

PETTY SQUABBLE TO BASELESS HATRED

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"How can I alone support your bother, your burden, and your arguments? Take wise and understanding men for yourselves, who are known to your tribes, and I will place them at your head... And I took the heads of your tribes, wise and understanding men, and I placed them as heads over you, ministers over thousands, ministers over hundreds, ministers over fifties, and ministers over tens, and police for your tribes." [Dev. 1:12-13, 15]

The Seforno says that there is an implied rebuke in the appointment of judges over Israel, extending even to "ministers over tens." Even though the Nation of Israel was told that they would enter and inherit the Land of Israel without needing to fight for it, receiving something far greater and honorable than all their property, nonetheless they could not stop bickering and arguing -- to the point that every group of ten needed its own personal judge.

Despite the universal notation in chumashim (printed texts of the Torah) to begin the second portion of this week's reading with verse twelve, as above, there is a similarly universal custom to stop one verse earlier instead. The reason: the first word of verse twelve, "Eichah," is the same as the first word of the Book of Lamentations which we read on the Ninth of Av. The Ninth of Av is the day of mourning for the destruction of our two Temples and other Jewish tragedies, and it follows Shabbos Parshas Devorim according to our calendar. So rather than proclaiming loudly any connection between our parsha and Lamentations, we begin the second portion one verse earlier.

Here, perhaps, in the connection of "Eichah" to "Eichah," we find an additional layer of rebuke. Our Sages tell us that the First Temple was destroyed because Israel had violated the "cardinal sins" of idolatry, murder and immorality, while the Second was destroyed because of baseless hatred. I think a connection can easily be drawn from the sin to which Moshe alludes, to those things which destroyed the Temples.

On the one hand, the Seforno implies that each person was overly concerned with his own property, to the point of pettiness. But in order for an argument to reach the courts, there also needs to be a lack of communication, an inability to reconcile differences, and a corresponding lack of concern for the _other_ person's property. After going to the courts, when the loser no longer has any justified claims against the other, all he is often left with is... baseless hatred towards his adversary. And, of course, when baseless hatred is taken in turn to its extreme, it can lead to murder. Even immorality often demonstrates a lack of concern for another person and the uniqueness of his or her spousal relationship. So we see that the hatred and discord which destroyed the Temples had their roots in

the "petty squabbles" of the Jews generations before.

If needless hatred begins with a lack of communication, then increased communication can remove the hatred and divisions that remain between us. With proper communication, we can counter the misinformation that often causes hatred, and develop new relationships outside our own groups. In short, as we mourn the Temple's destruction, we can also make our own best efforts to ensure that it is rebuilt - speedily in our day, Amen.

Good Shabbos!

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