



THE SHAME BEHIND CAUSELESS HATRED
A Tisha b'Av Talk and Suggestion for Elul Work
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My question is: how can it be, that for two thousand years we've known that Baseless Hatred is what caused our exile, which means that *that*, corrected, is the key to our redemption. And yet, for two thousand years we haven't managed to fix it, or even to make significant headway. We've made so many resolutions ...launched so many campaigns. Whenever tragedy strikes and we try to make the best of it by upgrading our mitzvah practice, more often than not we focus on *Ahavat Yisrael* (unconditional love of fellow tribesmen). There's a flurry of sincere commitment, and then... slowly but surely we revert to our judgmental and quarrelsome selves. Why!? Why is it so hard? What is going on?

The *Netziv*¹ makes it clear that both then and now, the primary culprits of this fatal flaw are the learned folks...not the *amei ha'aretz* (not the ignorant masses)...but rather the educated and observant community...like us. Just like in the *midbar* (desert), there were certain fiascos that were started by the *erev rav* and then seeped *up* to contaminate the masses (like the Golden Calf)...but there were other failures that started with the elite and seeped down to rile the common folk (like the spies, which, as we know, set the stage for Tisha b'Av).

I want to start by quoting the *Netziv*'s explanation for our current exile. It appears in his preface to the book of Bereshit. This is a quote...a long quote. It is edited somewhat but does still convey the author's intention:

When the *prophets* refer to the book of *Bereishis* they call it *Sefer HaYoshor* (the Book of the Upright) because the *yashrut* of our forebears, their instinctive, rock-solid integrity, is the most important thing that we are supposed to learn from them...more than their piety and religiosity. ...The prophets emphasize *this* trait (of *yashrut*) in order to justify HaShem's destruction of the 2nd Temple, despite the fact that that generation was filled with *tzadikim*, *chassidim*, and *talmidei chakhamim* (righteous ones, pious ones, masters of Torah study)—this was the era of the early *tana'im* (the *Baalei Mishna*), the most authoritative rabbis in Jewish history. They had so much going for them (at least theoretically), but (says the *Netziv*) they (or their generation) lacked *yashrut* (*mentchl'kite*) in the way they moved through the *worldly* world. And how did that lack of *yashrut* manifest itself (says the *Netziv*)...as self-righteous intolerance, *sinat chinam*, which means, as he describes it: that they branded any person who did not serve Hashem according to *their* understanding of *Yiras Shamayim* as a heretic, as an *apikorus* (with all the halachic consequences of that). It wasn't just name-calling, it was life-destroying. And so (says the *Netziv*) this dogmatic attitude led to murderous strife, and other evils that eventually resulted in the Temple's destruction and our multi-millennial exile. And so, lest you say, "But HaShem, its not fair, there were so many *mitzvos* that were happening then, so much *mesirut nefesh* for the Torah...how could you ignore that and pay us bad for good"...The *Netziv* says, that

HaShem was letting us know that he cannot tolerate *tzadikim* of that sort, *tsaddikim* that lack *yashrut*, *tsaddikim* who imagine that their moral outrage is protecting Hashem's honor when it is really just protecting their own...*tsadikum* who do not have the space in their hearts to tolerate different approaches to Torah and *yirat shamayim* ...*tsaddikim* who do not have the compassion in their hearts to seek the wellbeing of all living things, as modeled by Avraham (the epitome of *yashrut*) who put himself out, praying for the deliverance of Sodom's lowly idolaters.

And I want to emphasize two points...first, it doesn't say "HaShem cannot tolerate *rasha'im* (evil-doers) like this"...but rather, "He cannot tolerate *tsaddikim* like this." And second, that the term *tsaddik* here is not referring to some exclusive cadre of maybe 36 on the planet...rather it refers to someone who observes *mitzvot*, and strives to live a Torah-centered life ...i.e. us, as Isaiah asserts: עַמְּךָ כֻּלָּם צְדִיקִים (Your people are all *tsaddikim* [in training]).²

So how is it that we, the ones that mourn the Temple's loss, that fast on Tisha B'Av, how is it that we are also the ones responsible for its absence (or at least as responsible as anyone else)

I'm going to propose an answer to that question based on a story that is so oft-repeated this time of year that it is almost trite. And yet, there are certain details in that story, that are not usually unpacked when the story is told, and these details actually provide clues that, I believe, will help to answer our question.

The story is that of Kamtsa and Bar Kamtsa and please bear with me as I tell it again (and in my telling I'm going to incorporate the commentaries of the Maharsha, and others). The story appears in the Talmud Gittin (55b-56a) and with slight variation in Eicha Raba (4:3)...I'm going to merge the two.

The story begins with a celebratory banquet that an unidentified Jerusalemite, we'll call him Ploni, is hosting and everybody whose anybody is there. But Ploni notices that his good friend Kamtsa is missing, and sends someone from his household to track Kamtsa down and bring him to the *simcha*. As we know the person mistakenly brings Bar Kamtsa instead of Kamtsa. An innocent mistake except that Bar Kamtsa and Ploni are in the midst of a bitter dispute. Bar Kamtsa was certainly surprised to receive a personal invite from his rival but took it as a peace-making gesture, "Maybe Ploni wants to let bygones be bygones," and so Bar Kamtsa cautiously accepted the invite, hoping for the best.

Bar Kamtsa joins the *simcha* and begins chatting with the guests. Ploni sees Bar Kamtsa seated at his banquet, mingling with the invitees and flies into a rage. He stomps over to Bar Kamtsa and says: "You spoke badly of me. You are my enemy. How dare you sit in my home. Leave, NOW."

Bar Kamtsa pleads with him: "Please, do not shame me like this, I'll pay for my meal."

Ploni refuses: "No. You cannot join this meal" Go, NOW."

BK: "OK. I won't join the meal. I will not eat or drink anything. But please don't shame me."

Ploni refuses and repeats his demand for BK to go."

BK again pleads not to be shamed, and offers to pay for the whole affair.

Ploni refuses and kicks BK out.

Throughout this altercation, no one intervenes and attempts to make peace by taking Ploni aside and urging him to calm down. The Maharsha says, that the banquet was filled with rabbis who certainly had the authority and the responsibility to defuse the situation and prevent the public shaming that was happening before their eyes.

Apparently (says the Maharsha) Ploni was a bigwig, so none of the rabbis wanted to risk getting on his bad side, which means they were all guilty of flattery, says he.³

On the street, humiliated, Bar Kamtsa plots revenge, not so much against Ploni (because he didn't expect much from him) but against the rabbis who witnessed his public shaming and did not protest. Burning with anger, Bar Kamtsa seeks revenge and so he defames them to the Roman governor by confiding that the Jews consider the governor's sacrifices unfit for their holy altar. The governor tests Bar Kamtsa's claim by sending animals to the Temple and asks his agents to see if they actually do end up on the altar. Bar Kamtsa blemishes the animals enroute rendering them unfit for sacrifice.

The rabbis are in a quandary. The animals are halachicly unacceptable, but to refuse them will insult the Roman governor and that could bring fatal consequences. The rabbis rule that it's a matter of *pikuach nefesh* (a life-saving measure) to sacrifice the animals, despite their blemish, so as not to disgrace the governor, for who knows how he'd react to the affront. Yet R. Zecharia Abkulas overrules them and insists that they stick to the letter of the law, and refuse the animals as *korbanot*. True to script the governor takes offense, goes ballistic, declares war on the Jews, destroys the Temple and exiles the nation.

The Talmud closes with the painful comment: "Because of this timid ruling (*anvatnuto*) by R. Zecharia Abkulas, our House is destroyed, our Temple burnt, and our nation exiled." A couple pages later the Talmud adds: "We learn from this incident how serious it is to put a person to shame, [שהרי סייע הקב"ה את בר קמצא] for we see that HaShem prospered Bar Kamtsa's path". The Talmud is saying that his plot could not have succeeded if HaShem was not behind it. Hashem was so fed up with our disregard for the dignity of those with whom we dispute, that he destroyed his House and burnt His Temple to get his point across [החריב את ביתו ושרף את היכלו].

If we pay attention, we'll see that this story, our feature story about *sinat chinam* (baseless hatred), is all about shame from beginning to end. Every step of the plot is driven by unprocessed shame. The Talmud is telling us that unless we get a handle on the way this mysterious force, called shame, circulates though the psyche, we will not be able to rid ourselves of *sinat chinam*...no matter how many resolutions we make. So now let's revisit our story but this time we'll focus on its undercurrent of shame.

But first, I want to define shame "as the discomfort produced when the ego feels diminished or deflated." Briefly there are three types of experience that produce shame: 1) Failure. I *did* something wrong, bad, stupid...ugh I'm such a loser. I'm so embarrassed. 2) Defect. I am flawed (perhaps visibly, perhaps secretly) which makes me undesirable. I'm damaged goods. I'm a *shlav bet*, second class citizen—and it is (or feels to be) a permanent, inescapable and humiliating condition. 3) *Someone else*, insults, belittles, rejects, ridicules, degrades me or renders me powerless. How dare they minify me. How dare they disregard me. I am not a nobody. I'm a somebody, and I will prove it by making their life miserable for messing with me...even if I destroy my own life in the process.

Shame is the first emotion mentioned in the Torah. Adam and Chava were not ashamed (*lo yitbosheshu*). They sinned, and then they were ashamed. Shame is right there, at the most foundation level of our human odyssey which means it infuses everything. It is endemic to the human condition. Every human being has a *pekala* of shame inherited from primordial times. No blame. Maharal says that shame is the most powerful motivating force in the psyche.⁴ And yet, because of the ego's aversion to it, it gets pushed out of sight...suppressed, denied, projected. We are mostly unaware of its influence on our life. And yet, if the Talmud be our guide, it is right in there, as the primary instigator of *sinat chinam*...which is the primary cause of our continued exile...which is the primary cause of all of our woes.

So now let's revisit the Bar Kamtsa tale through the shame lens: Let's start with the backdrop. Ploni and Bar Kamtsa were *b'rogez* which is basically defined as a situation where each feels wronged and blames the other for the problem. Blaming is the most common defense against the shame of failure. Adam blames Chava, Chava blames *nachash*. The ego avoids shame by deflecting the blame.

Bar Kamtsa spoke *loshon hara* (defamatory speech) about Ploni. The Torah tells us that *loshon hara* destroys the *tselem Elokim* (Divine image) of its subject. That it is a shaming act which exposes, degrades, belittles and disempowers the other.

And from the other side, part of the motive (and the perverse hankering) to speak *loshon hara* is because focusing on the failures and defects of *the other*, distracts us from the profound discomfort of our own shame (because everyone's got it). This strategy of relieving our insecurities by judging and vilifying others is called projection, and it is another common strategy for deflecting shame. (כל הפוסל במומו פוסל)⁵

Next, Ploni flies into an unrelenting rage. The Talmud notes that one sign of what we would call, these days, an abusive personality is if, when in the midst of personal *simcha*, having drinken a bit of wine, the person does not soften and forgive.⁶ Current research identifies shame as the primary trigger for the vindictive and unforgiving rage displayed by Ploni...I'm speaking here about rage (as distinct from anger).

Bar Kamtsa explicitly begs Ploni not to shame him. Getting booted from the party would bring unbearable disgrace. That humiliation, of course, (perversely) was exactly what Ploni sought to produce, as revenge for the *loshon hara* that caused *him* shame.

The rabbis do not intervene. Maharsha explains that they do not want to risk offending Ploni (an important man about town). They're afraid of incurring his displeasure which could get *them* shamed, cut from the payroll, and booted as well. The Maharsha calls this flattery which is the ego-stroking that we do to protect someone from the shame (or guilt) that they *should* actually feel for their wrong action.

The dispute escalates. The same burning shame that incited Ploni's wrath, now rages through Bar Kamtsa's soul. That was Ploni's aim—whether conscious or not—to relieve his own shame by dumping it on Bar Kamtsa—by shaming him even worse. It worked. Now *he's* up and Bar Kamtsa's down. Bar Kamtsa is mortified. He only sees one path of relief from his unbearable disgrace, and that is to dump it back on Ploni and his rabbi accomplices by shaming them even worse—watching them squirm while he gets the last laugh (even if it ultimately harms him as well). That's the inevitable snowball of escalating shame.

Bar Kamtsa hatches a plan that raises the stakes. He goes to the Roman Governor and pokes at his pride by reporting that (secretly) the Jews are shaming him...that they consider

him a 2nd class citizen...to the point that they don't even allow his goyish animals to touch their pure and holy altar.

Fast forward...The blemished animals arrive and the rabbis rule to accept them so as not to provoke the tyrannical governor. Clearly a life-saving measure (*pikuach nefesh*). R. Zecharia Abkulas' self-image as a *machmir* (zealous for the Lord), prevents him from accepting that compromise. Tosefos says that he was too sure of his belief that HaShem prefers the *chumrah*.⁷ R. Zecharia believed he was protecting HaShem's honor but he was really avoiding the shame that *he* would feel for the *aveyra* portion of the *aveyra lishma*—for fearfully invoking a leniency in his confrontation with the secular authorities. He couldn't bring himself to commit the “sin” of offering a blemished animal, even when it was what HaShem wanted in that moment as an emergency measure, which meant that it only *appeared* to be a sin but really it was the halachically correct thing to do...it was the *mitzvah* of the moment.

This is supported by the fact that this same R. Zecharia did *not* confront Ploni at the party (presumably, says Maharsha, for reasons of self-interest). He wasn't “zealous for the Lord” back then (when it *was* a time for courage). And now he chooses *to* confront the Roman governor, because his self-image is wrapped up in being zealous for Torah vis a vis the “infidels,” and so the Talmud (paradoxically) describes *this* as taking the timid route (*anvatnuto*) of confronting the Roman Governor, instead of the courageous route, of relying on the leniency that if there is a threat to life, we suspend the Torah for that moment—except of course for three exceptions as we know.

As a consequence of his ever so subtle lack of *yashrut* (of pure motive) R. Abkulas suffers the ultimate humiliation. There is no shame greater than his. That it be recorded in the Talmud for all time that this man caused our greatest tragedy: the Temples destruction and our multi-millennial exile with all the death and suffering it has wrought.

ענוותנותו של רבי זכריה בן אבקולס, החריבה את ביתנו, ושרפה את היכלנו, והגליתנו מארצנו.

The Talmud is teaching that *sinat chinam* is intricately entwined with unacknowledged shame. Each person in our tale made *this* choice or *that*, for *this* reason or *that*, yet really, what actually drove them to make that choice was an unconscious need to free themselves of shame (either by dumping it or avoiding it).

There is a difference between hatred and dislike. We all have preferences and aversions, compatibilities and differences. Some folks are easy to be around and some folks are not. That's fair. But when we find ourselves reviling a person altogether, feeling ill-wishes toward them, tearing them apart in our heads even if we don't voice those thoughts to another, not being able to sit at the same table with them, feeling a glimmer of joy when hardship comes their way or even secretly hoping that it will... in that case, at that point, we have crossed the line into *sinat chinam* (causeless hatred), even if we haven't actually voiced *loshon hara*, or acted harmfully toward them.

And the hidden factor that instigates this shift from distaste to antipathy, from dislike to hatred... always (or nearly always) can be traced back to an auto-reflex to protect ourselves from some shame that is triggered in us by that person and that quickly morphs into hatred.

And so the work for us is to follow the breadcrumb trail back to the source of our hatred which, inevitably, passes through some negative emotion (like envy, fear, anger, disgust) and

then, eventually, lands squarely on one of those three types of shame that I mentioned earlier (i.e. failure, defect, or insult).

And then, once identified, the work is to acknowledge that shame and to process it in a more spiritually productive way as guided by the Tikunei Zohar which notes the equivalence of the Hebrew word for shame, *boshet* (בושת), and *teshuva* (תשובה). They are the same letters just rearranged. *Bet, shin, vav, tav* (*boshet*) versus *tav, shin, vav bet* (*tashuv*).

So I will give a very brief suggestion of how one might begin to work with unacknowledged shame:

- 1) The first step, which is actually a very potent one, is simply to acknowledge the shame mechanism and to set about discovering the shame behind the hate. Its like in the Wizard of Oz, where the whole reality was conjured by this little man, behind the curtain, in a booth with amplifiers. Similarly the whole reality of *sinat chinam* is conjured by the little demon in the booth...called shame (and the ego's need to deny it).
- 2) Identify (if possible) what sort of shame we are dealing with: is it the 1) shame of failure: i.e. that I *did* something wrong, bad, stupid...ugh I'm such a loser.
Or is it the shame of defect: i.e. I am flawed which makes me undesirable and, at best, *shlav bet*.
Or is it the shame of insult: That someone belittled, degraded or disempowered me.
- 3) And depending upon what type of shame we are dealing with, so that will determine how to defuse it, or, at the very least how to disrupt the chain of cause and effect that leads to *sinat chinam*. This is called turning *boshet* into *tashuv* (shame into teshuva). And I am defining teshuva in its most generic sense as *return*—as connecting everything back to its Source, i.e. its root in HaShem.

Shame of Failure

Which generally hides behind embarrassment, blame, or wanting to disappear. This shame of failure, is (in some ways) the easiest to remedy, because it entails what we generally think of as teshuva—classic teshuva. In this first type/cause of shame we really did do something bad, that we are ashamed about. Yet our tradition wisely distinguishes between the person and the deed, the sinner and the sin (which in popular psychology is the distinction between shame and guilt—shame being a total, global sense of worthlessness and guilt being the fitting remorse for a bad deed). In this first category of shame, our job is to admit our failing and process its shame through *teshuva* (as detailed in the footnote below).⁸ Our ego prefers to escape this admission-of-failure by blaming its faults on someone else. But if we choose that path it will backfire, and produce a situation where shame ends up ruling our life.

The prayer intention upon discovering this sort of shame might be something like:

I am not afraid of truth, whatever responsibility is mine in this conflict, please help me see it, admit it, and do teshuva around it. Let me walk my talk. Help me to bring my behavior into line with my persona and grant me the humility to admit the gaps when I am falling short.

Shame of Defect

Which often lurks behind the hatred caused by envy or disgust: Teshuva here means that we can (and must) connect our “defects” back to HaShem’s goodness through faith-truths. But it’s

important, in working with this tool, that we really do KNOW that our affirmations are true. For example:

The only thing that will make me happy is to do what I'm designed to do, and my life is custom tailored to enable exactly that. HaShem knows my life's mission even better than I. He designed it, He wills it, and He is bound by covenant to assist its fulfillment from cradle to grave. Not a moment passes where He fails to provide the resources required for my next step in personal and spiritual growth. The blessings that I covet in other people's lives would only be obstacles to *my* soul's work. This moment is perfect. I KNOW that this is true.

Or, more briefly stated: I am a center of expression for the Primal-Will-to-Good-Which-Eternally-Creates-and-Sustains-the-Universe (ie HaShem). That is my dignity and nothing can take that from me.

Shame of Insult

Which is often behind the hatred caused by rage and vengeance. HaShem, I accept the humbling of this event, but I cannot accept the injustice of it. Please help me to find a way to correct the wrong that was done to me. And in the meantime, along with my pursuit of justice, I will follow the instruction of the Baal Shem tov and pray for this person's teshuva and spiritual awakening in the same way that I pray for my own. Just as there is nothing I want more than to bring my own life and will into line with spiritual law, and I pray daily for this (in the 5th bracha of the Amida) so do I include my enemy and/or tormentor in this prayer. For if my enemy does teshuva and really does see the light, then he/she will make amends, and I will be satisfied, for I will see justice done. And in the meantime I will continue to pursue justice through the legitimate means available to me.

The prayer that I use to interrupt a flow of angry, judgmental, vengeful or critical thoughts is:

HaShem please bring light and love and joy and peace into this person, and into the place inside me that feels wronged, dishonored, belittled by them. [You should substitute whatever descriptors apply to your situation at hand.]

HaShem says to Avraham: וְהָיָה בְרָכָה – "you should be a blessing [not a curse]" and yet we really can cause harm through our negative thoughts (especially ones that we ruminate upon) so it is good to have a handy antidote. I find the short prayer above, revised to the specifics of the moment, to be extremely useful.

There's so much more to say, but it will have to wait. Instead I'll close with a simple prayer:

May we have kind hearts.
May we have broad minds.
May all of our desires be true.
May we be free of the scourge of Adam's sin.
May we greet your mashiach and rejoice as one.

¹ R Naftali Tsvi Berlin (1816-1893), *HaEmek Davar*, Intro to Genesis.

² Isaiah 60:21.

³ Mishna Sota 41a; Sefer Ha'yerei'im, mitzvah 248, Sefer bmidbar 35:33; Nedarim 22a; Sha'arei Teshuva 3:187-188.

⁴ מהר"ל, ספר נתיבות עולם ב - נתיב אהבת ריע - פרק א

”פירוש בדבר זה רמזו כי אין דבר שהוא גורם לפעול בעולם כמו הבושה, כי עם גודל מעלת בהמ"ק שהוא בית קדוש א/להי על הכל גרמה חטא של הבושה שהבושה הוא בטול צלם הא/להי, עד שהחטא בזה גרם לבטל בהמ"ק הא/להי.

⁵ TB Kidushin 70a, and also BM 59b (מום שבך אל תאמר לחברך).

⁶ TB Eruvin 65a: R. Hanina observed: He who allows himself to be pacified when he is taking wine possesses some of the characteristics of his Creator, for it is said in Scripture: And the Lord smelled the sweet savour; and . . . said . . . “I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake”.(Gen. 8, 21), which shows that the Creator allowed himself to be pacified when enjoying, so to speak, a “sweet savour” (cf. prev. n.) and Maharasha on Gittin 55b-56a.

⁷ אשרי אדם מפחד תמיד. בפי' הרואה (ברכות ס.) אמרינן חזיה להווא גברא דהוה מפחד א"ל חטאה את דכתיב פחדו בציון חטאים ופריד מקרא דהכא ומוקי לה בדברי תורה שדואג שלא ישכח תלמודו וחוזר על משנתו תמיד והכא נמי מיייתי ליה אהני עובדי שבטחו על רוב טובתם ושלוותם לבייש את בר קמצא ולעמוד על בת קיסר והיה להם לפחד ולדאג מן הפורענות ולא דמי לאדם המתפחד בחנם:

⁸ Teshuva applies between man and God and also between people. In the former there are three steps; in the latter there are five:

BETWEEN PEOPLE AND BETWEEN MAN & GOD

Confession. Admitting that one has done wrong and specifying the affront.

Regret. Expressing a heartfelt apology that is proportionate to the hurt caused by the offense.

Commitment to change. Resolve not to repeat that behavior again.

BETWEEN PEOPLE

The same three as above plus:

Securing forgiveness. We must apologize at least three times until the injured party forgives the affront.

Reparation. We must compensate for damages that accrued from the offense.