

# "Make For Yourself a Teacher: Learning Across Denominations"

an evening of cross-community learning for *Tisha B'av*

co-sponsored by DC Beit Midrash and

the American Jewish Committee's Interdenominational Jewish Women's Leadership Dialogue

9 Av, 5764

July 27, 2004

Washington DCJCC

7:30 - 9:00 pm

Sources for study

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## Tisha B'av: Destruction of the Temples

### FIRST TEMPLE

(1a) from *Book of Legends: Legends from the Talmud and Midrash*. Bialik and Ravnitzky, eds., p.431, based on B. Shab 119b

R. Judah stated: Jerusalem was destroyed only because disciples of the wise were despised there, as is said, "They mocked the messengers of God, and despised His words, and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against His people, till there was no remedy" (2 Chron 36:16). What does "Till there was no remedy" suggest? That for the illness of him who despises disciples of the wise, so said R. Judah in the name of Rav, there is no remedy [B. Shab 119b]

### SECOND TEMPLE

(1b) p.193, *Book of Legends, ibid*, based on B. Yoma 9b

Why was the First Temple destroyed? Because of three evils in it: idolatry\*, immorality, and bloodshed. But why was the Second temple destroyed, seeing that during the time it stood people occupied themselves with Torah, with observance of precepts, and with practice of charity? Because during the time it stood, hatred without rightful cause prevailed. This is to teach you baseless hatred is deemed as grave as all three sins of idolatry, immorality, and bloodshed together.

\*Compare with explanation offered in Source 1a above --  
Reconciling sources equate mocking God's messengers with idolatry.

## TEACHERS

(2a) from Maimonides' *Hilchot Talmud Torah* [Laws of Torah Study], chapter 4

One should not study from a teacher who does not follow a proper path, even though he is a very wise man and his [instruction] is required by the entire nation, until he returns to a good path, as [implied by Malachi 2:7]: "For the priest's lips shall keep knowledge, and they shall seek Torah from his mouth, because he is a messenger from the Lord of Hosts."

Our Sages said: If a teacher resembles "a messenger of the Lord of Hosts," seek Torah from his mouth. If he does not, do not seek Torah from his mouth.

(2b) from chapter six of *Hilchot Talmud Torah*

It is a great sin to disgrace Torah sages or to hate them. Jerusalem was not destroyed until [its inhabitants] disgraced its sages, as implied by [II Chronicles 36:16]: "And they would mock the messengers of God, despise His words, and scoff at His prophets" -- i.e., they would scorn those who taught His words.

Similarly, the Torah prophecy [Leviticus 26:16] "If you despise My statutes" [should be interpreted]: "If you despise the teachers of My statutes." Whoever disgraces the sages has no portion in the world to come and is included in the category: "Those who scorn the word of God" [Numbers 15:31]

## STUDENTS

(3a) -- from *Hilchot Talmud Torah*, chapter 4

Torah should be taught only to a proper student -- one whose deeds are attractive -- or to a person whose behavior is unknown. However [a potential student] who follows bad ways should be influenced to correct his behavior and trained to follow a straight path. [After he repents, his deeds] are examined and he is allowed to enter the house of study to be instructed.

Our Sages said: Whoever teaches an improper student is considered as if he throws a stone to Mercury [an ancient worship practice related to the Roman god of wayfarers], as [Proverbs 26:8] states: "As one who winds a stone in a sling, so is he who gives honor to a fool." There is no "honor" other than Torah, as [Proverbs 3:35] states: "The wise shall inherit honor."

(3b) from p. 416, *Book of Legends* (*op.cit.*)

Raise up many pupils.

The school of Shammai says: A man is to teach only one who is wise, humble, of good stock, and rich.

But the school of Hillel says: Every man is to be taught. For there were many transgressors in Israel who were attracted to the study of Torah, and out of them sprang righteous, pious, and worthy men. What parable may illustrate the matter? The one of a woman who sets a hen to brood on eggs -- out of many eggs, she may hatch only a few chicks; but out of a few eggs, possibly not even one.

## INSUFFICIENT STUDY

(4) from p. 208, *Book of Legends*, based on B. Sanh 88b

When disciples of Shammai and Hillel who had not studied sufficiently grew numerous, disputes multiplied in Israel, and the Torah became two Torahs.

### Some sources and publication information:

*Book of Legends: Legends from the Talmud and Midrash*. Bialik & Ravnitzky, eds. Wm. G. Braude, trans. NY: Schocken, 1992.

(a compilation of rabbinic lore, published in Odessa, 1908-1911, by co-founders of the modern Hebrew publishing house, Dvir)

*Mishneh Torah: Hilchot De'ot/Hilchot Talmud*. Rambam. R. Eliyahu Touger, trans. NY: Moznaim, 1989

(*Hilchot Talmud Torah* [Laws of Torah Study] is published together with *Hilchot De'ot* [Laws of Personality Development] in a bilingual edition of the *Mishneh Torah* [Repetition of the Teaching], written by the 12th Century CE sefardi scholar Rambam. [R. Moses ben Maimon aka Maimonides], who lived much of his life in Cairo.

### "Make for yourself a teacher"

questions for group discussion and/or chavruta learning

How do we reconcile Source 2a and Source 2b?

Can an individual or movement within Judaism refuse to learn with a teacher without disgracing or hating that teacher? How?

Look back at Source 1a -- What does it mean to despise teachers "until there is no remedy"?

Are individuals or movements within Judaism today despising one another's teachers to the point of "no remedy"? Is such a situation preventable? How?

Compare Source 4 -- Has our Torah become two Torahs?

If so, what, if anything, can be done to rectify the situation?

If not, what can be done to prevent it?

What does Source 4 suggest about the relationship between disputes and "sufficient study"?

## Another View of Tisha B'av

remarks from Dialogue member Naomi Rosenblatt

### Recalling Rebellion

It is an essential characteristic of Judaism to draw a moral lesson from historical events: The Exodus, one people's escape from slavery, becomes a more general call for human freedom; the triumph of a small group of zealots over a larger army teaches "not by might but by spirit."

Touching examples of this characteristic in action are found in the rabbinic interpretation of calamities befalling the Jewish people. The destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE is attributed by the rabbis to intra-Jewish strife, a kind of sibling rivalry that led to civil war. However, the emphasis on the moral lesson and the fasting and the prayers obscures the historical aspect of the war of the Jews against the vast Roman Empire.

The brave war against Rome, which the Jews conducted for four long and terrible years, was a unique rebellion in Roman history. The fighting for Jerusalem, that continued for three solid years, was brave and courageous. The people withstood starvation, rape, and massacres. The ultimate -- and inevitable -- triumph of Rome over the zealots who defended Jerusalem was a victory of numbers, as legion after legion poured into the city until it fell.

Still standing in Rome today is evidence of how important the Romans considered this victory over the small, but tenacious Jewish people. Titus, son of Emperor Vespasian, had been sent to vanquish Jerusalem and, upon his return to Rome, he ordered construction of the Arch of Titus to commemorate the victory. On the Arch are engraved pictures of looted ritual items, such as the Temple's menorah, as well as depictions of slaves, Jews who'd survived the carnage in Jerusalem, who were brought to Rome in chains.

Jews visiting the Arch of Titus, should do so out of pride at the courage and tenacity of the Jews who fought off the mighty empire for three years and not to recall the shame of defeat nor to mourn the loss of Jerusalem. In fact, Jewish visitors often spit when viewing the Arch.

### Celebrating Survival

Even within the tragic story of Jerusalem's defeat, there is a silver lining to celebrate: One year before the ultimate defeat of Jerusalem, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai escaped from the city to the town of Yavneh, north of Jerusalem. Ben Zakkai's students, pretending he was a victim of the plague, which was raging at that time, carried him out of Jerusalem in a coffin; once outside, ben Zakkai obtained permission from Emperor Vespasian to establish the first yeshivah (academy of Jewish learning) in Yavneh. This yeshivah was destined to play a central role in the spiritual survival of the Jewish people, helping to replace the sacrificial system with a Judaism based on prayer and study.

Similarly, even the misery of the Holocaust left a silver lining as a legacy: the modern State of Israel. The small, often beleaguered Jewish people continues to survive and thrive. With this in mind, the mournful day of Tisha B'av should be balanced by recalling the "silver linings" of Jewish history: from the bravery of the Jewish rebellion against Rome to the founding of the State of Israel.

To learn more about the rebellion era, see *The Jewish War* by the ancient author Josephus (available from Penguin Classics), *The Book of Legends* (op cit.), and/or, e.g., Raymond Scheindlin's *A Short History of the Jewish People* (Oxford Univ, 2000).

## The American Jewish Committee's Interdenominational Women's Leadership Dialogue

The first AJC Intra-Jewish Dialogue began in New York City in 1996, aiming to take advantage of the open lines of communication among women leaders to reduce tensions in the Jewish community -- especially evident in the wake of the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin.

The Washington Chapter's Dialogue, which began in 1999, similarly explores ways to bring together Jews of different views and practices. Participants include both lay leaders and members of the clergy, teachers and writers in the Washington community, from the spectrum of Jewish life -- Traditional Orthodox, Modern Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, Pluralistic and Renewal.

"Make For Yourself a Teacher" is the first public program of the Washington Dialogue. The Dialogue is grateful for the collaboration of the DC Beit Midrash on this program and for the great foundation in cross-community Jewish learning they have developed since their inception two years ago.

Dialogue members Sharon Freundel, Virginia Spatz, and Matlee Yadin developed this source booklet with input from Liz Diament and Nancy Lang; Naomi Rosenblatt provided "another view." Dialogue members Rabbi Leila Gal Berner, Lauren Brownstein, Dottie Bennett, Judith Dack, Ann Gilbert, Amanda Katz, and Marion Usher also contributed to this program, directly or indirectly.