

PREVENTING IDENTITY THEFT

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

Asara BeTeves

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The Medrash (Eichah Rabba 1:10) relates an interesting dialogue between Hashem and our forefather Avraham. "Rav Ukva said: On the night of the ninth of Av our father Avraham entered the Holy of Holies. The Holy One, blessed be He, grabbed him by the hand and walked with him on long paths and short ones. The Holy One, blessed be He, asked him, "What has My beloved to do in My house?" He answered, 'My Master, where are my children?' He said to him, "They have sinned, and I have exiled them among the nations." Avraham asked, "Were there no righteous people among them?" He replied, "She [Israel] has done vile deeds." Avraham said to Him "You should have considered the good among them." He replied, 'the mass of them were bad, as it is written, "She has done vile deeds, even the multitudes." Avraham said, You should have considered the covenant of circumcision in their flesh.' He replied, ' by your life, they have repudiated it, as it is stated, "And the holy flesh is passed from you." Not only that, but they rejoiced in each other's downfall' as it is written "When you do evil, then you rejoice," and it is written, "he that is glad at calamities will not be unpunished."

Rav Yehonasan Eibshitz (Yaaros D'vash, drush 4 and 10) notes that the dialogue, and in fact the whole episode, is unusual. Why would Avraham need a tour of the Bais HaMikdosh, the Holy Temple? Hashem clearly knew why Avraham was there - to advocate on behalf of his children. So why did Hashem ask? The Talmud tells us that the first Temple was destroyed because of idol worship, murder and illicit relationships. Yet, in the dialogue, the conversation focuses on "vile deeds," repudiation of circumcision, and an inherent hatred of one another, to the extent that people rejoiced in each other's downfalls. Why were these infractions singled out in this conversation?

Rav Eibshitz notes that the nation of Israel at the time of the destruction of the first Temple was indeed engaged in vile deeds. The fault found in the generation that lived at the time of the destruction of the second Temple was pervasive baseless hatred. However, the first exile lasted a

mere 70 years; the second exile is the one in which we currently find ourselves. In truth, the first exile, due to the severity of the nation's transgressions, should have lasted longer. However, there was a great danger if that would have happened. The nation of Israel was losing its connection to its roots. The people were forgetting the Torah. They stopped performing distinctive observances. They married members of the other nations. The nation was in danger of losing its identity as the nation of Israel. That spiraling decline had to be put to a quick halt. Hashem, in His mercy, did just that.

Ezra arose to lead the people, and with the leaders of the generations following him, they reestablished the preeminence of Torah in the lives of the people. They instituted changes so that the Torah would not be forgotten. When the second Temple was destroyed and the people found themselves in exile once again, they were a different nation than the exiles from the first destruction. They had been fortified in Torah over years and years. The Torah was ingrained in their being. Their identity was not at risk of being lost. The original exile, which needed to be cut short, now continued. And that is where we find ourselves today.

God asked Avraham "What business do you have with My house - would you not prefer that I exact my punishment on a building of stones rather than the people? Avraham replied that if that was the case, where are the people? Why were they exiled? Avraham was not troubled about his children being in exile. He knew, as he entered into a covenant with God, that they would eventually be redeemed from that exile. However, he was concerned about the effect of that exile - what would the nation look like upon its emergence from exile? Hashem had to allay his fears. He showed Avraham that there would be a short exile and a long exile. He explained why they were going into exile, and why the short exile would be short - the people were losing their identity, they had lost their connection with God. The nation was en masse engaged in vile behavior. They tried to hide their circumcision, that bodily manifestation that distinguished them from the other nations. They rejoiced in each other's downfall. Rav Eibshitz notes that the primary hatred was not based in the common citizen's hatred of his brethren, although that existed as well. The ones who were most despised, whose downfall was most celebrated, were the scholars, those who dutifully studied the Torah and adhered to its dictates. These behaviors, in sum, amounted to an absolute rejection of Hashem and His Torah.

The Fast of the 10th of Teves recalls the beginning of the end. The series of events that led to the destruction of the first Temple began: Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to the city of Jerusalem. This fast occurs as the remembrances of our last observance, Chanukah, have just begun to fade. On Chanukah, we recall how a small group fought against the massive pressure to drop their Jewish identity. Only a few days later, we fast to recall the start of an exile that began for that very reason. We know that fast days are intended to be days of introspection, days of repentance. The fast of the 10th of Teves is a particularly appropriate time to reflect on our Jewish identity. Do we act in a fashion that comports with the description given to those in the nation of Israel as modest, merciful and kind? Do we properly value and respect the Torah and its standard bearers? The lessons of

Chanukah and the 10th of Teves should serve to make us a stronger nation, as individuals and as a whole.

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The author has Rabbinic ordination from Mesivta Tifereth Jerusalem, NY.