

CHAPTER 8

HOW DID *SINAT CHINAM* COEXIST

WITH TORAH, *MITZVOT*, AND ACTS OF KINDNESS?

By now you already know that one of the advanced weapons of the *yetzer hara* is to delude us in giving up the battle.¹ With *sinat chinam*, one of its strategies has been to convince us that *sinat chinam* is simply not relevant to us. That's why many members of my audiences believed "they had never experienced it." Another *yetzer hara* strategy to create confusion with *sinat chinam* is to raise a basic question about the generation of the Second Temple: "How could *sinat chinam* be widespread in the midst of Torah, *mitzvot*, and acts of kindness?" This question resonates well since people believe intuitively (and erroneously) that Torah, *mitzvot*, and acts of kindness should have protected Jews in Israel from any type of hatred. Case in point: that very question was raised by Orthodox Rabbis from Israel and the Diaspora who wrote: "How is it possible to learn Torah and fulfill mitzvot, yet somehow harbor feelings of hatred for others?...How could such a lofty generation also be guilty of causeless hatred?"² This chapter undermines this type of *yetzer hara* argument by explaining how *sinat chinam* did in fact coexist with Torah, mitzvot and acts of kindness, and what lessons we can learn from the experience of that generation.

HOW GROUP *SINAT CHINAM* ERUPTED

The history of that period has been described by reliable Torah-observant historians such as Rabbi Berel Wein,³ Rabbi Hersh Goldwurm,⁴ and Rabbi Ken Spiro.⁵

Roots of Divisiveness: Hasmonean Dynasty

¹ Twerski p. 17

² Rabbi Doron Perez, Senseless Hatred: Cause and Cure HaMizrachi USA edition vol. 5 No 3, p.4.

³ Rabbi Berel Wein, Echoes of Glory (Shaar Press, 1995)

⁴ History of the Jewish People/The Second Temple Era, adapted by Rabbi Hersh Goldwurm (Mesorah Publications, Ltd. Brooklyn, 1982)

⁵ Rabbi Ken Spiro, Crash Course in Jewish History: From Abraham to Modern Israel (Targum Press, Inc Southfield, MI, 2010)

The roots of divisiveness go back to the period that followed the victory of Yehudah the Maccabee in 165 BCE that we celebrate during the holiday of Chanukah. Rabbi Hersh Goldwurm explains that “Although the Temple area had been liberated and the service reinstated, parts of Jerusalem and nearly all of the countryside were still under Syrian-Greek control and Hellenist control.”⁶ Hellenists were Jews who had accepted Hellenism. They bribed Antiochus IV in order to take control of the *Kehunah Gedolah* and appoint their own *Kohen Gadol*. Later, during the reign of Yochanan Hyrkanus (grandson of Mattisyahu 131-104 BCE), a new group called the Sadducees emerged from the descendants of the Hellenists.

“How did the Sadducees differ from the Hellenists? Both denied the divine origin of the Oral Law, and both cast off the ‘Yoke of the Commandments.’ Primarily, they differed in their political concepts. Hellenists were assimilationists who saw no reason for existence of a Jewish nation...Not so the Sadducees....They gave the impression that they, too, were nationalistsThey opposed the Sages arguing that there was no need for Sages in order for one to know the laws since they believed that the written Torah was to be taken literally. They changed several laws and denied the existence of the World to Come. However, most of the people followed the Sages who were called Pharisees (Perushim).

Another group arose called Essenes who were not as brazen as the Sadducees. They withdrew into isolated areas according to rites that have no basis in the Torah (“it has been conjectured that from their teachings arose the Christian religion.”)⁷

Following the short and peaceful reign of Queen Shlomis Alexandra (76-67 BCE), civil war erupted between her two sons Hyrkanus and Aristobolus who turned to the Roman general Pompey for help (63BCE). The latter took advantage of the situation. “Even when the Roman legions were marching on Jerusalem, the two hostile brothers refused to unite. Hyrkanus’ men, who considered Pompey their ally, opened the city gates to him, while Aristobolus and his soldiers withdrew behind the fortifications of the Temple mount.”⁸ Pompey managed to put an

⁶ History of the Jewish People/The Second Temple Era, adapted by Rabbi Hersh Goldwurm (Mesorah Publications, Ltd. Brooklyn, 1982), 73.

⁷ Ibid., 93.

⁸ Ibid., 106.

end to Judean political independence and impose a tributary tax. Jewish rule which was under the jurisdiction of the Roman procurator was limited to Judea and few other areas.

Roman Procurators

We fast forward to the Roman procurators, after the death of Augustus Cesar in 14 CE. Judea had been incorporated into Greater Syria which was run by a Roman procurator or governor appointed by the Roman Senate. The various factions described above had survived. The Hellenized and assimilated Jews welcomed the Roman presence and profited from it. They opposed the other Jews who resisted Roman domination. The Sadducees included mostly wealthy Jews. Religiously, while they denied the divine origin of the Oral Law, they dominated the Temple hierarchy which they had corrupted. Politically, they cooperated with the Romans to keep their power base and saw other Jewish factions as troublemakers. Rabbi Wein explains the divisiveness engendered by the Sadducees: “The complete abandonment of Jewish tradition and values by the Sadducees in the years preceding the destruction of the Temple demoralized much of the Jewish population of Judah and brought about a climate of divisiveness and polarization in Jewish life.”⁹

The Pharisees were deeply attached to the survival and transmission of Judaism that had been kept for the previous 300 years by the system of *zugot* that is described in the beginning of Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers): one was called Nasi (President), the other Av Beit Din (Chief Justice). The last pair was Hillel and Shammai (Hillel died in 10 CE).

By the year 30 CE, several groups of nationalist extremists constituted the party of the Zealots. They fought to break the yoke of Roman domination, using violence whenever it suited them. Rabbi Wein explains their modus operandi and its consequences: “Their descent into violence coincided with a general breakdown of law and social convention at the end of the Second Temple era” resulting in “a bloody civil war among the Jews themselves.”¹⁰

A subgroup of Zealots was called Sicarii because they used a short dagger (itself called *sicarii*) to extort wealth from the population. Another subgroup of the Zealots, the most violent, was called Biryonim. In that environment, murder was so frequent that the Sanhedrin was longer

⁹ Rabbi Berel Wein, *Echoes of Glory* (Shaar Press Publication, 1995), 144.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 145.

hearing capital cases. In addition to the above, there were sects who preached the imminent coming of the Messiah. One of those came from the Essenes and led to the early Christians. At this point Judea was in political and spiritual chaos.

Fatal Triumph of the Zealots

“On the 8th day of Av in the year 66,”¹¹ the fighting began in Jerusalem. the Zealots drove the Romans out of the Upper City. After promising them safe passage out of Jerusalem, the Zealots killed all the Roman soldiers and controlled Jerusalem. This forced Rome to retaliate and exert all its might to crush the Jewish revolt. The largest city in the Galilee “asked the Romans for protection from their fellow Jews—the Zealots.” Vespasian who had been sent by Rome to rebuild its empire, surrounded the city of Jerusalem in 69 CE. “ In Jerusalem, “the Zealots were overcome with internal dissension such that the most extreme factions took power...The Zealots, the Sicarii, and the *Biryonim*, all began to extort wealth from the most moderate elements of the population in Jerusalem, ostensibly to promote the war effort...The Sadducees and the Friends of Rome, together with many moderate Pharisees, did form an army and gained control of most of the city, but the Temple Mount remained in the hands of the Zealots.” A true civil war broke out which went on while the Romans had encircled Jerusalem. Then the Zealots “resorted to acts of suicidal desperation to force the Jewish population to fight to the end.” That is when Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai took the historic gamble to be smuggled out of Jerusalem in order to save Yavneh and its great scholars, and make it the new center of Jewish life. “On the ninth of Av, in August 70, the Romans broke into the Temple.”¹²

Analysis: Virulent Group Hatred Erupted at The End of the Second Temple

Rabbi Spiro concluded as follows:¹³ “Jewish sources list twenty-four separate factions. Their conflicting views were a symptom of a disease afflicting the Jewish people at this time. The rabbis call this disease *sinat chinam*, “senseless hatred” of one Jew for another Jew. “

How could this happen to us?

¹¹ This section follows the sequence of events described by Rabbi Berel Wein, *Echoes of Glory* (Shaar Press Publication, 1995).

¹² Rabbi Berel Wein, *Echoes of Glory* (Shaar Press Publication, 1995), 169.

¹³ Rabbi Ken Spiro, *Crash Course in Jewish History: From Abraham to Modern Israel* (Targum Press, Inc Southfield, MI, 2010), 180.

The evolution of group belonging to tribalism and group hatred described in the previous chapter explains what happened to our ancestors in the period that preceded the destruction of the Second Temple. We learned that in any society, normal groups can develop a strong group identity and compete with other groups with different ideologies. That competition is fed by our natural “us versus them” instinct which operates subconsciously. When the competition makes “groups feel threatened, they retreat in tribalism. They close ranks and become more insular, more defensive, more punitive, and more us-versus-them.”¹⁴ Members of one group demonize members of the out-group and begin to hate them simply because of their different beliefs.¹⁵ The most lethal form of group hatred erupts when the divisiveness between sects centers around Torah beliefs or practice because each group feels completely self-righteous and its members become zealots in the name of G-d! The very Torah which was supposed to unite our people was used by the sects to create unbridgeable and irreversible chasms. In that context the stories of hate flourish:

- the hated enemy was impure and immoral.
- the hated enemy is trying to control you.
- the hated enemy thwarts or destroys our destiny.
- the hated enemy is not only your enemy but an enemy of G-d!

With the profound empathy loss elicited by group hatred, any hardship that members of the outgroup experienced failed to elicit a sense of outrage or remorse, leading to cruelty (*achzariyut*).

Unfortunately, in the context of such widespread group *sinat chinam*, social trust disappeared, our sense of mutual responsibility (“*arevut*”) vanished, and individual *sinat chinam* flourished. That’s what the story of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza illustrates. In the midst of such spiritual chaos, the Temple could no longer fulfill its role.

This episode of our history shows that *sinat chinam* from group hatred led Torah-observant Jews to violate so many Torah commandments that the future of Judaism became at stake. It

¹⁴ Ibid., 8-9.

¹⁵ According to Viktor Frankl, the search for meaning is a basic human drive. That drive makes us vulnerable to interpreting differences in meaning as threats to our survival and triggering hatred (as explained in upcoming chapters). Since meaning systems proliferate in any large human population, conflicting meaning systems can trigger violent strife (see R W Dozier, Jr. *Why We Hate* (Contemporary Books McGraw-Hill, New York, NY; 2002),10-13.

was saved by the wisdom and foresight of our Chachamim such as Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai. Rabbi Spiro wrote that “Jerusalem could have gone down in history as the only city that the Romans couldn’t take by laying siege. But it didn’t. The reason that it did not was *sinat chinam*, “senseless hatred” among the Jews”¹⁶ that lead to civil war.

SINAT CHINAM INHIBITED TIKKUN HAMIDDOT WHICH PRECLUDES BEING “OSEK BATORAH”

Review of *Tikkun Hamiddot*

In Chapter 5, we learned that *Tikkun hamiddot* is an obligation. According to Rambam¹⁷ and *Sefer Hachinuch*,¹⁸ the source for this obligation is the commandment “*Vehalachta Bidrachav*,”¹⁹ “And you shall go in His ways.” This verse commands us to rectify our character traits by emulating the *Middot* that Hashem uses in His behavior toward us.

In *Hilchot Teshuva 7:3*, Rambam teaches that a person must repent not only for sins involving actions, but also for his/her bad *middot* such as anger and jealousy. Rambam adds that the sin of bad *middot* is far more serious than the sin of actions, because our *middot* govern our actions, and it is more difficult to curb bad *middot* than it is to hold back from bad actions.

Schematically, *tikkun hamiddot* has two general goals:

- (i) to rectify our flawed *middot* such as pride, anger, hatred, cruelty, and jealousy.
- (ii) to acquire good *middot* such as humility, compassion, and especially *yirat shamayim* (fear of Heaven) since it is essential to the acquisition of any other good *middah*.²⁰

Limmud HaTorah Requires *Tikkun Hamiddot*

We also learned a midrash where the angels said before Hashem that if Jews hate or envy one another, it means that they are not engaging in Torah! The angels’ rationale is that the Torah was given to Bnei Israel in order to help them repair their flawed *middot* such as hatred and jealousy. To that effect, Rabbi D Kestenbaum wrote:²¹ “The entire purpose of the Torah is

¹⁶ Ken Spiro, *Crash Course in Jewish History: From Abraham to Modern Israel* (Targum Press, Inc Southfield, MI, 2010), 186.

¹⁷ *Hilchot Deot* 1:5

¹⁸ *Mitzvah* 611

¹⁹ *Devarim* 28:9

²⁰ Rabbi MD Kestenbaum writes “if a person lacks fear of Heaven, he will be incapable of acquiring good *middot*.” *Olam HaMiddos* (Art Scroll Mesorah Publications, Ltd Rahway NJ, 2021), 33.

²¹ Rabbi MD Kestenbaum *Olam HaMiddos* (Art Scroll Mesorah Publications, Ltd Rahway NJ, 2021), 25.

perfecting one's *middos*, and one is therefore not considered a true student of Torah if his learning does not bring him to perfect his character."

Also recall the statement of the Vilna Gaon cited by Rav Chaim Kanievsky:²² "All service of Hashem is dependent upon perfecting one's character traits, and negative character traits are at the root of all sins. A person's main focus in life should be to overcome his undesirable traits—and if this is not his objective, why does he need to live at all?"

Jews were expected not just to toil in Torah but to be "*osek baTorah*." Unfortunately, group *sinat chinam* which was prevalent at that time inhibited *tikkun hamiddot* which prevented them from being truly "*osek baTorah*. That's how group *sinat chinam* could coexist with Torah study.

SINAT CHINAM CORRUPTED AVODAT HASHEM

Just like personal *sinat chinam* corrupts an individual's *avodat* HaShem (as explained in Chapters 3-5), group *sinat chinam* corrupts the *avodah* of the Tzibbur.

Kiryat Shema

- The presence of group *sinat chinam* in their hearts and their violent behavior corrupted their *Kabbalat Ol Malchut Shamayim*. It means that they could not claim to accept HaShem as Ruler and affirm that everything that occurs is governed by HaShem's will and that "*everything is inseparable from His control and guidance*."²³
- When we recite 'Shema Israel,' we are supposed to unite with all other Jews of the world and make an active demonstration of the "*achdut*" of Klal Yisrael. Jewish unity or *achdut* was not possible while group *sinat chinam* was rampant.

Korbanot and Tefillot

The group *sinat chinam* in their hearts and their violent behavior corrupted their offerings of *korbanot* as well as their tefillot.

Mitzvot and Relationship with HaShem

Rabbi Kestenbaum explained how hatred affects a Jew's relationship with HaShem: "When a person flagrantly violates *halachah*, then no matter how lofty his intentions, he cannot truly be

²² Rav Chaim Kanievsky *Orchos Yosher* (Messorah Publications, Ltd, Brooklyn, 2019), 269-270.

²³ *Ibid.*,xi

seeking a relationship with HaShem. How can someone claim he is acting for the sake of closeness to Hashem while disobeying Him at the same time?²⁴

WHAT ABOUT THEIR ACTS OF KINDNESS?

Rabbi Doron Perez addressed this issue by citing an answer given by the Netziv of Volozhin who “suggests that the generation of the *churban* showed loving kindness to their own communities, but not to other communities. They loved and cared for those who shared their philosophy and traditions but rejected those who did not.”²⁵ They believed that only their community’s way of serving G-d was authentic, while all the others were suspected of perverting the Torah and G-d’s will.

A GREATER GENERATION HAS A GREATER *YETZER HARA*

When the *gemara* compared the sins of the two generations that lived during the times of the two Temples, Rebbe Yisroel Salanter brought up the general principle that “Each man who is greater than his neighbor, has a greater evil inclination to contend with.”²⁶ He applied this principle to those two generations and concluded: “during the Second Temple era, where they engaged in Torah study, performance of mitzvot, and acts of kindness,” Jews had a greater *yetzer hara* that caused them to become ensnared by exceedingly grave transgressions, the full gravity of which is recognized by those who understand the truth.”²⁷

A GREATER GENERATION SHOULD HAVE EXPRESSED THE TORAH’S MESSAGE OF LOVE FOR ONE’S FELLOW JEW

Rav Binyamin Zimmerman²⁸ addressed this issue as follows: “Why does the Talmud stress that the people in the time of the Second Temple were learned and kind? On the simplest level, the

²⁴ Rabbi M D Kestenbaum, *Olam HaAvodah* (Mesorah Publications, Ltd, Rahway, NJ, 2021), 48-49.

²⁵ Rabbi Doron Perez “Senseless Hatred Cause and Cure” *HaMizrachi* vol 5vNo3 Tisha B’Av 5782, 4.

²⁶ *Sukkah* 52a

²⁷ *Iggeret Ha-Mussar* of Rebbe Yisroel Salanter in *The Ethical Personality* by Rabbi Zechariah Fendel (Hashkafah Publications, New York, 1986), 272.

²⁸ Rav Binyamin Zimmerman, *Bein Adam Le-chavero: Ethics of Interpersonal Conduct*, <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/philosophy/issues-jewish-thought/issues-mussar-and-faith/sinat-chinnam-and-destruction-temple>.

intention is to point out that despite their other great qualities, they were held accountable for their baseless hatred. However, in truth, the point might be a little different. The Talmud may be indicating that it is not despite their learning that the people were held accountable for their *sinat chinam*, but specifically because of their learning. Those who become scholars and understand the Torah's message of love for one's fellow Jew, are supposed to express this love in all their actions. Failing to do so reflects a misunderstanding of the Torah and sometimes even a corruption of it. After all, the Torah was given when the Jewish people were unified: "They united themselves here with one heart" (Mekhilta, Shemot 19:2).

WATCH OUT FOR GROUP BASELESS HATRED

According to some authors, when Chazal introduced the notion of *sinat chinam* in Yoma 9b, they taught that "baseless hatred is even the driving force behind some of the other Talmudic explanations for *Churban HaBayit*; were it not for baseless hatred, we would have been better at honoring others and would have been more successful at developing a positive relationship with Torah."²⁹ In his Preface to Sefer Hafetz Chaim, the author writes that "at the end of the epoch of the second Beit HaMikdash, baseless hatred spread and became common place throughout society and with it came Lashon Hara (language that was hurtful and damaging to one another)."³⁰

CONCLUSION

Let's remember that group *sinat chinam* co-existed with Torah, mitzvot, and acts of kindness because:

- (i) It unleashed several negative *middot* (anger, contempt, jealousy, and especially cruelty, "*achzariyut*" since people killed each other).
- (ii) It destroyed the people's ability to be self-aware (*cheschbon hanefesh*) and to engage in *Tikkun Hamiddot* (rectification of one's character traits). Without *Tikkun HaMiddot*, those Torah-observant Jews lost the ability to "remove from their soul the trait of hatred."

²⁹ Ilana Turetzky, The Benjamin and Rose Berger CJF Torah To-Go Series, Tisha B'Av 5779, 12.

³⁰ Hafetz Hayim, Preface and Introduction, translated by Yedidya Levy (Mazal Elul, Yedidya Levy, Brooklyn, 2004), 5.

As for us, we should remain chronically aware of the dangers of group *sinat chinam*. We should become able to diagnose its first symptoms. Otherwise, *Chas VeShalom*, a blindness sets in between groups, they become tribal, group *sinat chinam* erupts, it takes a life of its own, and its consequences become irreversible.

TAKE HOME MESSAGE FOR CHAPTER 8

Dear Reader,

This chapter addressed a question about the generation of the Second Temple that was addressed to me on multiple occasions: “How could *sinat chinam* be widespread in the midst of Torah, mitzvot, and acts of kindness?”

This question is of interest because most Jews believe intuitively that Torah, mitzvot, and acts of kindness should have protected Jews in Israel from the dangers of hatred. Even Orthodox rabbis raised that question. Also, I was also curious to explore why the guemara in Yoma 9b emphasized the co-existence the coexistence of hatred with the three pillars of Torah, mitzvot, and *guemilut hassadim*. My analysis provides the following answers to the above question:

1. Our ancestors did not protect themselves from the dangers of group *sinat chinam*: they split themselves in multiple sects according to political and religious lines.

Here is a summary of the historical context. The divisiveness in Jewish society began before the generation of the Second Temple, in the period that followed the victory of Yehudah the Maccabee in 165 BCE. Groups and sects such as the Hellenists and the Saducees emerged, both of whom denied the divine origin of the Oral Law. Another group was the Essenes who had their own rites. In 63BCE, civil war erupted between the two sons of Queen Shlomis Alexandra after she passed away and tragically, the Romans (General Pompey) were invited to assist one brother Hyrkanus. Only the Pharisees remained attached to the survival and transmission of

Judaism. By the year 30 CE, several groups of nationalist extremists constituted the party of the Zealots. By 69 CE, the Zealots, the Sicarii, and the *Biryonim*, all began to extort wealth from the most moderate Jewish population. That's when Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai was smuggled out of Jerusalem to save Yavneh and its great scholars and create new center of Jewish life. On the ninth of Av, in August 70, the Romans broke into the Temple.

2. While Jews in that generation, were knowledgeable in Torah, their group *sinat chinam* destroyed their ability to engage in *tikkun hamiddot* in order to become truly *osek* in the Torah.

Group *sinat chinam* co-existed with Torah because it destroyed the people's ability to be self-aware (*cheschbon hanefesh*) and to engage in *Tikkun Hamiddot* (rectification of one's character traits). Without *Tikkun HaMiddot*, those Torah-observant Jews could not be "osek baTorah" and lost the ability to "remove from their soul the trait of hatred."

3. What about their Mitzvot?

Rabbi Kestenbaum writes: "When a person flagrantly violates *halachah*, then no matter how lofty his intentions, he cannot truly be seeking a relationship with HaShem. How can someone claim he is acting for the sake of closeness to Hashem while disobeying Him at the same time?"

4. What about their acts of kindness?

The Netziv of Volozhin answers: "the generation of the *churban* showed loving kindness to their own communities, but not to other communities. They loved and cared for those who shared their philosophy and traditions but rejected those who did not.

5. A greater generation has a greater Yetzer Hara

There is a general principle that "Each man who is greater than his neighbor, has a greater evil inclination to contend with." Rebbe Yisroel Salanter applied this principle to the two generations that lived during the times of the two Temples, and concluded: "during the Second Temple era, where they engaged in Torah study, performance of mitzvot, and acts of

kindness,” Jews had a greater *yetzer hara* that caused them to become ensnared by exceedingly grave transgressions...”

6. A greater generation should have expressed the Torah’s message of love for one's fellow Jew

Rav B. Zimmerman writes: Those who become scholars and understand the Torah’s message of love for one's fellow Jew, are supposed to express this love in all their actions. Failing to do so reflects a misunderstanding of the Torah and sometimes even a corruption of it. After all, the Torah was given when the Jewish people were unified: “They united themselves here with one heart.”

7. Conclusion

As for us, we should remain chronically aware of the dangers of group *sinat chinam*. We should become able to diagnose its first symptoms. Otherwise, *Chas VeShalom*, a blindness sets in between groups, they become tribal, group *sinat chinam* erupts, it takes a life of its own, and its consequences become irreversible.
