LEARNING FROM THE PAST AND PRESENT: RABBINIC AND COMMUNAL RESPONSES TO CRISIS

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To be able to respond to crisis, we must identify where we are within the great sweep and cycle of Jewish history. The relationship between God and the universe is continually evolving, and so must our responses to challenges.

I sit in my kitchen on the Upper West Side of New York sifting through the daily news. My kitchen is bright and festooned with Jewish artifacts of triumph. There are pictures of my family celebrating in Israel, a picture of my daughter at her Bat Mitzvah, easily identifiable Jewish and Israeli art, and even a shelf filled with Jewish cookbooks. On one wall I have volumes of Jewish poetry, literature, and history. But as I look at the newspaper, I feel dark, with a certain difficult-to-identify sense of déjà vu. The paper is filled with ominous Jewish stories—from suicide bombers to outbreaks of anti-Semitism in Europe and even calls for jihad against our tiny remnant. Some time ago, I sat with a ruler and measured how many column inches were actually devoted to Jews. It wasn't that many. But today my eye scans for "J's" and "I's" first, and the paper seems devoted entirely to being the "rough draft" of the history of our destruction.

Jewish literature and memory move easily between triumph and destruction. Secure times feel precarious and precarious times disastrous. Our earliest stories bear this mark. Abraham stands over his son with his knife in the air, ready to slay his future, while at the same time fulfilling the directive of his covenant with God. Which one is it? The murder or the covenant? The binding of Isaac is a solitary and wind-blown story of an old man and his son. But by the time of the Babylon conquest, the story has grown to mythic proportions. How could the Babylonians win? What happened to the covenant with God? Maybe there is a deeper meaning to the destruction.

A theory of history provides a framework for contemplating these questions, and those of late biblical and rabbinic responses to crisis. There are many models that explain leadership decisions during Jewish moments of duress. For a variety of reasons, I concentrate here on a kabalistic approach. In *Liqqutim Hadashim,* the sixteenth-century mystic, Hayyim Vital, the disciple of Rabbi Isaac Luria, wrote of *tsimtsum* and *shevirah* (withdrawal and shattering) at the instant of creation. The image is based on the notion that when God created the universe, God was "everywhere." But if God was everywhere, where could the universe be put? Vital's approach, based on a long kabalistic lineage, is that God, instead of creating the universe outside God's self, instead withdraws or concentrates into God's self. This allows the universe, which is always in potential, to burst, expand, and then inflate into being. The question then is, When God withdrew, was it at the same rate as the expansion of the universe or was it a little faster? If it was a little faster, that would mean that the distance between God and the universe would grow over time. This, in turn, would mean that the relationship between the universe and God would be changing constantly and it would be crucial to gain knowledge of where we are in that equation.

We can find traces of this image in the Torah itself. In the Garden of Eden, God is

walking through the garden in the cool of the afternoon. Yet, by the time of Cain and Abel, all we are left with is a disembodied voice. The generation of the Tower of Babel feels that it must build high in order to reach God, and Abraham is only able to contact God in a deep sleep.

We also see this shift in the political arena in the stories of two kings, Hezekiah and Josiah. Hezekiah is the king of Judah in 722 B.C.E. during the time when the Assyrians destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel (II Kings 19:8–37). Hezekiah is also under threat, as is made clear by a letter from King Sennacheriv. Hezekiah believes that he must gather an army and fortify the city of Jerusalem in order to be delivered from the hands of the enemy. He also knows that he has to look to God, though he is not sure that this will suffice to save the day. He receives a second message, this time from the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah takes a totally different tack: "Fair Jerusalem shakes her head at you!" The message to Hezekiah is not to worry about the military, but instead to hire a lot of Jewish communal workers and address the social problems that have grown up in Jerusalem. Hezekiah responds that he does not think that this will work against the Assyrians. Isaiah counters, "I don't know either, but I am certain that the military option will fail." Hezekiah complies with Isaiah's wishes, and "that night an angel of the Lord went out and struck down 185,000 in the Assyrian camp, and the following morning they were all dead corpses" (II Kings 19:35). This is an excellent military outcome for a decidedly mystical strategy.

The next king in this situation is Josiah, who comes to rule after a number of disastrous administrations. In II Kings 21, we learn that Manasseh had rebuilt many of the idolatrous shrines that Hezekiah had destroyed. When Josiah comes to power, this all changes. By Josiah's eighth year (633 B.C.E.), there is a marked shift in national policy (II Chronicles, 34:3). Everything in the kingdom of Judah goes through a transformation and reform. A decade later (622 B.C.E.), the reforms reach their climax at the very same time as the Assyrian enemy collapses. Josiah rebuilds the kingdom to include the north, expanding the territory to approximately the same size as the Kingdom of David. By 609 B.C.E., Josiah must have felt very strong. He no doubt believed that, like his ancestor Hezekiah, he was the embodiment of the equation in Deuteronomy that a good king brings good to the nation and a bad king brings bad. Yet, the great powers of the day, Egypt and Babylonia, were about to engage in a grand-scale international struggle. Josiah believed that his continuation of religious reform guaranteed him protection and longevity, and so he confidently rode out to Megiddo to stop the troop movements of Egypt's Pharoah Neco. There, in a border skirmish that was insignificant in the overall history of the region, Josiah is killed. Why? The people were in disbelief.

Using the kabbalistic analysis of Hayyim Vital, Josiah thought that he lived under the same conditions as Hezekiah, only to find out that the distance between God and the universe had widened and God's protection had weakened. Josiah's prophet is Jeremiah, and he is left to mourn the loss of the good king and, within 25 years, the destruction of the Temple. We are in exile in Babylonia for less than a century, but we never regain the innocence of the reign of Hezekiah.

The Book of Lamentations is bleak in its response to the desolation of Jerusalem. Yet, it is not without hope. The rabbis assign the authorship of Lamentations to the prophet Jeremiah, who asserts that the exile will be short and the return glorious, if accompanied by a new understanding of the covenant, which is now based on a different, if evolving, theological situation. Not understanding the evolution turns previously righteous acts into disastrous folly.

In the Passover Haggadah, we hear about the seder in B'nei Brak that lasted throughout the night. The authors of the Haggadah cared a lot about this story and put it in prime time, before the kids get too cranky and your

grandmother wants to eat dinner. That seder features an all-star cast, including Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua, who was carrying the casket hiding Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai out of Jerusalem (Gittin 56a). There is also Rabbi Tarfon, who knew that "the time was short and the task was great" and the young Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya, who only looked to be seventy but was in fact sitting in as a replacement for the imperious Rabban Gamliel. And then there was Rabbi Akiva who had visited the mystical orchard and emerged unscathed. But why do we hear of this seder?

The concluding line of this story is decisive. Students come and say to the rabbis, "*Rabboteinu,* the time has come to recite the morning Shema." It is an odd story. First, who are the students to tell these rabbis that it is time to recite the morning Shema? These are the rabbis who decided when the Shema was to be recited in the first place. Second, why weren't the students at the seder? If this was the "dream-team seder," shouldn't the students have been hanging on every word?

To understand the drama of this story, we have to look ahead to its bookend on Yom Kippur. In the *Eyleh Ezkerah,* the elegy lamenting the ten martyrs who died during the Bar Kochba Revolt, we hear that Rabbi Akiva, oblivious to his pain and surroundings, steadily intones the Shema as the last words of his life, words forbidden by the Romans. At the seder, the student's words can be seen as a challenge to the rabbis. Enough talking! The seder is too long. Time for action! Time to rebel against the Romans. But do the students know where they are in the equation? Maybe the rabbis were right, and it was actually a time for study.

The most difficult part of this story is that if the Romans forbade the students from attending the seder, then maybe the rabbis kept them out because of *pikuah nefesh,* because it endangered their lives. But, alternately, was the Passover story, with all of its plagues and the strong hand of God saving the day, the necessary story for them to hear in order to save their own lives and ultimately the nation? In the Haggadah, right after the plague section, the rabbis begin to fantasize: "not ten plagues, but 50 plagues or 250 plagues." Could the students have seen that, in the year 134 C.E., not even a single plague had come? Should they have, instead, spent the night evaluating where they were in the analysis of Hayyim Vital and acted in a way that would have prevented the martyrdom of old Rabbi Akiva?

In my kitchen, as I look at the newspaper, I try to understand not only ancient Jewish responses to crisis but also my own strategy. Would the history of the 20th century have been different if the rabbinic community, or a group of outstanding Jewish communal leaders, had evaluated the century's dangers and Vital's equation and spoken out?

We must be able to identify where we are in Jewish history and not respond to crisis as if conditions have remained static. What worked for Hezekiah did not work for Josiah, just as what worked for Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai did not work for Rabbi Akiva. But what is certainly important is to see our current situation within the great sweep and cycle of Jewish history. We must avoid responding to the last crisis and instead encounter the changed conditions of the present.