

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

www.TorahLeadership.org

"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

MUSSAR FOR MESSIANISTS

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

If the Third Temple were to be built tomorrow, what emotions should we feel today? Think for a moment. (This parenthesis is inserted to give you time to think.)

I suspect that most of you thought in terms of joy and anticipation. Certainly those are part of what we should be feeling. What about apprehension?

Let me be clearer. Of course we would be worried that things might go wrong and prevent construction. But should we be worried that things might go right?

My high school mashgiach often made the cynical comment that American Jews have trouble rooting for the Messianic Era to arrive because it would lower their standard of living; we'd be in inadequately air-conditioned caravans in the Negev for years.

But I'm not speaking here of material concerns. Are there reasons to worry that things could go wrong religiously?

Talmud Yoma 69b tells us that a sense of unease overtook the Jews as they danced for the inauguration of the Second Temple. The prophets on-site identified its cause: the *yetzer hora laavodah zarah* (inclination to idolatry), which caused the destruction of the First Temple, was dancing among them! The Jews fasted for thirty days and thirty nights. A fiery lion then came out of the Holy of Holies.

I understand this to mean that the impulse for religion is inseparable from the *yetzer hora laavodah zarah*. They are both expressions of the same human impulse/desire/need for spirituality. This *yetzer* got out of control during the First Temple and led to its destruction.

The Jews mistakenly thought that exile had been sufficient to purge them of this *yetzer*. Their mistake became evident immediately after the new Temple was built! They responded by toning down the spirituality of the Second Temple. It therefore lacked the miracles and the passion of the First Temple, to the point that Nachmanides believes that it was only a placeholder for an eventual true Redemption.

Netziv argues that toning down the spirituality inevitably meant upgrading the intellectualism. The initial leaders of Second Temple Judaism essentially chose to replace Prophetic with Rabbinic Judaism.

Our Talmudic story presents this decision as tragic but necessary. It succeeds in the sense that that the Second Temple endures, until it is destroyed because of a breakdown in social relationships. Perhaps the breakdown in social relationships could have been prevented by stronger communal spirituality. But our story's perspective is that the Temple would have been destroyed almost immediately had the (genuine) spirituality not been dampened.

I think of this story whenever someone suggests that increased spirituality is a panacea for problems facing the Jewish community. Certainly it is not; spirituality is necessary but also dangerous, and we must always calibrate for our reality.

The caution and restraint at the Second Temple's inauguration came from hard memories of the destruction of the First. Were there any such voices of caution at the inauguration of the First Temple? Ralbag to this week's haftarah (1 Melakhim 9:1) thinks that Hashem Himself was such a voice.

The thirty-third moral is to inform about the extent of Hashem the Blessed's Providence over Israel. For this reason you will find that because the Divine Wisdom predicted that Shlomoh would sin, and his descendants, and that this would be a cause for the destruction of the Temple and the exile of Israel from off its land, therefore it went to an extreme to warn him against this in what it said to him in G-d's second appearance to him, so that he would be careful of Hashem's Will, and command his sons and his house after him to guard the path of Hashem. And to this purpose He informed him of the exile of Israel from the Land and the destruction of the Temple, if they did not observe the path of Hashem, he and his sons.

Hashem had already said this to Shlomoh at the time of the Temple's building, to caution him to observe all the mitzvot of Hashem the Blessed.

For this very reason, at the time that he sinned to Hashem, Hashem the Blessed informed him of the punishment that He would bring upon his descendants because of this sin, so they would repent and straighten the crooked.

But he was not cowed by this to the point of rebuking his wife,

and also did not command his sons after him to observe the path of Hashem.,

and this was the reason for the exile of Israel from the land and for the destruction of the Temple.

(Note: Ralbag's reconciles Divine foreknowledge with human free will by saying that G-d knows how beings without free will would choose.)

Ralbag apparently reads the founding of the Temple as a risky time. This reading has deep roots in chumash. Consider the possibility that the Golden Calf to some extent resulted from G-d's legitimization of iconography and profoundly immanent religious experience via the initial command to build the Tabernacle. Consider as well that the entire category of *avodah zarah* is likely named after the *eish zarah* brought by Nadav and Avihu at the Tabernacle's inauguration.

It seems that anyone who foresees a Temple being rebuilt imminently would do well to look for signs of dangerously mistaken religious passion among their fellow believers. If they don't see any, most likely either their prediction is wrong or else their perceptiveness is limited.

In the Talmudic story, the Jews succeed in "killing" the inclination to idolatry. They seek to follow up this victory by "killing" the inclination to sexual sin as well. But being cautious types, they experimented first, and discovered that even imprisoning this inclination led to finding no eggs under chickens.

I don't think this is an empirical claim that sexual desire is necessary for egg-production. Rather, it symbolizes the idea that eliminating a *yetzer hora* always comes at great cost. Sometimes the cost is worth it, and sometimes it isn't.

It seems intuitive to me that both the productivity and the dangers of these impulses are heightened by arousal. It also seems intuitive to me that the impulse for redemption, the Messianic impulse, reflects another such innate human drive with great potential for both construction and destruction.

Many of us in the Religious Zionist community are in a state of Messianic arousal. The extreme version of this yields a sense that the State of Israel leads inevitably to a rebuilt Third Temple. If so, we should be looking very, very carefully to ensure that some corrupt version of that drive – perhaps even something idolatrous – is dancing with us. If we can't see it, and therefore can't take precautions against it, then either we are mistaken that Redemption is imminent, or else we are blind to our own desires.

That may seem a false dichotomy – why can't this Redemption be different than the previous ones, and involve a fundamental positive change in human nature? My answer is twofold:

First, I see quite a lot of evidence in the masoret that the First Temple was also intended to be the permanent and last. According to Ralbag, G-d sought to prevent the sin that led to its eventual destruction.

Second, it seems difficult to me, tending to profound inconsistency, to simultaneously argue for a Religious Zionism that insists that human beings as-we-are can accomplish key steps toward Redemption, and then for a Redemption that will fundamentally alter human nature. I don't think it is coherent to suggest that the State be achieved by human force so that G-d can send a flaming prefab Temple down from Heaven.

I argue for a nonMessianic religious Zionism. That position may be a minority in the Religious Zionist world, and in any case, I certainly can't demonstrate it empirically. But I hold that I can say on the basis of tradition that those who do see the State of Israel as Messianic have a special obligation to be vigilant for corruptions of the religious Zionist impulse. They must be looking for and valorizing those sorts of critiques, so that they can identify and perhaps conquer or at least contain the *yetzer hora* that is certainly dancing among them.

Shabbat shalom!

The mission of the Center for Modern Torah Leadership is to foster a vision of fully committed halakhic Judaism that embraces the intellectual and moral challenges of modernity as spiritual opportunities to create authentic leaders. The Center carries out its mission through the Summer Beit Midrash program, the Rabbis and Educators Professional Development Institute, the Campus and Community Education Institutes, weekly Divrei Torah and our website, www.torahleadership.org, which houses hundreds of articles and audio lectures.