

CONFRONTATION

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The month of Tevet, which begins, believe it or not, our slow but inexorable countdown to Purim and Pesach, is marked by the fast day of the tenth of Tevet. The fast day of the tenth of Tevet marks the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem, which eventually led to the destruction of the holy Temple and the exile of Israel from its homeland. However, Jewish tradition records that the ninth day of Tevet is also a sad day on the Jewish calendar worthy of being declared a fast day by itself.

This ninth day of Tevet is mentioned in Shulchan Aruch at Orach Chayim, Section 580, sub-section two. But the language there is most cryptic for it states that the ninth day of Tevet is a sad day for "troubles that occurred on that day that are no longer known to us." How are we to commemorate a day that has no meaning for us? And why should the rabbis have hidden, so to speak, the matter so that it is "no longer known to us?"

In the selichot, the penitential prayers for the tenth day of Tevet, reference is made to the day of the ninth of Tevet as being the day of death of the great Jewish leader, Ezra the Scribe. In those selichot as well and so also in the above section of the Shulchan Aruch, the eighth day of Tevet is also mentioned as a day that is a candidate for being a fast day.

The reason given for this sad day is that it is the anniversary of the forced translation of the Torah into Greek - the Septuagint - by the emperor of Egypt, Ptolemy. Thus we have three consecutive sad potential fast days following one upon the other in the month of Tevet. According to the selichot recited on the tenth of Tevet, all of these fast days have been united into the one fast day of the tenth of Tevet.

We are still left with the troublesome and somewhat mysterious question as to why the Shulchan Aruch did not clearly identify the ninth day of Tevet as being the day of the death of Ezra the Scribe. Ezra ranks only second to Moshe in the hierarchy of the transmitters of Torah to the Jewish people. The rabbis of the Talmud taught us that "if the Torah had not been given through Moshe then it would have been given through Ezra." It therefore appears rather unlikely that the rabbis would purposely hide his day of death and give that sad day an anonymous character.

There are also opinions that the date of Ezra's passing was in fact the eighth of Tevet and not the ninth. As such, the mystery regarding the ninth of Tevet only deepens. Judaic scholars abhor mysteries and thus many theories have been advanced as to the reason for the sadness and trouble that occurred on the ninth day of Tevet. Though there are no hard and fast proofs that can sustain

any of these theories, there is one fascinating theory that I wish to share with you.

I attended a lecture a number of years ago given by Professor Shneur Z. Leiman, the head of Judaic studies at Brooklyn College in New York. Professor Leiman is a great Talmudic scholar and a recognized scholar and expert in Judaic studies generally. He proposed that based upon recurring Jewish legends about the possibility of there being Jewish popes in the early years of Christianity and the fact that the rabbis of the time of the Mishna exerted all efforts to delineate Judaism as a religion completely separate and distinct from even nascent Christianity, the rabbis placed a "mole" - one of their own colleagues - into the hierarchy of the then beginning church to insure that it would completely separate itself from the Jewish people and Judaism per se.

This person naturally was awarded the cover of anonymity by the rabbis and his mission was most successful, for Christianity, early on, did separate itself completely from Jews and Judaism. Various names have been submitted to identify the true identity of this person. I remember that Professor Leiman chose a likely candidate but I no longer recall who he was. This anonymous hero of the rabbis and the Jewish people died on the ninth of Tevet and he is remembered, albeit anonymously, by the cryptic reference to that date in the Shulchan Aruch. I cannot vouch for the veracity of this theory but it certainly made for one fascinating and intriguing lecture. **Vayigash**

Yehuda confronts Yosef regarding all of the false accusations he has piled on to his brothers. Both Yosef and Yehuda have right on their side. Yehuda is certainly correct in sensing that Yosef has a personal agenda of animosity towards him and his brothers that has expressed itself in all of the false accusations that he has leveled against them. Yosef is justified in his behavior towards his brothers in order to bring them to the realization of the terrible sin they committed against him and Yaakov when they sold him as a slave and covered up the event for over twenty years.

Both Yehuda and Yosef are strong personalities, each convinced in the rectitude of one's cause and opposition. Yosef has the upper hand since the brothers are under his jurisdiction and arrest. Yet Yosef is weakened by the knowledge that these are his brothers and that any act of revenge that he may take upon them may at the end rebound negatively to him and his family. This knowledge of the difficulty and ambivalence of the situation is the reason for his weeping and finally, of his revealing himself as their long lost brother.

His pursuit of ultimate justice and full repentance of the brothers appears to be too dangerous a course to pursue further. The unity of the family, the knowledge of the grief of his father and his compounding of that grief by his behavior towards the brothers until now, finally takes precedence over the strict justice that he apparently intended to inflict upon them. Sometimes truly, discretion is the better part of valor.

Yehuda and all of the brothers are shocked and dismayed, speechless in fright and shame, at the revelation of Yosef to them. They realize that they were wrong in discounting his dreams and in taking such a drastic step as to remove him from their immediate family. Yet the tear between Yosef

and his brothers lingers and will reawaken itself after the death of Yaakov.

Even later in Jewish history when the kingdom of Solomon splits into two it is Yehuda and Yosef that still confront each other. Each then also has right on its side but that division turns into disaster for the Jewish people and its sovereignty in the Land of Israel. There are many times in life when pushing right and justice to the limit can have very negative consequences in the long run of events.

Yosef's revelation to his brothers before he exacted a full measure of justice from them allowed the family to reunite, albeit with tensions and past wrongs not fully resolved. This course of behavior is analogous to the idea of the Talmud that there are many times that a person must behave l'fnim meshurat hadin - in a fashion that is beyond the demands of justice alone. The behavior of both Yosef and Yehuda in this confrontation and its resolution for the benefit of family unity testifies to their wisdom and holiness in a most dangerous and volatile situation.

Shabat shalom.

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