# Introduction

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“They began to cry and Rabbi Akiva was laughing.”

This book was born amidst pain and unbearable devastation.

On the ninth of Av, 5774 (Aug. 5th, 2014), my beloved eldest brother, Nadav (Nadi), passed away at the age of 49. Nadi was diagnosed with cancer on the eve of Passover 5772. Nadi fought with all his might against the disease that spread throughout his body but reserved even more of his efforts for easing the pain and worry that gripped all his loved ones. On the ninth of Av 5773, a year before Nadi’s passing, I had the privilege to donate bone marrow to him. We sat together in the isolation room as an infusion dripped new bone marrow cells into his body. During the transplant and in the hours following it, Nadi managed to maintain a spirit of joy and optimism. “At least I saved you from fasting today, my brother,” he joked. In those moments, I thought to myself about the story in tractate Makkot that tells of the Sages’ pained response to the sight of the destroyed Temple. They began to cry, but Rabbi Akiva laughed. Like in that wonderful story, I almost wanted to ask Nadi, “Why are you laughing?” He would surely have answered, “Why are you crying?”

Whoever has not seen Nadi encouraging the medical team with joy and laughter, has not witnessed the power of the human spirit in his life.

Whoever has not seen how warmly the nursing staff at the ward welcomed him each time he had to undergo yet another round of difficult treatments, has not seen a beloved person in his life.

Whoever has not seen Nadi’s devotion to his parents, his children, his wife, his brothers, his sisters, and all his family and friends, even at the height of his illness, has not seen love in his life.

Whoever has not seen the skilled medical team at the hospital in Arkansas, USA weeping when his life slipped away has not seen true tears in his life. Blessed is the eye that has seen all this.

In the days and weeks following his death, we, his family and loved ones, found ourselves overwhelmed by unfathomable pain and longing. Even in those difficult hours, we all tried to hold on to what seemed to us the most important legacy he left us. This book seeks to engage with the content of this legacy.

I chose to embark on a journey to realize Nadi’s legacy, and it became clear to me that Tisha BeAv would be my compass along the way. Tisha BeAv, the day when Nadi was reborn, and Tisha BeAv, the day when, exactly a year later, “the angels triumphed over the righteous, and the sacred ark was captured.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

On Tisha BeAv, the destruction includes a variety of aspects: religious, national, cultural, and personal. Throughout the generations, Jewish tradition has woven diverse meanings into past events, seeking to find an echo of the hardships and challenges of the present in the historical destruction of the Temple, the *hurban*. In their attempt to interpret the *hurban*, the architects of Jewish culture sought to understand its roots, its meaning, and perhaps through this, to find consolation, repair, and above all, hope.

The stories of the *hurban,* especially those found in tractate Gittin of the Babylonian Talmud and in the midrashim on the Book of Lamentations, are the central cultural locus of this rich tradition. Some of these stories deal with the description of the *hurban* and its scope, while others seek to find a cause and interpretation for its occurrence. These last allow a glimpse into the thoughts of their authors and the value system they sought to shape. Despite being filled with bitter pain, these stories inspire in the reader a belief in the ability to repair and rebuild.

The collection before you includes nine encounters that took place in the framework of *havruta* study. Studying in pairs is a traditional Jewish practice that allows for a meaningful encounter between people. Anyone who knew Nadi could not help but see him as a true *havruta*, literally a friend. The sweet nostalgic moments that comfort me are my memories of sitting as a young boy next to my older brother, Nadi, engaged in *havruta* study at the Or Etzion Yeshiva.

I invited intellectuals and social activists to study the stories of the *hurban* with me in *havruta*. My study partners are all actively engaged in creation, repair, and hope. In my conversations with them, we sought to decipher the profound insights embedded in these stories while also examining them through the personal lens of contemporary challenges.

The conversations in the book were edited and translated, and references were added at the end of each one for the benefit of readers seeking further depth.

# Conclusion

The twisted paths of Jewish history often invite polemics, even today. The reason for this may lie in the deep paradox in Jewish historical consciousness: history and the bearers of memory who engage in its examination are at opposite poles. The historian Yosef Haim Yerushalmi phrased it like this:

בעוד שהיהדות בכל הדורות לא חדלה לתהות על משמעותה של ההיסטוריה, ההיסטוריוגרפיה עצמה לא מילאה אצל היהודים אלא תפקיד שולי לכל היותר, ותכופות לא מילאה תפקיד כלל; ובעקבות זאת, בעוד שזיכרון העבר היה תמיד גורם מרכזי בהתנסות היהודית, הרי לא ההיסטוריון היה משמרו העיקרי.[[2]](#footnote-2)

According to the Yerushalmi, the preservation of Jewish history is a process involving traditions, value clarifications occurring within communities over the years, and the striving to create a connection between the past and the present. Contrary to the modern conception of history that aspires to reach “objective truth,” traditional memory is freed from this obligation, and even sees striving for it as an unnecessary burden.

The stories of the *hurban* presented here express these tendencies: historical events, which would have been recorded in a historical chronicle in the form of narratives of war and exile, perhaps as part of a dramatic epic, are instead presented in a minor key as conflicts and moral dilemmas that arise in communities, families, and individuals. For the Sages, these are the agents of memory, presenting the sources of the sins, their meanings, as well as their punishing outcomes. More generally, these stories present “experiences of the *hurban*.”

The nine study sessions that make up this book are a tribute to this process. The intellectuals and social activists I met with sought to read the “historical stories” (which are already included in the “here and now” reality of the Sages) as relevant to the challenges of the current generation. This is an interpretive homage to the creators of these stories—an attempt to find a contemporary social meaning that parallels events of days gone by.

The interpretive practice employed by the agents of memory emerges during the readings as a subversive act of leadership. The central challenge facing those who seek to interpret leadership is to identify the connection between the moral-logical vision that guides it and the practical strategy through which the leader chooses to effect change. Upon examining the stories, the concept of attribution emerges as a central theme, familiar from social psychology.

Attribution Theory[[3]](#footnote-3) seeks to understand the processes that people undergo in seeking to gain information about the motives, traits, and life goals of others. According to this theory, there is a special significance to the way a person interprets situations and this interpretation may have far-reaching implications for determining his future behavior.

The shared readings focused on the reciprocal relationships and elusive ties between the ethical and the psychological. One of the central phenomena in the various texts is the narrator’s choice to attribute the source of the tragedy to his community or his people. This is a surprising choice, contrary to the universal human need to blame the perpetrator, the one who physically caused the destruction. The greater the trauma, and the wider its scope, the greater the need to find perspectives that direct their gaze outward in blame, attributing the disaster and distress to others. The denunciation of the enemy, the cultivation of his demonic image, and the desire for his annihilation—all these are absent from the central narratives, and perhaps are even actively silenced by those who perceived themselves as the spiritual leaders of the Jewish people during that period. An example is the text opening with “Jerusalem was destroyed only because…” The reader’s expectation from this opening structure is for the continuation to indicate a single, cruel external enemy who brought this upon us. Instead, the narrative structure surprisingly points to an “internal enemy”, and to heighten the irony, this is identified with the will of God, with the good, with the seemingly positive phenomenon, “because they judged in it by the law of Torah.”

This choice to turn their gaze inward is amplified given that some of the Sages were second and third generation post-*hurban*. Others, members of even later generations, grapple with the implications of the national disaster in their time and with the living echo of the collective memory. Focusing on the internal moral flaw and removing their gaze from the humiliation and the experience of persecution comes at a price. Identifying as a victim can sometimes provide some comfort to populations who have suffered abuse by a cruel ruler. The stories in the book are part of the broader engagement of Talmudic and post-Talmudic literature in the sources of the *hurban*, its scope, its intensity, and its implications. This extensive engagement is to be expected due to the dimensions of the national catastrophe, but its unique nature attests to the urgency felt by the Sages to give meaning to human existence in general, and to address the question of suffering and evil in particular. The *hurban* served as a test case for them and as an opportunity to shape consciousness. They used these stories to embed within their audience the practice of introspection, of using tragedy as a lever for deep moral clarification to bring about rectification in the life of the individual and the society in which he operates. The internal attribution of the disaster is therefore a call to a complex action of overcoming passive patterns of thought characterized by despondency, victimhood, and self-righteousness.[[4]](#footnote-4) The nine readings in the book can therefore serve as a source of fundamental principles for the rectification of society:

The uncompromising demand that encourages *taking a stand* even in complex situations is at the foundation of the Kamtza and Bar Kamtza story. The requirement that leaders broaden their perspective in times of crisis stands in contrast to the natural tendency to narrow the focus to ensure survival, or out of utilitarian calculations, dependent on time and place. The need for far-reaching decisions stands in contrast to the approach that encourages adaptation and focus on the present. This is the meaning of the story’s condemnation of the sages who “did not protest,” meaning, they were passive. In doing so, they implemented the principle that would only be articulated many years later by the 18th-century Irish political philosopher Edmund Burke that “the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”

How is justice manifest? Is it in an abundance of details and the orderly laws that exist between them, or perhaps the spirit of justice is an abstraction that needs to be realized? The ironic assertion “Jerusalem was destroyed only because they judged in it by the law of Torah” clearly refers to the latter possibility, according to which *the spirit of justice* is superior to justice and the spirit of the law is superior to the law. The aspiration to establish a world built solely on a formalistic order of laws threatens bitter results and even national disaster. A necessary condition for the existence of a well-ordered society is the creation of conditions for the construction of the legal infrastructure which can apply a variety of balancing principles to the formal judicial system. This infrastructure plays a central role in preserving a society’s moral values, preventing the collapse of justice into a discourse of details that is alien to the spirit of justice and truth.

Despite its often being identified as a utilitarian need, *compromise* is often morally preferable. The story that tells of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai’s choice to flee besieged Jerusalem and negotiate with the besiegers reveals how central compromise must be in the ethical discourse of spiritual and political leaders. It is an alternative that is often the best solution, not a secondary one. This attitude is part of a worldview in which pragmatism and ethical leadership do not contradict one another.

Leaders guiding a flock that is coping with pain must have a deep understanding of the psychology of pain. Rabbi Yehoshua sought to dissuade the ascetics from wallowing in their grief by calling on them *to return to living*. In doing so, he sought to begin to heal the wound without ignoring the intensity of the pain by creating a gradual return to a life of joy and hope.

Honesty and *authenticity* are powerful tools in dealing with crisis and pain. The reading from tractate Semahot cautions against fakery, against avoidance or denial of the power of a loss or tragedy.

The story of the carpenter’s wife brings to the surface the need to generate *a community conscience*, one that goes beyond the framework of the individual and his relationship with others. This story clarifies that a decent society must ensure the inclusion of voices that will counterbalance the mechanisms of buying, selling and exploitation in society. Norms of sensitivity and the identification and prevention of injustices have the power to prevent the moral and structural destruction of society.

The realistic description that appears in the prophet Isaiah’s rebuke of a destroyed and desolate land with its cities burned to the ground contains a poignant educational and moral message: only *moral choices* will succeed in restoring the ruins and reestablishing a national home and a reformed world. The path to this goal involves transforming Jerusalem into a city of justice that cares for the orphan and the widow, such that those who return to her will be redeemed through righteousness (Isaiah 1:27).

The obligation *to maintain identity* even in times of emergency and distress is at the center of the story of the High Priest’s children who were captured. This story illuminates the call to preserve one’s moral identity and one’s sense of having been created in the image of God even under unreasonable conditions. In the words of Viktor Frankl, in his study of human nature in the face of Nazi evil: “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

What is the meaning of the image of a leader laughing upon viewing the ruins of the Temple? Does the laughter reflect an existing situation, or does it generate a new phenomenon? Rabbi Akiva’s laughter in the story that concludes tractate Makkot is a clear example of the use of humor as a leadership tool with the aim of developing a new and audacious sense of purpose for the community. Laughter at the viewing of the ruins of the Temple, while the other Sages cry bitterly over the loss of that Temple teaches us an important lesson about *optimism*. Rabbi Akiva, with his optimistic outlook, refused to join the Sages’ lamentations and could see the beginning of redemption in the shattered stones, like a person who looks at a burned out forest and manages to discern among the ashes the sprouts of recovery.

This optimistic outlook is a fitting conclusion to the nine stages of this journey in memory of Nadi. At every encounter, the image of Nadi, a paragon of optimism and compassion, was present for me. In the face of all the storm and silence, the wailing and crying, the wound and the pain, the calm and the sorrow, he was a superhuman source of confidence, tranquility, and boundless love.

Nadi was a beacon of light, joy, and optimism. That endless smile that was always etched on your face was the first thing anyone who looked at your beautiful face noticed, and the first thing that comes to mind for all those who love you, even today, whenever we remember you. That smile of yours, Nadi, was a lesson. That smile was a commandment for a life of responsibility, repair, and hope. Just like then, on the day we parted, we promise you again, Nadi:

“We will return to you and you will return to us.

Our thoughts are with you and your thoughts are with us.

We will not abandon you and you will not abandon us,

Not in this world nor in the world to come.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

1. See Bavli Ketubot 104a. Bar Kapparah uses this expression in his response to the passing of his teacher, Rabbi Yehuda the Prince: “The *erelim* [angels] and the *metzokim* [righteous mortals] both clutched the sacred ark. The angels triumphed over the righteous, and the sacred ark was captured.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi (1982) *Zakhor:Jewish History and Jewish Memory.* Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, p.???? [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See, for example, B. Weiner. (1986), *An Attributional Theory of Motivation and Emotion*, New York: Springer-Verlag. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This interpretive approach parallels the psychological processes described as *loss and trauma meaning making.* See Catherine H. Stein, Kristen M. Abraham, Erin E. Bonar, Christine E. McAuliffe, Wendy R. Fogo, David A. Faigin, Hisham Abu Raiya, Danielle N. Potokar (March 2009). “Making meaning from personal loss: religious, benefit finding, and goal-oriented attributions.” *Journal of Loss and Trauma*. 14 (2): 83-100. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Victor Frankl (1986) *Man’s Search for Meaning*, New York:Washington Square Press, p. 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This is the traditional declaration made at the conclusion of studying a tractate of the Talmud. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)