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Parshat Devarim: On Gumption Rabba Sara Hurwitz

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The classic reason given for why the Beit Hamikdash was destroyed is *sinat chinam* (baseless hatred). But, there is another reason given in the Talmud for the destruction of the Mikdash - the lack of leadership from the rabbinic authorities during the Temple period.

The Gemara in Gitin (56a) asserts that it was “the humility (ענוותנות) of Rabbi Zechariah b. Avkulas that destroyed our Mikdash, burned our heichal (synagogues) and exiled us from our land.” The statement follows the famous story of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza. Bar Kamtza’s enemy mistakenly invited Bar Kamtza to a banquet instead of Bar Kamtza’s friend Kamtza. The rabbinic community silently watched as Bar Kamtza was humiliated and sent away from the feast. Furious, Bar Kamtza sought revenge by agitating the Roman Emperor’s wrath against the Jews. He deviously told the Emperor the Jewish people would never sacrifice a gift from him. The Emperor agreed to put the Jews to the test and sent a calf. Bar Kamtza maimed the upper lip and eye of the calf, rendering it a non-kosher sacrificial offering, before delivering it to the Jewish community. The community then had a dilemma - should they sacrifice the gift from the Emperor, knowing it is not fit to be a korban, thereby risking the wrath of God? Or abide by halakha, and risk destruction? It is Rabbi Zecharya ben Avkulas who decides not to offer the korban and thus the Gemara concludes “because of the humility of R Zecharya, the Temple was destroyed.”

In the Torah, the attribute of *anava* (humility), is usually a positive trait. Moshe Rabbenu is praised for his humility. He is described as *haish moshe anav me’od, mikol ha’adam* - the most humble person who ever lived (Bamidbar 12:3). The implication is that it is this trait of humility that made him such a great leader. Could it be that for Moshe, the attribute of *anava* brought him accolades, but the very same trait in Rabbi Zecharya leads to the destruction of the Beit HaMikdash? Perhaps, for Moshe, the word *anav* is meant to convey a confidence in himself and his understanding of the Torah, while the word *anav*, in the Talmud, means the exact opposite—a meekness, or lack of confidence in oneself and lack of confidence in understanding the Torah.

Moshe begins Sefer Devarim:

These are the words that Moshe spoke

אלה הדברים אשר דבר משה

God did not command him to speak, but these are the words that Moshe saw as relevant and important to share with the people as they are about to enter Eretz Yisrael. This speech, this final testament of Moshe, is thought to be an interpretation of God’s Words. The Ra’avan, Rabbi Eliezer ben Rabbi Natan of Mainz, wrote in a Responsa (§34) that while “The entire Torah was spoken by God and has no chronological order, Moshe arranged Mishneh Torah [Sefer Devarim] chapter after chapter specifically so it could be interpreted.” Moshe shaped the words of the Torah, God’s law, in a way that the people could understand and benefit from at this juncture in their journey. And he does so with a keen understanding of the spiritual and political temperature of his people:

And Moshe began to explain the Torah (Devarim 1:5)

הואיל משה בִּיאַר אֶת הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת (דברים א:ה)

Rashi explains that Moshe taught the Torah in 70 languages. However, didn’t all of *B’nei Yisrael* speak the same language? Rashi, quoting the Tamchuma says:

Moshe gave 70 interpretations of every pasuk (1:5) **באר את התורה: בשבעים לשון פירשה להם (א:ה)**
There are at least 70 ways to interpret and understand any verse within our sacred text.

Moshe had the gumption, the leadership, to interpret the law in a way that was palatable and relevant for the people.

This was Rabbi Zecharya ben Avkulas's failing. He could not, did not, or would not interpret law. He did not even attempt to find an alternative path forward when presented with his dilemma: either abide by God's law and bring about destruction, or sacrifice the korban and ignore the so called *halakhic* requirement of sacrifices - potentially angering God. But, is this really a choice? Would God want us to uphold God's law at the expense of destroying the Temple, and spilling Jewish blood?

The Maharatz Chayot, Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Chayot (1805-1855) says that Rabbi Zecharya did not interpret the word of God correctly. You see, if he had delved into the law, Rabbi Zecharya may have found many *heterim* (loopholes) that would allow him to sacrifice the calf, and not "break the halakha". He could have relied on the concept that it is permissible to violate a negative commandment for fear of a foreign government. But he didn't have the gumption to interpret the law. In the Maharatz Chayot's words: Rabbi Zecharya was acting with humility in the sense that he did not see within himself the strength to fulfill the law—to violate the Torah for the sake of other important concerns; because he did not have gumption to lead, the Beit Hamikdash was destroyed.

Moshe's humility lead him to have the gumption and confidence to understand and interpret the Torah for the people, making him the most renowned leader of the Jewish people. Rabbi Zecharya's humility led him to meekly accept law at face value, without interpreting the law to meet the needs of his community.

This is the challenge of being both modern and Orthodox. It is the challenge to uphold *halakha*, while still engaging with modernity. To find synergy between the law and our world, and recognize that our world impacts *halakha*, and that *halakha* has much to offer secular society.

On this Tisha B'av, let's all seek out ways to be *anshe anava* people of humility—and have the gumption to see our *halakha* and our sacred Torah through the eyes of enhancing our community, rather than destroying it.



Rabba Sara Hurwitz, Co-Founder and President of Maharat, the first institution to ordain Orthodox women as clergy, also serves on the Rabbinic staff at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. Rabba Hurwitz completed Drisha's three-year Scholars Circle Program, an advanced intensive program of study for Jewish women training to become scholars, educators and community leaders. After another five years of study under the auspices of Rabbi Avi Weiss, she was ordained by Rabbi Weiss and Rabbi Daniel Sperber in 2009. In 2013 Rabba Hurwitz was awarded the Hadassah Foundation Bernice S. Tannenbaum prize, and the Myrtle Wreath Award from the Southern New Jersey Region of Hadassah in 2014. In 2016 she was the Trailblazer Award Recipient at UJA Federation of New York. She was named as one of Jewish Week's 36 Under 36, the Forward50 most influential Jewish leaders, and Newsweek's 50 most influential rabbis. In 2017 Rabba Hurwitz was chosen to be a member of the inaugural class of Wexner Foundation Field Fellows.