

Shai Held, Judaism is About Love (2024)

LOVE IN THE RUINS

Responding to Devastation

IMAGINE LIVING IN a world that seems fundamentally coherent and meaningful. You know that God cares about you and you know where God's presence can be found. You know what your obligations and commitments are, and when you fall short of them, you know where to go and what to do in order to make things whole again.

According to the book of Exodus, God commands the people to build a tabernacle (*mishkan*) because God wants to dwell among them; the presence of the tabernacle in turn enables the people to be confident that God is with them.¹ The Temple in Jerusalem serves a similar role: when the Temple is dedicated, it is filled by a cloud of glory in which the presence of God abides.² For the Bible, the Temple is nothing less than God's abode and dwelling place.³ In a psalm recited regularly by Jews to this day, the psalmist gives voice to his longing to "live in the house of the Lord" where he knows intimacy and closeness with God can be found (Psalm 27:4). Rabbinic texts make clear that for Jews in ancient times Jerusalem was the center of the world, and the Temple was the center of the center.⁴ As the historian Shaye Cohen explains, "The [T]emple was more than a building and more than the home of the sacrificial cult. It

was the sacred center of the cosmos, the place where heaven and earth meet, the visible symbol of God's love for Israel."⁵

When the Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, all of that disappeared. The trauma must have been immense, almost unfathomable. It may be hard for many of us, living as we all do in an at least somewhat disenchanted world, to fully imagine the sense of loss the people must have felt. The center of the world had been . . . razed to the ground. Listen to how Jewish historians describe the event and what it meant. The Destruction, one writes, was "one of the most cataclysmic crises in Jewish history";⁶ "no longer," another explains, "did Judaism have a sacred center, a temple, a priesthood, and a sacrificial cult."⁷ With the Temple gone, a third declares, "much of Jewish life lay shattered."⁸

For many Jews, the world without the Temple was but a pale shadow of the world with it. As a midrash describes it, "So long as the Temple service is maintained, the world is a blessing to its inhabitants and the rains come down in season . . . But when the Temple service is not maintained the world is not a blessing to its inhabitants and the rains do not come down in season."⁹ The Temple was nothing less than a source of life and sustenance; without it, the world was an emptier, less fertile place.

Adding to the misery, many of the old theological explanations fell flat. The prophets had taught that disasters befell Israel because of its sins; traditional Jews still give voice to this idea in the traditional Musaf prayer, in which we declare that "because of our sins we were exiled from our land." Although some scholars maintain that Jews for the most part interpreted the Destruction of the Second Temple along these lines¹⁰—God had meted out just punishment for Israel's sins—others seriously question that. As one scholar puts it, the Talmudic sages "had inherited from the days of the prophets a clear, morally coherent account of why Israel suffers disaster, but [many of them] could not bring themselves to apply it to the troubles of their own day." Part of the tragedy they faced was rooted in the fact that "they knew the implied accusation was not just, but not how to explain things otherwise."¹¹ The world as they had known it no longer made sense.

Jews responded in a variety of ways—with grief, and mourning, and lament, but also with a relentless commitment to rebuilding, reconstituting, and where necessary reimagining Jewish life.

While an exploration of the diverse ways Jews found and made meaning (and preserved Judaism) in the wake of the Destruction is beyond the scope of this book, it's important for us to pay close attention to one crucial aspect of Judaism's response to the devastation.

RESPONDING TO DESTRUCTION . . . WITH LOVE

Among the Temple's many functions was that those who had transgressed could go there and atone for their sins. In a world without the Temple, was atonement no longer available and reconciliation with God no longer possible? An oft-cited story offers a startling response:

Once as Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai was coming forth from Jerusalem, Rabbi Joshua followed after him and beheld the Temple in ruins. "Woe unto us!" cried R. Joshua, "that this place, the place where the iniquities of Israel were atoned for, is laid waste!" "My son," R. Yohanan said to him, "be not grieved; we have another atonement that is like it (*kemotah*). And what is it? It is acts of lovingkindness (*hesed*), as it said, 'For I desire lovingkindness and not sacrifice'" (Hosea 6:6).¹²

Atonement through sacrifice may no longer be possible, says R. Yohanan, but another, equally powerful means of atonement is available: acts of love and kindness can play the same role in the present that sacrifice had played in the past.¹³ Later Talmudic passages go further, suggesting that lovingkindness is not *equal* to sacrifice but *superior* to it: *hesed* can achieve what sacrifice cannot.¹⁴ As a midrash imagines God telling the people: "The lovingkindness you do for one another is more precious to me than any sacrifice that Solomon offered before Me."¹⁵

Why would the sages argue that lovingkindness can take the place of sacrifice? On one level, I think, the answer is that Jewish tradition

had long held that the world rests on three pillars: on the Torah, on the Temple service, and on deeds of lovingkindness.¹⁶ When one of the three was effectively taken away, the other two were relied upon to take its place. In a world where Temple service had become impossible, the study of Torah and deeds of lovingkindness would serve as means of effecting atonement.¹⁷

But I'd like to suggest another possibility too. We saw in chapter 7 that for both biblical and Rabbinic theology, how we treat others *is* in a sense how we treat God. Recall, for example, how the book of Proverbs declares that "one who is generous to the poor makes a loan to the Lord" (Proverbs 19:17). In some sense, sacrifice and acts of lovingkindness are structurally parallel: both are about giving something to God. Since, in the absence of the Temple, we can't give something to God directly, we give something to God indirectly, by giving to God's creations. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, a midrash explicitly affirms that when a person gives tzedakah, God considers it as if they had offered a sacrifice to God.¹⁸

THE HAPPIEST DAY: CELEBRATING LOVE

As a mishnah makes clear, the ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av is a national day of catastrophe, a time set aside to mourn the various disasters that have befallen the Jewish people during our history. On the Ninth of Av, we are told, the generation of the Exodus learned that they would not enter the Promised Land; both the First Temple and the Second were destroyed (in the years 586 BCE and 70 CE); and the revolt against Rome was effectively defeated (circa 136 CE).¹⁹ The biblical reading for the day is the book of Lamentations, which is understood as an "eternal lament for all Jewish catastrophes, past, present, and future."²⁰ The Ninth of Av is a day of intense grief and sustained mourning. "When the month of Av begins," the mishnah says, "we limit our rejoicing."²¹

Recall what we've seen about just how much was lost when the Temple was twice destroyed. To this day, on the Ninth of Av the sense

of anguish and bereavement is acute and palpable. "Remember, O Lord, what has befallen us," we plead; "behold, and see our disgrace" (Lamentations 5:1).

And yet, just a few days later, the Jewish calendar makes a dizzying transition. A Talmudic sage declares that "there were no happier days for Israel than the Fifteenth of Av and the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur)." The reason why is critical: on those days, young women would go out and dance in the vineyards, and women and men would meet one another.²²

Now, let's think about this for a moment. The Temple has been destroyed and we are in mourning; the traditional seven days of mourning (*shiva*) have not yet been completed—and suddenly we are thrust into one of the most joyous days of the year. What is going on here?

The tradition implicitly makes a stunning claim. In the wake of destruction and devastation, we should respond with . . . more love. Grief and lament have their place but they cannot, must not, be given the final word. When everything seems lost, the Mishnah subtly reminds us, set about reaffirming life and rediscovering love.

Trauma can lead us to retreat into ourselves, to withdraw from community and companionship, to feel so defeated that we grow incapable of intimacy and connection; few things can be as isolating as intense loss. In the face of all this, the mishnah responds by inviting us, by summoning us, to insist upon love, to find hope and take inspiration in one another.

But let's not fool ourselves. Love is not the only response to desolation, and it's often not even the first. There is a place for grief and, as we've seen in chapter 3, for protest and lamentation. And often, there are concrete tasks that need attending to: rebuilding in the wake of destruction can consist of endless seemingly quotidian tasks. Yet the mishnah resolutely adjures us: to heal from loss, choose love.

There is another dimension of this that is worth considering. According to an extremely influential Talmudic teaching, the Second Temple was destroyed because "baseless hatred" was pervasive among

the people. Baseless hatred, the Talmud teaches, is as grave a transgression as Judaism's three cardinal sins—idolatry, sexual immorality, and murder—put together!²³ Later Jewish writers add that the exile is ongoing because this sin is so enduring.²⁴

In light of this, the logic of the Jewish calendar comes into focus: If hatred is what caused the Temple to be destroyed, then perhaps love is what will one day enable it to be restored. So from the very midst of the desolation, we emerge into a holiday celebrating love.

But romantic love will not suffice: Finding a spouse to love is not enough, since the love between spouses in and of itself does nothing to overcome social strife. People can love their spouses and hate just about everyone else. We've all met couples who are kind to one another and apathetic or even hostile toward others. Like a unit of one, a grouping of two can be governed by selfishness. Our mishnah responds to this danger by adding another striking detail about the celebration of the Fifteenth of Av: when the young women would go dancing in the vineyards, all of them, including the wealthiest among them, would do so while wearing borrowed white garments, "so as not to embarrass the one who had none."²⁵ Precisely in the moment when people are going to couple off, to form new, cohesive (and potentially selfish) family units, they (we) are reminded to keep the experiences and needs of others firmly in mind and at heart. The Fifteenth of Av celebrates the love between spouses . . . and insists, at the very same time, on compassion and generosity toward those who are not our spouses, those who may in fact be complete strangers. In place of baseless hatred comes Judaism's prescription: compassion for all.

RESPONDING INSTEAD OF EXPLAINING

How ought we to respond when faced with destruction and devastation in our own time? What does confronting suffering require of us?

I often come back to an argument made by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik about what he sees as Judaism's approach to the problem of evil. The ideal Jewish response to evil and suffering, he says, is not

metaphysical but practical. "We do not inquire about the hidden ways of the Almighty," R. Soloveitchik writes, "but, rather, about the path wherein a person shall walk when suffering strikes. We ask neither about the cause of evil nor about its purpose, but rather, about how it might be mended and elevated. How shall a person act in a time of trouble? What ought a person to do so that they not perish in their afflictions?"²⁶ We cannot know why a good God permits so much excruciating suffering but, often at least, we can decide how to respond. From my perspective this is where Judaism's emphasis on love, and specifically on kindness and compassion, comes into play. We will never know why the parent in front of us was widowed at such a young age, but we can offer them concrete assistance as well as an open heart and a listening ear; we cannot know why we have been beleaguered by lifelong illness but we can work to grow in empathy and compassion as a result.²⁷

On one level, R. Soloveitchik's argument could be heard as something of an evasion. We don't have an answer, so we change the question. There may be some truth to that charge. But on another level R. Soloveitchik is obviously right: we will never know why the world works as it does, but we do have the capacity to exercise agency even in the face of unimaginable pain, our own and others'. Remember: the sages don't mandate that we explain why some are hungry, but that we feed them; they don't ask us to explain illness, but to heal it, and to comfort those who are beset by it; and so on. (Let me avoid misunderstanding: we do need social, economic, and political explanations for why some are impoverished; without such analyses, we cannot work for a more just world. It is metaphysical explanations that we don't need in order to respond. In any case, much as we might yearn to have such explanations, they elude us.)

The deepest response to the problem of evil is to walk in God's ways, to be a vehicle for God's mercy. In discussing the love that the Torah mandates us to have for the stranger, we encountered the idea that we must be the ones to deliver God's love to others. I take the same idea here: faced with suffering, we must respond with love.

In his classic *I and Thou*, Martin Buber imagines a religious person reciting the Lord's Prayer. "Thy will be done," she says, but, Buber adds, "the truth goes on to say for her: 'through me whom you need.'"²⁸ At the end of the day, for me the only response to the problem of evil and suffering that really matters is this: whether or not we help God bring love and compassion to places of darkness and affliction.