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DEVARIM

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JOYFUL PLANTING: COVID AND THE PROHIBITION OF PLANTING DURING THE THREE WEEKS

ERICA BROWN is the director of the Mayberg Center for Jewish Education and Leadership and an associate professor of curriculum and pedagogy at The George Washington University.

Among the laws oft debated in contemporary halakhic literature on the Nine Days—the prohibitions of purchasing new clothing or a new home, shaving, swimming, or listening to music—one rarely encounters a meaningful discussion of the prohibition of planting during the Nine Days. There may be too few gardeners in our modern society to attach relevance to this law. But perhaps it is this prohibition above the others that truly showcases the emotional tenor of mourning that is generally challenging in the absence of having personally experienced the Temple's destruction and the ruin of Jerusalem.¹ To understand the significance of this prohibition, we will briefly review the rabbinic sources and connect them to a more fundamental understanding of the role gardening plays in the Hebrew Bible and its inherent joy.

In defining the prohibition, the *Shulhan Arukh* contrasts building and planting that is done as pure manual labor from that which is an expression of aesthetic beauty or pleasure:

From Rosh Hodesh until the Fast we minimize business transactions and constructions of joy, for example the building of a house for one's son upon marriage or the erection of molding or interior decoration. One also refrains from planting for joyous purposes (lit. happy planting), for example the creation of a royal canopy for a banquet (*avurneki shel melakhim*), that is planted for its shade or the planting of myrtle species and other coverings.²

The *Shulhan Arukh's* halakhic synopsis is based on Tractate *Yevamot*, where the major categories of prohibition during this time period are outlined:

What is the period of mourning to which Rav Hisda is referring? As we learned in a mishnah:³ During the week in which the Ninth of Av occurs, it is prohibited to cut hair and to launder clothes, but on Thursday it is permitted in deference to Shabbat. Prior to this time the public reduce their activities, refraining from business transactions, from building *and planting*, and one may betroth a woman but may not marry, and cannot hold a wedding feast.⁴

The royal canopy detail mentioned in the *Shulhan Arukh* is discussed elsewhere in the Talmud where an important distinction is made between building and planting out of necessity and that done for pleasure:

When the Sages said that construction must be decreased on public fasts, they were not referring to the construction of homes for people who have nowhere to live, but to joyful construction. Similarly, when they said that planting must be decreased, they were not referring to planting food crops, but to joyful planting. What is meant by joyful construction? This is referring to one who builds a wedding chamber for his son. It was customary to build a special house where the wedding would take place, and at times the couple would also live there. What is meant by joyful planting? This is referring to one who plants trees for shade and pleasure such as one might find in a royal garden [*avurneki*].⁵

For our sages, who lived within a farming culture, the kind of planting that would be problematic during the Nine Days is non-essential planting. It is the wealthy who could afford to build a house for a child upon marriage or an aristocratic wedding canopy. The one who orders these luxury items does so just for pleasure; it is purely joyful planting. The Halakhah contrasts the demanding life of the farmer with the more playful and volitional endeavors of the gardener that bring pleasure and delight. Although engaged in many of the same activities and with the similar desired outcomes, one is an occupation, the other a hobby. It is pleasurable planting, the kind which brings joy, that is problematic during the Nine Days. To understand why, we turn to the early chapters of Genesis that take place in *the Garden*.

Back to the Garden

In the second chapter of Genesis, God created a garden as a home for human occupation: “The Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the man whom He had formed” (Genesis 2:3). Of all the places of vitality that could have been chosen to house human beings, God selected a garden with trees that offered bounty, wisdom, and life itself. Before Adam was created, there was no one to tend God’s new landscape: “No shrub of the field was yet on earth and no grasses of the field had yet sprouted because the Lord God had not sent rain upon the earth and *there was no man to till the soil*” (2:5).⁶ Ten verses later Adam’s role as gardener is made even more explicit: “The

Lord God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden, to till it and tend it” (2:15).

Ibn Ezra on 2:15 describes the nature of that work: to provide water and to guard the garden from destructive animals. Radak contends that Adam must have been formed outside of the garden and only then placed within it since the verse states this explicitly: “The Lord God took the man and placed him there” (2:8). This small and arresting detail conveys, according to Radak, that Adam was moved into the Garden from outside it so that he would appreciate the magnificence of the garden and that God desired the best for humanity.

Adam, as a gardener, lived in harmony with surroundings created for his sustenance and satisfaction. But after Adam’s sin, his punishment transformed him from a gardener to a farmer: “Cursed be the ground because of you; by toil shall you eat of it all the days of your life” (Genesis 3:17). Suddenly, Adam had to work hard and perspire for his food. All this was to occur outside the garden. The curse continued and intensified over the next generation. Cain’s punishment added another layer of complication to working the land.⁷ Hard work would not necessarily result in a successful yield.⁸ Cain was destined to wander, implying that he could never put down roots that are figuratively and literally essential to farming.⁹ Noah’s very name was to inaugurate a cessation to the land’s curse.¹⁰ Thus, in Genesis, gardening is an act of joy, harking back to humankind’s idyllic existence in the Garden of Eden. Farming may be life-sustaining, but it is backbreaking work. Adam and his descendants wanted to be good stewards of the earth yet their transgressions replaced joy with adversity and gardening with farming.

Adam’s exile from the Garden became, in essence, a metaphor for all future exile. In the spirit of Ecclesiastes, there is, “A time for planting and a time for uprooting the planted...” (Ecclesiastes 3:2). Rashi explains this as a metaphor for nation building and for destruction. Anyone who has ever weeded a garden understands the physical violence of uprooting. With one sharp tug, an entire root system is eliminated, one that may have taken many days, months, or years to grow, an experience even more jarring with deeply rooted, stubborn plants. Such brutal and destabilizing leave-takings were made only worse throughout Jewish history the longer Jews were permitted to stay in a particular land. The comforting delusion of safety and security was overturned as quickly as a gardener overturns the earth with the sharp blade of a hoe.

Perhaps for this reason, the Temple destroyed is likened in *Eiklah*, Lamentations, to a decimated and uprooted garden.

“He [God] has stripped (*va-yahmos*) His Booth (*sukko*) like a garden; he has destroyed His Tabernacle” (Lamentations 2:6). Rashi on 2:6 defines “*va-yahmos*” as “cutting off the vegetation of a garden.” In other words, the *sukkah* is uprooted. R. Dovid Altschuler links the term to Zephaniah 3:4 as an act of perverse decimation. The Temple in Jeremiah’s haunting words is like God’s booth, a simple place God dwells in on earth while in the midst of planting, except that God’s *sukkah* was now shattered.¹¹ One conjures images of an abandoned field with a small shade hut at its center that is splintered and unusable.¹² But in this construct, it is the farmer who has slashed at the booth that now affords no protection from the elements. Like a field burned down by a farmer with only the scantest reminder of its former benefits, is the Temple stripped bare. Dr. Yael Ziegler, in her new commentary on Lamentations, writes, “The garden metaphor, with its absconded produce, alludes to this plundering of Jerusalem’s food as the catastrophe unfolds. The result is hunger in Jerusalem ... The garden metaphor also evokes the Temple’s life-giving functions, the way its religious rituals provide food for the soul.” Ziegler alerts us to the practical consequence that is at stake. A destroyed garden cannot feed a starving capital city.

Like the original exile from Eden, the destruction of the Temple was also akin to the loss of a garden. Joyous planting, or gardening, which returns us to a prelapsarian Edenic state and evokes a Temple still standing, cannot be appropriate for the Nine Days.

Modern Gardening and Redemptive Regeneration

Gardening not only harks back to the joy of Eden and the Temple, but suggests a future joy as well, one of regrowth and renewal. In this vein, it was only during COVID that I truly began to understand the prohibition against joyous planting during the Nine Days. Behind masks, we bore the daily weight of terrible news: daily, global death tallies, unattended funerals, rising unemployment, political unrest, and race riots. Grief began to include lesser disappointments: celebrations postponed, vacations cancelled, gatherings shunned. The small and irritating inconveniences of working in closets and home schooling mounted. Slowly, we became a simulacrum of ourselves.

As the news in March and April of 2020 got worse, spring, nevertheless, majestically unfolded, creating a canopy of nature and birdsong that made the words of Song of Songs that Passover thrum with newness. Like countless others, I spent time in my garden. Crocuses gently peeped out of the dry cold earth, followed by daffodils, then later the dogwood blooms and, later still, the bursts of hydrangeas. Walking in silence most mornings, I took in the outdoor

world with a patience and vitality that I would otherwise have been too busy to absorb.

The shutdown created the luxury of found time to plant and tend a porch garden, read about gardening, and pay attention to the daily changes in flowers and the sudden irascibility of weeds. I’d remove the brown leaves and shriveled petals and welcome daily the new buds. So much died overnight. So much was born overnight. Gardening involves constant decisions about what to nurture and what to destroy.¹³ It also requires constant vigilance. The astonishing and constant replenishing of nature kept me hopeful. The known world was on fire, but the dill and basil kept growing in their terracotta pots. Solace takes small forms.

Dr. Joel Flagler, professor of plant biology at Rutgers University reported on the popularity of gardening during COVID: “There are certain, very stabilizing forces in gardening that can ground us when we are feeling shaky, uncertain, terrified really. It’s these predictable outcomes, predictable rhythms of the garden that are very comforting right now.”¹⁴ But there was something else that became clear. In planting, only by removing that which was dead is space properly made for the living. Only then can a plant invest its energies in growing that which is new. This was Adam’s job and the job of all humans after him: to remove death and to make room for life, to experience the verdant sense of possibility that is everywhere in the lushness of a garden.¹⁵ And this, I discovered, is joyful planting. One need not plant a royal wedding canopy to experience this level of happiness. Gardening is the ultimate expression of hope in the future.¹⁶

Regeneration is redemptive, as we read in Job: “There is hope for a tree; if it is cut down it will renew itself; its shoots will not cease” (Job 14:7). Leaves and stems that seem listless and lolling can return to full vibrancy within hours of being watered. Ezekiel extols this vitality: “And on the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither, nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month ... Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing” (Ezekiel 47:12).

Jeremiah’s mandate to build houses and pleasure gardens in exile (Jeremiah 29:5) was meant to provide a glimmer of hope at a time of general hopelessness. Redemption takes time: to eat of a tree one planted takes years, but it will happen. The gardener understands this. Planting gardens stabilizes exile and becomes a rehearsal for the promise of planting in a homeland. That Israel is our garden and we its gardeners is apparent in the closing lines of the book of Amos: “I will restore My people Israel. They shall rebuild

ruined cities and inhabit them. They shall plant vineyards and drink their wine; they shall till gardens and eat their fruits” (Amos 9:14). But it is only in Isaiah that the trajectory from emotional relief to the actual work of tilling and tending is stated clearly and unambiguously. Jerusalem will be rebuilt and then we will all become gardeners: “For I shall create Jerusalem as a joy, and her people as a delight. And I will rejoice in Jerusalem and delight in her people. Never again shall be heard there the sounds of weeping and wailing” (Isaiah 65:18-19). The emotional relief is profound, but then the work must begin: “They shall build houses and dwell in them. They shall plant vineyards and enjoy their fruit” (Isaiah 65:21).¹⁷

In exile, we plant Jeremiah’s garden. In Israel, we plant Isaiah’s garden. The difference is not only the location. It is the promise that our enemies will not eat the fruit of our labors. The only ones who will enjoy our gardens, according to Isaiah, are our own descendants: “They shall not build for

others to dwell in, or plant for others to enjoy. For the days of My people shall be as long as the days of a tree. My chosen ones shall outlive the work of their hands” (Isaiah 65:22). Like the tree, we will thrive, and our saplings will continue to delight in what we have nurtured under each vine and fig tree.

It is this joy of replenishing and renewal—deep, enduring, eudemonic, and purposeful—that we refrain from experiencing during the sad days that lead up to Tishah Be-Av. When we mourn during the Nine Days, we cannot—should not—be gardeners. With sober hearts, we submerge ourselves in collective grief and lock up the elation that comes with removing death and supporting life. But when the mourning concludes, we take out our spades and return to the delight of gardening. After Tishah Be-Av, it is good to plant something in a garden, to renew vegetal life and once again to plant hope.¹⁸ Perspiring under the hot sun, we close our eyes and, for a moment, we return to Eden.

¹ See my discussion of the emotional challenges of modern mourning in the introduction to *In the Narrow Places* (Maggid/OU, 2010).

² *Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim*, 551:2. I have liberally translated the passage and filled in the ellipses for the ease of reading.

³ *Taanit* 26b.

⁴ *Yevamot* 43a. Translation from Sefaria with emendations for clarity.

⁵ *Megillah* 5b. Translation from Sefaria.

⁶ Rashi on 2:5 observes that only with the birth of Adam was there a recognition of how foundational rain was to the success of this new enterprise of creation.

⁷ R. Joseph Soloveitchik contends that nomadic existence preceded pastoral existence and that only the settler can truly produce and create. See “Sacred and Profane,” *Jewish Thought* (Fall/Winter 5754/1993): 61-62. This was originally delivered as a *yahrzeit shiur* in memory of his father and also appeared in *HaTzedek* (June 1945) and then in English in *Gesher* 3:1 (June, 1966).

⁸ Genesis 4:12.

⁹ As a result of Cain’s recognition of his sin and his repentance, God mitigated Cain’s punishment, as evident from 4:17 when Cain marries, has a son, and builds a city named after his son—the acts of a penitent, not a permanent wanderer.

¹⁰ Genesis 5:29.

¹¹ The closest shared meaning of *sukkah* to the one in Lamentations is found in Isaiah 1:8: “Fair Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard, like a hut in a cucumber field, like a city beleaguered.” A *sukkah* can also be a refuge from strife, see

Psalms 31:20, or a place of vulnerability, as it appears in Job 27:18, 36:29, and 38:40.

¹² Like Lamentations 2:6, Jonah 4:5 mentions a booth as a shelter, but one in which the prophet escapes responsibility for others.

¹³ For more on gardening as both act and metaphor, see Michael Pollin’s *Second Nature: A Gardener’s Education* (Grover, 2003). There, he writes: “No less than the nineteenth-century transcendentalists and reformers, we look to the garden today as a source of moral instruction...gardening becomes, at least symbolically, an act of redemption” (p. 85). With thanks to Jeffrey Saks for bringing this book to my attention.

¹⁴ Lauran Aratani, “Gardening Trend that Bloomed during the Pandemic is Here to Stay,” *The Guardian* (March 31, 2021).

¹⁵ For the controversial thesis that plants are sentient, see Peter Tompkins & Christopher Bard, *The Secret Life of Plants: A Fascinating Account of the Physical, Emotional, and Spiritual Relations Between Plants and Man* (Harper and Row, 1989) and Stefano Mancuso & Alessandra Viola, *Brilliant Green: The Surprising History and Science of Plant Intelligence*, trans. Joan Benham (Island Press, 2015).

¹⁶ Richard Powers in his Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Overstory* (W.W. Norton, 2018), documents the understory of plant life that influences the overstory of humans above ground.

¹⁷ Meir Shalev provides a modern corollary in his latest book where he connects a return to Israel with the planting of a specific gardener, his grandfather: “My grandfather grew up in a Hasidic family in the Ukraine, and when he was old enough to know his own mind, he underwent a religious

conversion from the work of God to the work of the land. But my grandfather did not forget his Talmud: the first trees he planted in his yard were olives, pomegranates, and figs, all close to the vineyard. It was no coincidence that they were the fruit trees the Torah included in the seven species

HOW THE STUDENT POLAND EXPERIENCE HAS CHANGED

DAVID I. BERNSTEIN is the Dean of the Pardes Institute for Jewish Studies in Jerusalem.

Why am I not crying?"

As Tishah Be-Av approaches, this question evokes our struggle to experience genuine mourning for the destruction of the Temple. For me, though, it also recalls a question that I hear with increasing frequency from young Jews for whom I have served as historian and guide for student Poland journeys. And while I've lost count of the number of Jewish heritage trips I've taken to the "alte heyms" - I'm pretty sure it's over sixty since I started traveling to Poland in 1992 - I can say with confidence that the lack of tears is relatively new, and tells a larger story about the evolution of the Poland trips over the last thirty years. While these journeys remain a powerful educational tool, there are important ways in which the substance and tone have changed, which in turn reflect changes to both Poland and the Jewish community.

The Poland I visited in 1992 had just been freed from the yoke of a half-century of Communist rule. Holding free elections for the first time in decades, the country would be governed in subsequent years by a liberal democratic party. Poland was in search of a clearer and freer sense of its own history, and was anxious to join the Western world, especially NATO and the EU. And it largely succeeded. In short order, Poland became the most successful post-Communist regime. Skyscraper office towers and malls began to spring up in the large cities, forever changing the skylines of cities like Warsaw. The new government began to encourage public displays of Jewish life and memory, and even very tentatively began a reckoning with the ugly history of Polish-Jewish relations.

These developments have impacted Jewish heritage trips to Poland. The early years of "March of the Living" and other such journeys were generally characterized by the traditionally negative Jewish view of Poles and Poland, as summed up by former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir:

that the Land of Israel was blessed with," in *My Wild Garden: Notes from a Writer's Eden* (Schocken, 2020), 5.

¹⁸ Special thanks to Yosef Lindell and the other editors at *Lehrhaus* for their helpful edits.

"The Poles imbibe anti-Semitism in their mothers' milk." Certainly the pogroms of post-war Poland, in which more than 1,000 Jews (Holocaust survivors!) were murdered, seemed to justify such sentiments.

However, in the new, post-Communist and liberal Poland, Polish Jews began to "come out of the closet," and Jewish life began to revive. Many young Jews learned for the first time the "family secret:" they were Jewish. Their Jewishness was often warmly received in a country striving to restore its multicultural past. One young Polish woman told me that when she told her (non-Jewish Polish) friends in college that she just learned that she was Jewish, they simply said, "That's cool!"

This curiosity and warmth towards Jews and Jewish memory continues to pervade much of Poland. One excellent illustration is the rise of the Jewish Studies Institute of Jagiellonian University. I often bring students to meet with these Polish non-Jews who are studying Hebrew, Yiddish, and Jewish history. When asked why - at a time of decline in humanities departments in universities all over the world - they would *davka* make this seemingly strange choice, they often describe their curiosity about the Jewish cemetery in their home town, or stories of Jews told to them by their grandparents. In fact, in many Polish towns, there are individuals or groups with whom I am in touch who are consumed by a passion to preserve the memory of the Jews of their town. The "Shtetl Sanz," a group of hipster-type young Poles, are but one example.

The seventy-five non-Jewish Polish volunteers who staff the front desk of the Krakow JCC, and serve its Shabbat meals, are another example of what can only be called philo-Semitism on the part of many Polish Catholics.

And, of course, the Krakow Jewish Festival, begun in 1988, a year before the fall of Communism, is the largest Jewish festival in Europe, drawing about 25,000 people every June. I was once there on a motzei Shabbat amidst the crowds dancing to Klezmer music and hearing Rabbi Michael Schudrich recite havdalah from the stage. As I made my way toward the front, I kept looking for a hint that there were other Jews in attendance; I did not find one.

These dramatic shifts have had a profound impact on me, and on many other guides and historians who lead student journeys to Poland. Certainly, the pogroms before and after the war have not disappeared from our consciousness or our educational content. The destruction of Jewish communities by their Polish neighbors remains a centerpiece of the trips. But encountering some of hasidei umot ha-olam, and seeing the philo-Semitism of some of Polish society today, has given many of us a more nuanced picture of Polish-Jewish relations, then and now.

Truthfully, starting in 2005 right-wing nationalist parties began to dominate Polish life. Democracy there has become increasingly illiberal, and attempts to whitewash the Polish role in the Shoah have increased. Recent attempts by the current Polish government to restrict free speech about the role of Poles in the Shoah, and to highlight only those brave individuals who defied social norms and helped Jews, has “dialed back” (as one veteran educator put it) some of these more positive feelings. Yet we are also very conscious of those brave Polish historians (such as Professors Jan Grabowski and Barbara Engelking) and researchers who are determined to continue writing a truer history of that terrible time.

At the same time that Polish life has undergone seismic shifts, young Modern Orthodox Jews from the U.S. have also changed significantly, further contributing to the evolution of the Poland trips.

For one, the consensus among educators at yeshivot and seminaries in Israel is that the level of knowledge of Hebrew and Jewish culture has declined.

Personally, I notice this when I have guests in my Jerusalem shul sitting next to me on Shabbat: those who are over fifty understand the rav’s derashah; those who are younger do not. Fewer and fewer students can read the Hebrew epitaph on a matzeivah in the Warsaw Jewish cemetery. Increasingly smaller numbers have read a story by Y.L. Peretz or Sholom Aleichem, or have even heard of them. And many have never seen the Academy Award-winning classic films “Schindler’s List” and “The Pianist,” and will see them for

the first time on a bus in Poland. (In fairness, these films were made before they were born!)

Today’s students are also another generation removed from any ancestors who were survivors. Fewer have had strong interactions with grandparents or great-grandparents from Europe.

Furthermore, whereas in the early 90s, few students came to Poland, today it is de rigueur, a rite of passage for Modern Orthodox youth, as is a gap year of study in Israel. This means they are less self-selected; as these trips become a “bucket list” item to check off, there is less motivation lishmah. It also means that their camp counselors, older siblings, or cousins have already shared their experiences in Poland, creating less of a sense of wonder and surprise. Participants know they will see cages full of shoes in Majdanek. There is less shock and fewer tears. (For the record, I do not see any need for students to cry in Poland; they are there to learn. But it bothers many of them when they don’t.)

Perhaps another factor limiting the emotional force of the trips is the gradual renovation and reconstruction of destroyed shuls in Poland. As the Jewish community of Poland has regained much property and is trying to restore much of it, it is harder to find a hurvah. Seeing a reconstructed shul evokes a very different response than witnessing a destroyed shul. The former often evokes singing, dancing, and celebration; the latter evokes mourning.

Of course, once upon a time, in the 1990s, students did not have cellphones in Poland. They were almost totally cut off from their families and friends. Today, however, as they board the bus, students check their Instagram and TikTok accounts. Of course, the attention span of a generation that has grown up with smartphones is also shorter. It is harder for them to focus deeply, to “sit with” what they have just seen or heard.

The question of Jewish resistance to the Nazis was once a primary issue. It is no longer. There is much more understanding of the impossible situation in which the Jews found themselves, and in recent decades heroism has been much more broadly defined. There is greater empathy for the not-so-simple heroism of the nearly-impossible, heroic everyday survival in the ghettos and camps.

The educators who accompany students to Poland have also changed. In the early years, we knew much less. In the decades that have followed, we have become increasingly better-educated. Many of us have WhatsApp groups and

share information and new sites and insights. This means that the students have a much richer educational experience.

There is also less manipulation of students. Some educators used to crowd students into a cattle car, as if to “make them feel” (how impossible!) “what it was like (!).” That is much more rare today. Thankfully, there are fewer attempts to make students “step into the victims’ shoes.”

And of course, decades ago almost every journey included a survivor of the Shoah. Today that is rare, and our students are all the poorer for missing out on that very special experience.

The sum total of these changes for Poles, students, and educators means that the overall focus and student experience of the Poland trips has shifted. In the early years, “March of the Living” trips focused on the camps and destruction. Today, the educational guides that I know try to emphasize not only the Shoah and destruction, but also the 900 years of Polish Jewish history, and the revival of contemporary Jewish life in Poland.

It is hard to measure the impact of these journeys on participants, but it is especially important given the significant changes that we have outlined. JRoots, one of the leading providers of these trips, has reported that it surveyed over 800 participants, many of whom (but not all) were Modern Orthodox. Interestingly, according to JRoots, a few years after their trip, a very high number of these past participants said they were more involved in community work than before the trip.

This is certainly a desirable outcome, and important for the life of Jewish communities. It also suggests that along with the shifts for the Poland journeys and their participants, the educational outcomes may be changing as well. Students may be crying less, but the journeys are no less impactful, just different.

While Poland heritage trips are seen as educating toward Israel and the Zionist narrative - and they still do, despite the diminishment in student knowledge about Zionism and Jewish culture - they are increasingly impactful in other ways. Students walk away with an increased sense of communal responsibility, and, no less important, with a richer appreciation of the blessings of family, abundant food and shelter, and freedom. With all the gifts that many of today’s student participants are handed on silver platters from their childhood, perhaps these values are even more important to inculcate in our youth than ever before.

SHOMRON KOL TITEIN: LET THE SILENT SISTERS SPEAK AND BE CONSOLED

YOSEF LINDELL is one of the editors of the *Lehrhaus* and is a lawyer, writer, and lecturer living in Silver Spring, MD.

E *li Tziyon*, with its haunting dirge-like melody, signals the end of *kinnot* on Tishah Be-Av morning in the Ashkenazic tradition. The *kinnah* seems a fitting conclusion. It sums up the misery of the day, chronicling why Zion laments—the exile of its people, the cessation of the sacrifices, the loss of life, the mocking of its enemies. As Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik explains, *Eli Tziyon* “is the closing *kina*” because its message is that “no matter how much we have cried and grieved with the recitation of the *kinot*, it is not sufficient[.] ... [T]he *kinot* for Jerusalem have no end.”¹

Except that *Eli Tziyon* isn’t quite the last *kinnah*. One or two others typically follow. In many contemporary editions of the *kinnot* which follow the Eastern European arrangement, such as the ArtScroll, *Shomron Kol Titein*, written by the famed eleventh century Andalusian poet Solomon Ibn Gabirol, takes the final spot. This *kinnah*, which is also recited Tishah Be-Av evening, has a message that is quite different from that of *Eli Tziyon*. By suggesting that even the most irredeemable can be redeemed, it kindles hope. And for the *kinnot*, this is perhaps a more fitting conclusion.

Shomron Kol Titein is a dialogue between two metaphorical adulterous sisters who are discussed in Ezekiel 23. In this chapter, Oholah represents the ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Her name means “her tent,” and as the classical commentators on the chapter explain, this references the fact that the northern tribes sometimes used their own tent—unsanctioned and often idolatrous altars. The other sister Oholivah represents Judah and Benjamin in the south. Her name, “my tent is in her/it,” refers to the Temple in the portion of those two tribes, which God desired.

Ezekiel 23 may be among the bleakest chapters in the Bible. According to the prophet, Oholah and Oholivah’s dalliances began in Egypt where the Jewish nation was born (23:3). Matters did not improve in the Land of Israel. Oholah lusted after her Assyrian captors. Oholivah lusted after the Assyrians and the Babylonians. The language describing their improprieties and lusts is vivid, crude, and at times shocking (see, e.g., 23:19-21). To make matters worse, the sisters worshipped idols, slaughtered their own children, and desecrated the Temple (23:37-39). As adulteresses with blood on their hands (23:45), their punishment is swift. “Let

the assembly pelt them with stones,” God says, “let them kill their sons and daughters, and burn down their homes” (23:47). So ends the tale of Oholah and Oholivah, unrepentant sisters of ill repute. It is not long before the Temple is destroyed and the exile begins.

This parable, with its unremitting narrative of sinfulness, is consistent with Ezekiel’s theology elsewhere. The Israelites, declaims the prophet, were rotten from the get-go. They clung to their idols even when leaving Egypt (20:8). They rebelled against God in the wilderness time and again (20:13). God thought to nip the problem in the bud and destroy the people while they were still enslaved, but relented only “for the sake of [His] name” (20:9). God had sworn to take the Jews out of Egypt, and to do any less would be a *hillul Ha-Shem*. But the Israelites never really deserved God’s favor.

Oholah and Oholivah similarly represent a nation that had always been mired in sin. Thoroughly wicked, they deserve the destruction that overtakes them. Moreover, the sisters are silent, objects of prophetic metaphor. They have no voice. Tried as adulterers and stoned, their chapter closes without consolation.

Shomron Kol Titein is quite different from the biblical narrative that inspired it. Ibn Gabirol provides the sisters’ perspective, allowing them to speak. In fact, most of the *kinnah* is their words and complaints. The first words of the *kinnah* are “*Shomron kol titein*”—it begins with Shomron’s (Oholah’s) voice. “My sins have caught up with me!” she says. “My children have left me for another land!”² Three times Oholivah screams in response, “My palaces are in flame!” And to each refrain, Zion adds, “The Lord has forsaken me.” Each sister gets a stanza to argue why her punishment and exile was harsher. Oholah says that her fate was worse because she was exiled too soon and spent less time in Israel than Judah. (The Assyrians under Tiglath-Pileser exiled the ten tribes almost 150 years before the destruction of the Temple.) Oholivah retorts that her punishment was worse because the ten tribes were exiled only once, but Judah was exiled several times: twice by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon (first the nobles and artisans were exiled with King Jehoiachin and eleven years later the Temple was destroyed), and again by the Romans who destroyed the Second Temple, after which the Jews were dispersed throughout the lands. The *kinnah* is suffused with sound and the words of Oholah and Oholivah. The silent sisters are silent no more.

Nor, in this telling, are they entirely evil. Each sister acknowledges her sins and seems to regret the consequences. “I, Oholah, acted with spite and treachery;

my betrayal opposed me, and my rebellion accused me.” Oholivah admits, “I, too, was perverse and betrayed the Companion of my Youth just as you did.” In Ezekiel, the sisters expressed no regret. But in the *kinnah*, Oholah and Oholivah are here at last to lament their misdeeds.

After their anguished display, the *paytan* responds, beseeching God in the final stanza:

He who pities the poor, take pity on their plight!
See their desolation and lengthy exile.
Do not be implacably angry, but remember their lowliness.
Remember not their foolish iniquities forever.
Mend their fissures, soothe their grief, for You are their Hope and their Hero.
Renew our days like the days long gone, as You have spoken, “the Lord rebuilds Jerusalem.”³

After one thousand years of exile, Oholah and Oholivah are chastened, and seem more wretched than wicked. Their sins were but foolish. They are desolate. They are lost. “Have mercy, God!” the *paytan* demands. Has not their punishment already been meted out in full measure? What’s more, the petition is in the plural, so it seems like we are praying for Oholah too, asking God to bring back the ten lost tribes. This gives voice to one of the most persistent legends in Jewish history: that the ten tribes dispersed by the Assyrians did not assimilate and are somewhere awaiting the redemption.⁴

Shomron Kol Titein transforms the story of Oholah and Oholivah from its prophetic source. They are no longer the worthless adulterers of their youth, but the long-suffering maidens of an exile that has stretched on too long. Ibn Gabirol’s *kinnah* provides a hopeful coda to one of the grimmest parables in *Tanakh*. If even Oholah and Oholivah deserve redemption, don’t we?

The *paytan*’s bold prayer might help explain *Shomron Kol Titein*’s location at the end of the *kinnot*. Although prayers to console Zion can be found throughout the *kinnot*, and many *kinnot* end with moments of reconciliation,⁵ hopeful messages are particularly appropriate when concluding sections of the Tishah Be-Av service. We repeat the penultimate line of Eikhah: “Take us back God! ... Renew our days as of old,” (5:21) so as not to finish on a dismal note.⁶ So too, at the close of both the nighttime and daytime *kinnot*, we transition to the rest of the *tefillah* with the prayer: “Pity Zion as You have spoken ... Hasten salvation,

hurry redemption. And return to Jerusalem with great compassion.” We then add verses of consolation from Zechariah (1:16-17) and Isaiah (51:3). *Eli Tziyon*, which ends like it begins, with the wail of Zion like a “woman in her labor pains” and “a maiden girt in sackcloth,” would be a poor choice to lead into a section of consolation. *Shomron Kol Titein*, with its full-throated prayer for restoration, is a more suitable bridge to the conciliatory petition and verses that follow.⁷

Shomron Kol Titein is certainly not the only *kinnah* that could serve as an appropriate link to the verses of consolation, and indeed, it isn’t always found at the very end of the *kinnot*. At night, *Ad Ana Bekhiyah be-Tziyon*, an ancient *kinnah* of unknown authorship detailing the lament of the constellations of the zodiac, closes out the *kinnot*. It begins, “How long must Zion cry and Jerusalem mourn? Pity Zion, rebuild the walls of Jerusalem!” which suggests that it’s time to stop expressing our mourning and begin the process of rebuilding. The end of the *kinnah* also voices consolation.⁸ In fact, *Shomron Kol Titein* comes last during

¹ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Koren Mesorat HaRav Kinot* ed. Simon Ponsler (Jerusalem and New York: Koren Publishers and OU Press, 2011), 614-15.

² All translations of the *kinnot* are by Tzvi Hersh Weinreb, *The Koren Mesorat HaRav Kinot*.

³ An alternative text of the final line reads: “And Zion shall not say ‘God has forsaken me.’” See Daniel Goldschmidt, *Seder Ha-Kinnot Le-Tishah Be-Av* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1952), 29.

⁴ In the mishnah in *Sanhedrin* (110b), the Sages dispute whether the ten tribes will return in Messianic times. The Talmud then quotes a *baraita*: if they repent, they will return. Otherwise, they will not. Despite the Sages’ equivocation, legends about the ten tribes’ return have persisted. *Genesis Rabbah* (73:6) speaks of them as living beyond the *Sambatyon* river, an idea which spawned many striking legends throughout Jewish history and even inspired Messianic pretenders.

⁵ See Shulamit Elizur, “From Mourning to Comfort: On an Ancient Custom in the Afternoon Prayer of Tishah B’Av (Heb.),” *Tarbiz* 73:1 (2003): 126 & n6. In a striking example, at the close of *Az Be-halokh Yirmiyahu al Kivrei Avot*, Rabbi Elazar HaKalir tells that although God had refused the entreaties of Moses and the patriarchs, God is moved when the matriarchs wail and lament, and promises to return their children from exile. *Kinnot* composed in Sephardic lands, such as Ibn Gabirol’s, more commonly end in consolation than others. Elizur, 126 n6.

the daytime only in the most recent arrangements of the Eastern European service. Previously, *Ad Ana Bekhiyah* was the final *kinnah* both at night and in the morning.⁹

Nonetheless, the way in which *Shomron Kol Titein* turns around Ezekiel’s terrifying prophecy makes it a fitting choice. At the close of *kinnot*, when we feel our loss most intensely, our need for consolation is greatest.¹⁰ In a moment of intimacy as we prepare to rise from the floor, we give voice to our most desperate dreams. Oholah and Oholivah, among the most wretched of figures, can still be consoled, and can still be redeemed. There is even a glimmer of life to that most fanciful of legends, the return and reunification of all 12 tribes.

It may be, as Rabbi Soloveitchik suggests, that *Eli Tziyon*, which ends just as it begins, teaches that there is no end to the *kinnot* and the misery caused by the Temple’s destruction. But Ibn Gabirol’s *kinnah* provides a complementary message no less relevant: even in the depths of despair, hope springs eternal.

⁶ The same occurs with certain other parts of *Tanakh* and *Haftarot*. See *Yerushalmi Berakhot* 5:1; Rashi Lamentations 5:22, s.v. *hashiveinu hashem*.

⁷ One might even argue that the arc of the daytime *kinnot* as a whole bends toward consolation. We begin thrust into a jumble of densely alliterative and dizzyingly referential *kinnot* composed by HaKalir. They are dark and go on without pause, the last phrase of each one telegraphing the first line of the next, thus leaving the reader no space to process the fleeting prayers for compassion sometimes contained in their final lines. But the intensity of mourning slowly and subtly gives way to *kinnot* that close with more full-throated demands for justice, compassion, and a return to Zion. At the end we recite a series of *kinnot* each beginning with the word *tziyon*. Some of these Zionides end with remarkably hopeful paeans. An anonymous sixteenth century one proclaims, “Zion, you will once again be a sign of strength and a banner to all nations, and prominent will be the footsteps of your heralds. ... He will redeem with might from captivity, to rescue the deer from the hand of the boar, to become a crown of glory for the remnant of your flock!”

⁸ The *kinnah* concludes: “You will one day again take up Zion’s cause with zeal, and once more illuminate the populous city with the light of Your splendor.”

⁹ This is the case in older editions of the *kinnot*, such as the ones prepared by Dr. Seligman Baer in the nineteenth century (*Rodelheim, 1875*) and Rabbi Abraham Rosenfeld in the mid-twentieth (*The Authorised Kinot for the Ninth of Av* (1965), 177-79). In those editions, *Eli Tziyon* is followed by

Shomron Kol Titein and then *Ad Ana Bekhiyah*. In the Koren edition of the *kinnot* (but not in the ArtScroll), the first line of *Ad Ana Bekhiyah* follows *Shomron Kol Titein* and leads into the verses of consolation, although the remainder of *Ad Ana Bekhiyah* is only recited at night. There is certainly variation outside the Eastern European tradition as well, although *Ad Ana Bekhiyah* closes out the daytime service in some *Edut ha-Mizrah* traditions, and its first line appears at the end of the Spanish & Portuguese and Yemenite recitations of *kinnot*. In one arrangement of the Western Ashkenazic tradition, however, *Shomron Kol Titein* is in the

KAMTZA AND BAR KAMTZA IN THE AGE OF CANCEL CULTURE

DAVID HELLMAN serves as the rabbi of Young Israel of Brookline and is the current president of the Rabbinical Council of New England.

In the weeks and days leading up to Tishah Be-Av, we have become accustomed to hearing about the concept of *sinat hinam* and how our Sages taught that it was such “baseless hatred” within the Jewish people that led to the destruction of the Second Temple.¹ Presented as the quintessential example of this communal plague is the story of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza, in which a wealthy host publicly embarrassed his enemy who mistakenly came to his party, seemingly for no reason at all, thus setting in motion a chain of events leading to Rome’s devastation of Jerusalem. Messages that promote interpersonal harmony and unity are of course always welcome, but, too often, these Nine Days discussions inappropriately boil down the complexity of human conflict into the catchall phrase “*sinat hinam*,” and the story of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza is used as the medium to exhort us to just “be nicer.” In reality, what divides too many of us is not a generic *sinat hinam*. While sometimes personal fights are based on petty reasons, other times there are profound issues of principle at play. Emotions of jealousy and competition are rooted deep within the psyche and complex family and social dynamics can lead to division as well.

Our Sages, in their mastery of the Torah and profound human insight, were well aware of this. This essay, through a close reading of the story of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza, contends that the tale is not just about petty spite, but that it recognizes the complexities of hatred and the real political and social dimensions that might engender it. Learning the lesson of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza is thus about more than simply avoiding the jealousies that arise in daily life. It is not enough just to tell everyone to be nicer. To truly rid

middle of the *kinnot* and not at the end at all. See S. Baer, ed., *Seder ha-Kinnot le-Tishah Be-Av* (Frankfurt A.M. (Rodelheim): 1914), 113. It is interesting to note that in the Italian rite, the last *kinnah* before turning to special *piyyutim* that dwell on consolation is the well-known *kinnah Esh Tukad be-Kirbi*, which contrasts the euphoric Exodus from Egypt with the exile from Jerusalem. It seems again that this *kinnah* was chosen because it concludes in consolation, “Happiness and joy; gone are sorrow and sighing/When I return to Jerusalem.” See Elizur, 128 & n14.

¹⁰ See Elizur, 126.

ourselves of the destructive forces that spawn hate requires us to engage deeper and more complex issues as individuals and communities. And even when we take principled stands on matters of supreme importance, it is essential that we do not lose sight of other people’s humanity.

We begin with the story. The Talmud (*Gittin 55b*) relates:

The destruction of Jerusalem came about through Kamtza and Bar Kamtza in this way. A certain man had a friend named Kamtza and an enemy named Bar Kamtza. He once made a party and said to his servant, “Go and bring Kamtza.” The man went and brought Bar Kamtza. When the host found him there he said, “See, you are mocking me; what are you doing here? Get out.” Said the other, “Since I am here, let me stay, and I will pay you for whatever I eat and drink.” He said, “No.” “Then let me give you half the cost of the party.” “No,” said the other. “Then let me pay for the whole party.” He still said, “No,” and he took him by the hand and put him out.²

The anonymous host and Bar Kamtza were enemies, and neither was willing to compromise. Yet the host’s escalation of the situation is somewhat puzzling. After the mistake of his servant, the host will under no circumstance allow Bar Kamtza to stay, even after Bar Kamtza agrees to pay for the entire party! For a substantial sum of money, would he not let Bar Kamtza sit at a small table on the side of the room?

While hatred can enrage a person and make one act irrationally, even to the extreme and even at one's own expense, one wonders whether there is something more that might explain the host's unreasonableness here. Yet while it might be hard to understand the actions of the host, what Bar Kamtza does next to escalate the conflict is even more inexplicable, and it, I believe, provides the key to unlocking the story.

The Talmud continues:

Said [Bar Kamtza], "Since the Rabbis were sitting there and did not stop him, this shows that they agreed with him. I will go and inform against them to the Government." He went and said to the Emperor, "The Jews are rebelling against you." He said, "How can I tell?" He said to him: "Send them an offering and see whether they will offer it." So he sent with him a fine calf. While on the way he made a blemish on its upper lip, or as some say, on the white of its eye, in a place where we [Jews] count it a blemish but they do not. The Rabbis were inclined to offer it in order not to offend the Government. Said R. Zechariah ben Abkulas to them, "People will say that blemished animals are offered on the altar." They then proposed to kill Bar Kamtza so that he should not go and inform against them, but R. Zechariah ben Abkulas said to them, "Is one who makes a blemish on consecrated animals to be put to death?" R. Yohanan thereupon remarked: "Through the scrupulousness of R. Zechariah ben Abkulas our House has been destroyed, our Temple burnt, and we ourselves exiled from our land."

Embarrassed by the host and the silence of the Sages present, Bar Kamtza decides to get his revenge. He goes to the Emperor (or presumably to the local Roman authority) and informs him that the Jews are rebelling and will no longer accept Roman offerings. It seems quite a jump: from being embarrassed at a party to calling in the Romans! Furthermore, wouldn't this only result in new Roman edicts or persecutions against the Jewish community that would affect Bar Kamtza and his family as much as the host and the Sages? Additionally, we must wonder if just anyone was able to approach high level Roman officials and bring such accusations. In fact, the Roman official initially doesn't believe him and asks for proof. But to test the report, the

Romans send an animal with Bar Kamtza to be offered. Again, if Bar Kamtza was a random Jew, would he be appointed to be the official emissary of a Roman governor to offer his sacrifice?

These details in the Talmud's telling indicate that Bar Kamtza had access to high level Roman officials and was trusted by them. It would seem reasonable to surmise that Bar Kamtza was a wealthy, prominent citizen of Jerusalem and belonged to the faction who wanted to cooperate with the Romans. Indeed, historians have suggested that the names Kamtza and Bar Kamtza are related to an individual named Compsus son of Compsus, whom Josephus records (Life 9) was a prominent leader who pushed for the Jewish community to profess allegiance to Rome.³ Historians have also pointed out that Rabbi Zechariah ben Abkulas in the Talmud's account is very likely Rabbi Zechariah son of Amphikallus, who was a leading zealot who wished to rebel against Rome, as recorded by Josephus (War of the Jews 4:4:1).⁴ Thus, the existential issue of Jerusalem's relationship to Rome—whether to fully accept its authority, to wage outright rebellion, or to find some kind of compromised coexistence—lurks in the background of the Kamtza and Bar Kamtza story.

With this insight, many of the details of the narrative become clearer and invested with greater consequence. The host did not hate Bar Kamtza because of an earlier slight or for some other personal reason. The host belonged to the faction in Jerusalem that was anti-Roman, as were the sages that he invited to his party. This group sought ways to limit Rome's power and influence on the Jewish community, and some of them even wished to rebel. Bar Kamtza, though, was a leader of the group that wanted to cooperate with and more fully identify with the Romans. This great conflict was tearing apart Jerusalem from within, with nothing less than the future of the Jewish people at stake in these disagreements. Understandably, these debates were fierce and each side thought that the other was leading the nation into catastrophe. When the host saw Bar Kamtza at his party he became enraged. In his view, Bar Kamtza was nothing less than the enemy of the Jewish people, and he was persona non grata in the host's circle. No amount of money would have calmed him down; for the host, it was a matter of principle.

Perhaps the Sages agreed with the host's decision. Or perhaps they knew it was wrong to treat Bar Kamtza in such a way but did not want to speak up. The Talmud leaves this ambiguous, and either way, Bar Kamtza was humiliated and the damage was done. Bar Kamtza, pleading to stay, seems not to have understood why he was being treated as such an outcast. He knew that he had a different opinion about

Rome, but that was politics. Was he not still a citizen of Jerusalem, a neighbor and acquaintance of all those present? The coldness and cruelty of it enraged him, and he immediately devised a plan for revenge. Now his plan makes perfect sense. If they hated him because of his opinions about Rome, he would show them they were the ones making a mistake. He would use his Roman connections to remove the anonymous host, the rabbis, and the entire anti-Roman faction of Jerusalem from their positions of power with the expectation that the local authorities would protect and elevate him and the other pro-Roman Jerusalemites. However, as the Talmud tells it, his plan did not only bring about a change of leadership and power within Jerusalem, but also led to its complete destruction and subjugation.

Once we understand that Jewish-Roman relations were at the root of the hostility between the anonymous host and Bar Kamtza, it not only changes our understanding of the events and people in the story, but also impacts the lessons that we are to take from it. Of course, we must reflect and work on our own character to get over petty jealousies and overcome issues of personal competition (though that is hard enough). However, the story of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza engages with an even greater and more complex challenge: to not allow legitimate disagreements over issues of principle—even ones of incredible consequence—to turn into conflicts filled by and fueled with hatred for the human beings on the other side of the debate. The Talmud does not critique the anonymous host for declining to invite Bar Kamtza to the party or for having a legitimate and principled disagreement with him. The tragic sin of the host was that he saw Bar Kamtza's views as not only wrong and dangerous, but that he saw Bar Kamtza the person as contemptible, intolerable, even a monster. In the language of today, among the company at the party, Bar Kamtza had been cancelled. He was so beyond the pale that he was not even allowed to appear in the presence of the host and his guests. He was not one of them.

This is not to say that Bar Kamtza's pro-Roman attitude and actions were viewed favorably by the Sages. According to the Talmud's story, the Rabbis went so far as to suggest that Bar Kamtza should have been killed for endangering the Jewish people and the Temple. Indeed, R. Yohanan's closing remark indicts Rabbi Zechariah ben Abkulas for convincing the Sages otherwise. Nevertheless, the Talmud also makes

¹ *Yoma* 9b.

² Translation is based on the Soncino Talmud with some adaptations.

it clear that earlier, the host should have found some way to make room for Bar Kamtza at his party. It was a moment and setting where the great debates of the day could have been left at the door. The host, who thought he was protecting Jerusalem by making a point of kicking Bar Kamtza out, was actually setting in motion the events that led to Jerusalem's destruction.

It is disheartening that large divisions have developed both within the Orthodox community and the greater Jewish community, and that those divisions seem to have increased in recent years. Many of these disagreements are related to issues of great import. Debates over American politics, Israeli politics, and the boundaries of Orthodoxy are, to some extent, all issues fundamental to the future of the Jewish people. Partisanship has divided us, like it has the rest of society. The most important issues of our day must be debated vigorously, and there are times when principles must take precedence over compromise and one cannot misrepresent what one believes to be true. However, the lesson of the Kamtza and Bar Kamtza story, according to this reading, is that we cannot let those arguments prevent us from seeing the basic humanity of those that disagree with us. When we see those we disagree with in situations that do not relate to the areas of disagreement, such as at a party—as in Bar Kamtza's case—or if we see them at shul or on the street, we must be able to coexist with them, to be able to talk to them, and not turn them into "the other" with unnecessary and "baseless hatred."

Perhaps this explains the similarity of the names Kamtza, the host's friend and ally, and Bar Kamtza, the host's rival and enemy. The resemblance implies that there was something common to them, that in some ways they were the same. The host saw them as opposites, one good and one evil, and could not imagine equating them in any way; however, the host's servant, who was not as engaged with the politics of the day, did not see much difference between them and confused them. The story of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza teaches that when we not only disagree with the opinions of others, but actually negate and cancel their humanity, we are on a path that leads to destruction. The names Kamtza and Bar Kamtza, which are so similar, remind us that even when we are on opposite sides of an issue, there is still so much that we share. We are bound together, and with the right perspective we can even see something of ourselves in the other.

³ See Paul Mandel, "The Loss of Center: Changing Attitudes towards the Temple in Aggadic Literature," *Harvard Theological Review* 99:1 (2006), 27.

⁴ Mandel, *ibid.*