

## A Vision of Disaster

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Let me start with an image. Growing up, we went to an amusement park called Kennywood. The school district gave us a day off school for a “picnic” there and go on rides such as “Noah’s Ark” (surprisingly scary), “Thunderbolt” (truly terrifying), “Jackrabbit” (fun, but nauseating) and so on. Of course, there was a merry-go-round that I remember as being very large indeed, but maybe that’s just the memories of a small child. Naturally, everyone scrambled to get horses on the very outside edge of the ride, as that was where you had the greatest sensation of speed. The closer to the center you went, the less speed you experienced. But that was all predicated on the idea that the guy in the center, with his hand on the lever, kept the carousel at a safe speed. If he’d just let the ride go faster and faster, those on the outside edge would have been thrown off the ride unless they managed to make their way to the center where it would all feel safer.

This has been a summer of sadness. The brutal murder of four young men in the West Bank and Israel and the conflagration those four deaths sparked between Israel and Gaza is only part of it. There is Syria, the Ukraine, Iraq.

Here, America seems to be tottering toward tipping into disaster mode with its politics. The left and the right shout stridently at each other while the truth, the poor, pathetic truth, sits with rhyme and reason on the sidelines, all three of them ignored. And compromise, that precious ingredient that makes life possible, seems to have left the field, perhaps waiting for a more opportune moment to reassert itself.

The Talmud tells us:

*Rav Judah said in Rav's name: The forty-two lettered Name is entrusted only to one who is pious, meek, middle-aged, free from bad temper, sober, and not insistent on his rights. And he who knows it, is heedful thereof, and observes it in purity, is beloved above and popular below, feared by all, and inherits two worlds, this world and the future world. (B. Kiddushin 71a)*

In other words, who has the magic, the power, to slow things down when they start moving far too quickly? Someone in the middle, who does not insist on getting every last iota of every last thing they want. Everyone has a grievance they want addressed. But only when we agree that no one is going to get 100% of everything we want can things be made better. As long as there is a critical mass of people who insist on having everything go their way, things won’t get better. And those on the outside edge slip closer and closer to flying disastrously off the ride.

### Discussion Questions

1. How can we be the person described in our Talmud passage? True, we are either middle-aged (read, perhaps, mature) or not, but surely we can all work on the issues of temper, sobriety and malleability. How can we put these values into greater prominence in our personal and communal lives? Would these be good criteria for picking public servants?
2. How can we move a critical mass of people into the center of the “ride” to help address what is going on in our nation and our world?

Friends, now, as we begin to turn toward Tisha B’Av, let us remember what happens when people refuse to be kind to each other. It is this inability to compromise and behave with decency that brought the fall of the Second Temple. Let us not follow this road to certain disaster.