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Avoiding the Pitfalls of History—or the Camel's Nose in the Tent

“Those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it.”

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

Neither Edmund Burke nor George Santayana, to whom these quotations are often credited, was Jewish, but the sentiment they express is found in Jewish culture as well. At this time of year in particular, the question of the lessons of history are on our minds.

Last Sunday, traditionalist Jewish communities observed the 17th of Tammuz, a day which begins the somber three-week period of restriction in the summer. The 17th of Tammuz marks the day on which the walls of Jerusalem were breached and leads up to the 9th of Av, a day when we commemorate the destruction of the First and Second Temples. In some communities, weddings are not celebrated, swimming is prohibited, and meat is not eaten, as a sign of mourning.

The reasons for the destruction of the First Temple were clear to later generations. After all, we can see that major and minor prophets warned the Kingdom of Judea that unless they changed their ways, exile would follow. Idolatry and oppression of the poor and vulnerable were two of the main sins which the prophets decried.

But the destruction of the Second Temple was more problematic. The rabbis of the Talmud traced their roots back to the great Pharisaic teachers of the first century, to great sages like Hillel and Shammai, and told stories of their learning and piety. In the rabbinic mindset, the scholars of past generations are always greater than those of the present time. In the midst, then, of this flourishing of Torah study and mitzvot, why was the Second Temple destroyed?

I'd like to look at that question this morning from three perspectives in order to see if there is anything we can learn that has implications for us today.

The first perspective is the geo-political. This perspective recognizes that certain geo-political realities can't be ignored. Israel's location at the crossroads of three continents has thus greatly influenced our history.

In Biblical times, being on the King's Road that connected the great civilizations of the Fertile Crescent with the Kingdoms of Egypt meant that Israel was literally in the crossfire when these empires went to war with each other. Assyria and Babylonia both fought Egypt with disastrous consequences for ancient Israel.

At the time of the destruction of the Second Temple, the Roman Empire's eastern border was with the Parthians, the rulers of Persia/Iran at that time. Since the Persians were the Roman Empire's longest standing enemy, a revolt in the region was something that Rome could not tolerate.

Today too, while the news often focuses on Israel and the Palestinians, the broader context of the Middle East—the failed Arab Spring in Egypt, Hezbollah's control of Lebanon, the ongoing civil war in Syria, and what is going on in Iran—is considered the greater strategic threat.

The second perspective is summed up in this folk saying: Beware of a camel's nose, for if the camel once gets his nose in the tent, his body will soon follow.

This folk saying seems to have originated in a children's story in which a miller, taking pity on a poor camel that must live out in the elements, brings the animal into his tent, only to soon find that he has a guest who is very difficult to dislodge. Similarly, the involvement of Rome in Jewish history began at the request of a descendent of the Maccabees, an heir to the throne in the first century BCE. The invitation soon led to unwelcome Roman intrusion into Jewish affairs.

Following the death of the Hasmonean Queen, Salome Alexandra, her sons, Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II, turned against each other in a civil war. In 63 BCE, Aristobulus was besieged in Jerusalem by his brother's armies. He sent an envoy to Marcus Aemilius Scaurus, Pompey's representative in the area. Aristobulus offered Scaurus a massive bribe in return for rescuing him, a bribe which Pompey promptly accepted.

Afterward, however, Aristobulus accused Scaurus of extortion. Since Scaurus was Pompey's brother-in-law and protégé, the general retaliated by putting Aristobulus's enemy, Hyrcanus, in charge of the kingdom as Prince and High Priest. So essentially, Hyrcanus was in power only because of Rome.

Like the camel in the tent, once the Romans were involved in Judean politics, they were difficult to dislodge, and by the time of Herod's reign, Judea was a client state. Finally, in 6 CE, Judea came under direct Roman rule as the southern part of the province of Iudaea, thus losing control of its destiny.

The interference of another power in the internal politics of a nation, even if at the invitation of a local ruler, is a bad sign and a harbinger of losses to follow. Might this history be something we should look at in greater depth today as outside involvement seems to have been invited in a recent political context?

Finally, the third perspective about why the Second Temple was destroyed is found in the answer the rabbis gave to this question. Best known is their explanation that *sinat chinam*, groundless hatred, was the cause of *Churban HaBayit*, the burning of the House of God. In the Talmud, the explanation for the destruction of the Second Temple comes in a long story of a man who mistakenly issued a party invitation to the wrong person, his servant having confused Kamza with Bar Kamza. When his enemy came to the party, rather than treating him politely, the host caused great embarrassment by removing the unwanted guest from the party, despite offers to appease the host and even to pay for the entire party. The rabbis who were present did not speak out and so were identified with the host's offense.

To get even, the man maligned these Jewish leaders to the government, setting up a series of incidents which broke down the relationship between the Jewish community and Rome, ultimately leading Rome to the conclusion that the Jews were rebelling.

Our tradition includes other explanations as well. The Tosefta, for example, states that the Second Temple was destroyed "because they love money and each one hates his neighbor." And the Yerushalmi states: "Rav Yochanan said: 'Jerusalem was destroyed only because the judges ruled in accordance with the strict letter

of the law, as opposed to ruling beyond the letter of the law.” In all of these explanations, the theme of moral cause emerges.

The undoing of a society is sometimes caused by threats from outside, sometimes by the shortsighted invitation to solve one problem that ends up creating a worse one, and sometimes by an inner corruption which undermines the common good. May we be moved by the contemplation of these three weeks to act so that we may be spared these devastating consequences.