## Some comments received on the Devarim Sidrah Byte:

*Do you believe that it is the modern-day spiritual leader's role to preach uncomfortable truths? Do you think it is the rabbi's role to comment on broader issues, such as politics?*

I do feel it is the duty of a Rabbi to criticise (or applaud) politicians or the government when they decree or interfere (or defend) concerning religious practices or law. it is certainly their responsibility to call out and comment on matters that are going wrong with society where it affects their own or wider community. However, to jump on every event to bring the Torah into it to demonstrate their 'grip' of 'the situation' is quite demeaning to the position and dignity of the Rabbi and possibly of the Torah itself. As in all matters, saving one's powder for the big fight is mostly a good policy.

Mr Meyer Pearlman (London)

I do believe it is the spiritual leader's role to preach uncomfortable truths, but he should not do it in a confrontational way. Moses had a captive market in the wilderness; today's modern rabbi has a more discerning audience who may stay away if they think they are being unfairly 'got at'.
It is indeed the rabbi's role to comment on broader issues such as politics, provided he does so as part of his commentary on the week's sedra. It shows that the Torah is eternal and relates to current situations and problems. He shouldn't take a partisan political approach.

Dr Michael Bliss (Netanya)

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# ''Bar Kamtza and the Psychology of Double Displacement''

By Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

I wish to present a perspective on the well-known episode of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza, the Talmudic account that purports to describe the events that led up to the destruction of the Temple. Our starting-point will be the earliest biblical reference to the psychology of blame, guilt or sense of hurt.

The shifting of blame from oneself, and the construal of a particular crime, fault or misdemeanour as having emanated from another, seems to be instinctive. Freudian psychology refers to this as 'displacement', that is an unconscious defense mechanism whereby the mind re-directs such strong emotions as a sense of hurt, jealousy or blame, away from its original cause— especially if that cause is too influential, strong or inviolable— towards a more vulnerable target.

Such displacement may come into play, for example, in a situation where a boss constantly insults, demeans, or discriminates against, an employee. If the latter's antipathy towards the boss reaches boiling-point, but he or she fears to challenge the situation for fear of losing their job, the employee may well redirect all that frustration and anger, when they return home at the end of a working day, at a husband, wife, mother or sibling.

An act of displacement lies at the root of the very first dispute between God and man. When God reproves Adam for eating of the forbidden fruit his response was, האשה אשר נתת עמדי היא נתנה לי מן העץ ואוכלה - 'It was the woman *You lumbered me with* who gave me of the fruit.'

Note the subtle double-edged focus of blame: 'Don't blame me; It was Eve who enticed me; but— don't forget God— You are also not entirely blameless in this matter. After all, '*You* gave the woman to me' in the first place. [It has to be noted, however, that Adam conveniently overlooked the fact that God only provided that wife in response to his display of profound loneliness – ולא מצא עזר כנגדו - and 'he couldn't find a partner to be with him!' (Gen. 2:20).]

At work here is, in fact, an example of double displacement: Adam attributes the source of his undoing to God who, in turn, motivated Eve to entice him to sin.

Let us consider the next transgression, that of Cain's slaying of his brother, Abel, after God had accepted Abel's offering and rejected his own.

Cain could not direct his anger at God, for he must have accepted that, not only would that have been counter-productive, but also that, 'the God who probes the heart' would have known full-well that his offering was indeed not purely intentioned. So, instead, he redirects all his frustration and anger towards the more vulnerable target, his brother, Abel.

I have elsewhere applied this mechanism to the episode wherein Sarai (Sarah) blames Abraham for her profound anguish at being barren:

ותאמר שרי אל אברם חמסי **עליך**, אנכי **נתתי שפחתי בחיקך** ותרא כי הרתה ואקל בעיניה. ישפט ה' ביני ובינך. —

And Sarai said to Abram: 'My wrong is upon you: I gave my handmaid into your bosom; and, when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her eyes: the Lord judge between me and you' (Gen. 16:5).

I have suggested elsewhere that Sarai was here displaying all the symptoms of that psychological ploy of displacement. In other words, instead of venting her anger on God for creating her barrenness— an approach that, she knew instinctively, was both futile and possibly fraught with danger— she switched the trajectory of all that pent-up emotion to redirect it, firstly at Hagar, and then at Abram. Instead of merely lamenting her own barrenness, she directs her resentment both at Hagar's fecundity, as well as at her husband Abram, as the agent and beneficiary of that fecundity (See Jeffrey M Cohen, ''Displacement in the matriarchal home'', *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 2002, 90-96)

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This brings us to a discussion of the displacement tactic which, I suggest, was employed in the well-known Talmudic attempt to pin-point the specific cause of the destruction of the Temple.

History reflects *several* highly-explosive, internal social, political, and religious, tensions within Judea, in addition to the Roman determination to crush Judea coupled with simmering Judean anti-Roman feelings, all of which directly contributed towards the final conflagration. Yet the main Talmudic source, employing displacement, suppresses mention of most of those major contributory factors, and focuses instead on one, nameless individual's sense of grievance.

We are all familiar with the Talmudic account of the Jerusalem host whose servant mistakenly delivered an invitation to his master's grand banquet to the latter's enemy, named Bar Kamtza, rather than to his friend, similarly named, Kamtza. On the former's arrival at the banquet, the host told him to leave immediately, rejecting Bar Kamtza's plea to allow him to stay in return for his (ultimate) offer to defray the cost of the entire banquet if only the host would spare his humiliation (See Tal. *Gittin* 55b-58a).

Bar Kamtza was particularly incensed that, although the leading sages were all present and witnessed the affray, yet none of them reproved the host or attempted to persuade him to be reasonable and save Bar Kamtza's humiliation. So incensed was he with the religious establishment that he went to the Roman governor and informed on his people, alleging they were preparing to stage an armed rebellion. The ramifications of that single act, according to the (fuller) Talmudic account, sparked off the violent Roman retaliation that directly led to the destruction of the Temple.

Bar Kamtza's reaction may be construed as a further example of double displacement. For, when he realised that it was futile attempting to dissuade the host from humiliating him and unceremoniously booting him out, he re-directs his blind rage from the host to the rabbis present at the banquet, subconsciously blaming them for his humiliation. And, when that displacement did not succeed in assuaging his anger, he takes it a stage further, redirecting the missiles of his humiliation from those religious leaders towards the nation as a whole.

So, for those moderns who claim that they find it difficult to lament the tragedy of the destruction of the Temple, Tisha B'Av offers the challenge of reflecting on how we relate to others; how we deal with people who have offended us; and how ***not***, in those circumstances, to 'displace,' to redirect our pent-up frustrations against those who are but indirectly, if at all, responsible. How pertinent is the maxim, 'If you are in the mood for praising, praise others; if in the mood for blaming, blame yourself!'

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In conclusion, I was troubled when, as a yeshivah student, I first read that Talmudic account of the Bar Kamtza episode. I wondered how the rabbis could have possibly expected us to believe that it was nothing more than a simple domestic squabble between two men that was responsible for the ultimate destruction of the Temple, and the ensuing persecution, slaughter and exile of the entire nation!

Recent events may, however, provide a measure of perspective. I refer to how the single tragic killing of one black man by a policeman in America had the capacity to fuel a latent world-wide 'Black Lives Matter' movement, and how the Grime rapper (an appropriate name!), Wiley, jumped onto the bandwagon to distribute inflammatory anti-Semitic venom to his nearly one million Twitter and Instagram followers. We need no clearer demonstration of how rapidly a single happening may catalyse into a global hate forum which, if allowed to go unchecked, could, God forbid, lead to (more) widespread anti-Israel and anti-Jewish discrimination and violence.

We must be ever vigilant, and never under-estimate the potential effects of racism at the micro level. It is a virus that, if left uncountered, can speedily become a pandemic!

ונזכה לגאולה שלמה ושלום על ישראל

במהרה בימינו אמן.

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