached, the secular world is brought into the very heart of the Temple but the Temple is not yet destroyed. The utter desecration of the sacred happens on the Ninth of Av (we'll study it at the time).

Apostemos

Rabbi Steinsaltz, Volume 14, p. 169 teaches about the name Apostemos: "This may be connected with the Latin name, Postumus, given to someone born after his father's death. Several Roman generals bore this name, but the time and the reason for the burning of the Torah here are unknown to us."

A Word of Comfort

This occasion of the breaking of the tablets holds within it hints of comfort and redemption:

"Whereupon is called the Name, the name of the Lord of hosts (II Samuel 6:2)" R. Yohanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai: This teaches that the Ineffable Name together with all its substitutes were deposited in the ark. Rav Huna said: It teaches that the Tablets and the broken fragments of the Tablets were deposited in the ark. (Numbers Rabbah 4:20)

This is one of my favorite midrashic passages. The text from Samuel is problematic since the word "name" is written there twice; seemingly superfluously. Two sages have two different explanations for the repetition. Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai makes the repetition refer to God's actual name (the tetragrammaton or the word spelled *yud-heh-vav-heh*) while Rav Huna thinks it refers to the name found once in the broken tablets and once in the unbroken ones.

This is a favorite teaching of mine because it shows us that just because something is broken doesn't mean it has lost its holiness, its usefulness, its purpose. So often, we are willing to throw things (and people and relationships) away because they are broken instead of seeing the holiness they nevertheless contain. It is profoundly comforting to think that though the tablets were broken and the Temple destroyed, nonetheless, Jews still found holiness in the fragments.

And now, with apologies to our international students, I offer, in full, the Star Spangled Banner:

Oh, say, can you see, by the dawn's early light,
What so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming,
Whose broad stripes and bright stars through the perilous fight,
O'er the ramparts we watched were so gallantly streaming?
And the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air,
Gave proof thro' the night that our flag was still there.
Oh, say, does that star-spangled banner yet wave
O'er the land of the free, and the home of the brave!

On the shore, dimly seen thro' the mists of the deep,
Where the foe's haughty host in dread silence reposes,
What is that which the breeze o'er the towering steep,
As it fitfully blows, half conceals, half discloses?
Now it catches the gleam of the morning's first beam,
In full glory reflected, now shines on the stream.
'Tis the star-spangled banner; oh, long may it wave
O'er the land of the free, and the home of the brave!

And where is that band who so vauntingly swore
That the havoc of war and the battle's confusion
A home and a country should leave us no more?
Their blood has washed out their foul footsteps' pollution.
No refuge could save the hireling and slave
From the terror of flight, or the gloom of the grave:
And the star-spangled banner in triumph doth wave
O'er the land of the free, and the home of the brave!

Oh, thus be it ever when freemen shall stand

Between their loved homes and the war's desolation;
Blest with victory and peace, may the heaven-rescued land
Praise the power that hath made and preserved us a nation!
Then conquer we must, when our cause it is just,
And this be our motto: "In God is our trust!"
And the star-spangled banner in triumph doth wave,
O'er the land of the free, and the home of the brave!
--Francis Scott Key

Discussion Questions

1. Have you encountered this phenomenon of something "broken yet still holy" elsewhere in your life? Describe it.
 2. How did you manage the tension of the religious fast day and the secular holiday this year?
 3. Can you imagine Israelis singing The Star Spangled Banner and applying it to Israel? Or ancient Jews defending the Temple singing it? Does it fit? How?
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