

SHABBAT SERMON
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RABBI MITCHELL WOHLBERG

Who Knows 21?

A recent survey revealed that nearly 70% of the people who used the Internet seeking answers for Halachic questions do so because they say it's easier to reach the Internet than to reach their rabbis! When I read that, I decided it was time to come home from vacation before you decide to trade me in for a laptop!

I am back ... not permanently, but for a while ... long enough to teach you today just how smart I am, and to give you the Jewish perspective on Blackjack; or more correctly, 21.

If I asked you what came to mind when I say the number 21, I suspect most people would say "Blackjack." But you should know that for a Jew, the number 21 has a completely different meaning. In fact, several different meanings! The number 21 pops up in the least likely places. For example: the first letter of each of the five books of the Torah are: beiz, vov, vov, vov and alef. Put that all together and it equals 21. The first letter of the names of our three patriarchs, Avraham, Yitzchok and Yaacov, is an alef, a yud and a yud which equals 21. The Ten Commandments begins with the alef of Anochi and ends with the chuf of Reiecha; also equaling 21. What does this all prove? Not much that I can think of, but if you can, please let me know! All I know is that this Shabbos finds itself in the midst of 21 sad days in the Hebrew calendar, beginning with last Sunday's fast of the 17th of Tammuz and continuing for three weeks through the fast of Tisha B'av. These 21 days are marked as days of sadness in the Jewish calendar because of the many tragedies that took place during these days over the course of time, but most especially because of the destruction of the Temples in Jerusalem.

Our sages draw a distinction between what caused the destruction of the first Temple, and what caused the destruction of the second Temple. The first, they said, came about because the Jews violated the commandments of murder, idolatry and sexual immorality. The second took place because the Jews were guilty of sinat chinom – baseless hatred. The first Temple was rebuilt when the Jews no longer violated those commandments. The second Temple has still not been rebuilt, obviously because we Jews still exhibit sinat chinom – baseless hatred. And we're suffering from it ... and for it right now.

Let me show you how smart I am. Some years ago I received a call from one of the most prominent Reform rabbis in our community. He had a favor to ask of me. His son, who had gone on Aliyah and had served in the Israel Defense Forces, was now planning on getting married and he needed a letter from a rabbi certifying that he was Jewish. And this Reform rabbi – my friend, this man who does so much good for the Jewish people – could not write the letter about his own son, because Israel's rabbinate does not accept testimony or certification from a non-Orthodox rabbi.

I must tell you that I was embarrassed by the phone call. I was embarrassed that this prominent rabbi who had a son who had given him so much nachas, had to ask *me* to write this letter. My children had not gone on Aliyah, and my children had not served in the Israel Defense Forces ... but I could write this letter, and he couldn't. And of course, I wrote the letter. When I told an Orthodox colleague of mine how disturbing I found this entire incident and how much I was bothered by the whole system, he told me that this is the way it had to be; "Reform rabbis have done this, and Reform rabbis have done that ... they can't be accepted, their word cannot be trusted." I didn't want to get into an argument that I knew wouldn't go anywhere, and I knew that his sentiments are shared by other Orthodox rabbis, so I simply said to him, "Don't worry, the same rabbis in Israel who won't accept the word of a Reform rabbi today, someday won't accept your word as well."

And today, I'm sorry to say, I was right! It came to a head a few months ago and it has torn Israel's religious community apart with serious ramifications for the Jews in the United States as well. It came to a head in May when a Rabbi Avroham Sherman and two other ultra-Orthodox judges from the Chief Rabbinate ruled Rabbi Chaim Drukman is disqualified to be a judge and all conversions performed by him with Israel's National Conversion Court since 1999 are retroactively annulled. It's hard to imagine how serious and damaging this ruling was. First, it meant that thousands of people who were converted by the Court – many of them Russian immigrants – and their children are no longer considered Jewish. They have been "thrown out" of the Jewish people. That's unheard of! And let's remember who this Rabbi Chaim Drukman that they disqualified is ... he is one of the leading lights of religious Zionism; one of the heads of Bnei Akivah, the religious Zionist youth movement, and a leader of the Hesder Yeshivot – those schools where students learn in Yeshivot for six months and serve in the Army for six months. He is one of our people's best and brightest. For a long time the ultra-Orthodox in Israel have been undermining the work and authority of the religious Zionist rabbis and leaders. And now they were attempting a fatal blow ... the ramifications of which go all the way to our synagogue. In the past, my performing conversions and my officiating at weddings had been accepted by the Israeli Rabbinate. My letters certifying people as being Jewish have been accepted. But I don't know if that is true anymore ... nobody knows!

Which brings us back to the *sinat chinom* – the baseless hatred of Tisha B'av. The Talmud tells a classic story relating to baseless hatred and the destruction of the Temple. It is reflected in the words of the Talmud which says the destruction of Jerusalem came through a certain *Kamtza* and *Barkamtza*. The story in its simplest form tells of a man who invited his friend, *Kamtzah*, to a party and by mistake the invitation went to a man he disliked named *BarKamtza*. *BarKamtza* showed up at the party and wasn't allowed to stay, and felt humiliated when some of the rabbis present didn't say anything and so eventually he left and, in revenge, went to the local Roman authority and told him: "The Jews are rebelling against you;" leading to the destruction of the Temple.

The story is a rather strange one; we are not sure exactly where the baseless hatred is ... was it the man with *BarKamtza*, was it the reaction of *BarKamtza* in turning on his people, was it the silence of the rabbis ... who knows? But, for our purposes it is most important to know that this story as related is not the whole story, for the story continues by telling us that the Roman governor said to *BarKamtza*: "How do I know that they are rebelling against Rome's authority?"

And BarKamtza said, “Send them an offering and see whether they will offer it on the alter.” And here’s what BarKamtza did: he took a beautiful calf that the Roman’s were giving as an offering, and while on the way, made a slight blemish on it, rendering it unfit in the eyes of Jewish law as an offering. When the calf was brought to the Temple many of the rabbis said: let it be offered, this is the only way we will keep peace with the government. But a Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkulas said to them: we can’t do that, otherwise in the future people will think you can offer an animal with such a blemish. Some rabbis then said that BarKamtza should be killed – he is a traitor and he is going to squeal on his own people! But the same Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkulas said no, if we kill him, in the future people will say that someone who makes a blemish on consecrated animals should be put to death. So Reb Zechariah got his way; the law was strictly kept, and because of this, said Rebbi Yochanan: “Our Temple was destroyed, our sanctuary burned down, our people exiled from our land.”

We lost Jerusalem ... we lost the Temple ... because one rabbi was uncompromising and couldn’t care less what the consequences were to be.

So that’s the story. And 2000 years later, nothing seems to have changed; scholars of the Talmud haven’t learned the lessons of the Talmud. In the name of God, they are dividing our people. For a long time now ultra-Orthodox rabbis and ultra-Orthodox publications, when referring to Reform or Conservative rabbis, refer to them by name but never with the title “Rabbi.” Now they are doing the same with Rabbi Drukman. How sad ... how tragic. This is baseless hatred ... and those rabbis who practice it? They should know what’s in store for them. Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkulas, who practiced it 2000 years ago in the incident of BarKamtza, has absolutely no legacy to speak of. That’s the only time his name is mentioned in the Talmud. It’s as if the Jewish people from then on wanted to have nothing to do with him and with what he stood for.

All of our actions as Jews must take into consideration other Jews, and must take into consideration what the consequences of our actions are. For there is another 21 in the Jewish tradition ... there is the name that God uses to describe Himself. When Moses asks God what his name is, what did God answer? Ehyeh ... the four letters of which equal to 21. “Ehyeh ... I will be.” All of God’s actions take into consideration future consequences. May we learn from God and may we be like God, as reflected in the words of our prayers: “Attah Echad v’shimcha echad u’mi k’amcha Yisroel goy echad b’eretz – God is one and His name is one, and who is like His people Israel: one nation on earth.” Amen.

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