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When Did Our Children Become Dispensable?

by George D. Hanus, Special to the WJD

Millions of visitors flock to Rome each year to see the great architectural wonders of the ancient world. One of those impressive relics is the Arch of Titus, a 50-foot tall monument to the Roman emperor's destruction of Jerusalem and the Israelite kingdom in the year 70 C.E. The arch, the oldest surviving in Rome, graphically depicts enslaved Jewish captives carrying the ransacked booty of the Second Temple, all under the watchful eyes of the triumphant Roman legions. Most prominent among the sacred objects depicted is the menorah, which some believe is still in Rome today.

For every conqueror there are the conquered; and for every victor there are the vanquished. The Arch of Titus depicts the triumphant Roman victors—and we Jews, the vanquished. The tragedy of that loss is commemorated each year on Tisha b'Av.

Tisha b'Av, the ninth day in the Jewish month of Av, is observed this year on Sunday, August 14. Tisha b'Av memorializes two of the saddest episodes in Jewish history: the destruction of the First Temple (built by King Solomon) and the destruction of the Second Temple and the subsequent 2,000-year exile of the Jewish people from Israel. Though those two events occurred 556 years apart, Jewish tradition maintains that both took place on the ninth of Av. There is a well known Talmudic allegory that attributes the downfall of the Second Temple not to the invading Roman armies, but to factional fighting between Jews in Jerusalem.

The Talmud tells the story of two individuals, Kamtza and Bar Kamtza. Their terrible hatred of one another was exemplified by their actions and reactions. There was a certain individual who was friendly with Kamtza, but who was also an enemy of Bar Kamtza. He made a feast and told his servant to invite Kamtza. But instead the servant invited Bar Kamtza, who was happy and relieved that his enemy was extending a hand in friendship.

The person who made the feast eventually spotted Bar Kamtza and said: "Since you are my enemy, what are you doing here? Get up and get out!" Bar Kamtza, fearing an embarrassing public episode, replied: "Since I am here already, let me stay. I will pay you for whatever I eat and drink."

But the host would not have it, so Bar Kamtza offered to pay for half of the feast. Still, the host would not agree, so Bar Kamtza volunteered to pay for the entire cost of the festivities.

"No," said the host, seizing Bar Kamtza and throwing him out of his party.

Publicly humiliated, Bar Kamtza was hurt and upset. He thought to himself: 'Since the rabbis and communal leaders were there, saw the whole thing, and did not protest, obviously they had no objection to my embarrassment! I'll go now, and have a little feast-of-slander with the king.'

Bar Kamtza appeared to Caesar, the ruler of Rome, and declared, "The Jews have rebelled against you!"

"Who said so?" replied Caesar. "Send them a sacrifice," said Bar Kamtza, "and see if they will offer it."

So Bar Kamtza returned to Jerusalem with a healthy, unblemished ram. But along the way Bar Kamtza disfigured the animal, making it unsuitable for sacrifice. (Animals sacrificed at the Temple had to be pure

and without blemish.) Some say Bar Kamtza disfigured the animal on its upper lip. Others say he blemished the eye, perhaps to symbolize the communal leadership's inaction after witnessing his public embarrassment. In any case, it was a disqualifying blemish according to Jewish law.

The Rabbis considered sacrificing the ram anyway to maintain peaceful relations with the Roman authorities. But Rabbi Zechariah objected: "People will say, 'Animals with blemishes may be sacrificed on the altar!'"

Some communal leaders conspired to kill Bar Kamtza, so that he wouldn't be able to tell Caesar that his ram went unsacrificed, but others objected: "People will say, 'One who makes blemishes in sacrifices is killed!'"

In the end, the Temple was destroyed, and the hatred exhibited between Kamtza and Bar Kamtza was the cause, say our Sages.

The Hebrew term for the enmity of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza is *sinat chinam*, or baseless hatred. In the context of the destruction of the Second Temple, *sinat chinam* was expressed as a hatred of another person for no good reason. In the story of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza, *sinat chinam* plays out as the elevation of personal feelings above communal well being.

The Temple was the great symbol of Jewish unity, where all Jews were bound together in common service to G-d. Even today, every time a Jew anywhere in the world turns his heart and thoughts towards G-d in prayer, he directs those prayers toward the Temple. But when Jewish unity and communal caring evaporated, there was no longer any need for the Temple and it was destroyed.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaCohen Kook—better known as Rav Kook, the first chief rabbi of Israel and the founder of the religious Zionist movement—proposed that the antidote to *sinat chinam* is *ahavat chinam*, the unconditional love of our fellow Jews. It is this state of communal caring that can protect the sanctity and continuity of the Jewish people.

Sinat chinam can take many forms, one of which is total indifference for the plight of fellow Jews. Make no mistake; our community's global reputation is legendary for our assistance to the elderly, homeless, infirmed and financially destitute. However, we have totally ignored our most important assets—our children—and in the process their spirituality, education and love of our religion have suffered.

We 21st century Jews are witnessing the unraveling of 4,000 years of continuity. Embarrassingly, the business of our communal philanthropy institutions continues as usual, with no serious attention paid to the impending crisis.

Everyone is already sick of hearing the repetitious recital of recent studies showing the decline of the Jewish community. One of the most glaring recent examples showed that only 44 percent of Jewish teenagers believe in a personal G-d, the lowest percentage among any U.S. religious group.

Our children are voting with their feet. They are leaving the family of Israel. They are telling us that they have no sense of belonging. Study after study has confirmed that most of our children lack any sense of Jewish identity, feel no reason to marry a Jewish spouse and do not feel compelled to participate in Jewish communal functions.

The Jewish community and the leadership of our communal organizations have institutionally abandoned our children and their Jewish education. We have minimalized and marginalized the importance of providing adequate resources to funding Jewish educational institutions. Many leaders go so far as ridiculing the proponents of Jewish education.

Finger pointing is not helpful, but we know the solution. No one disagrees. If universal, high quality,

intensive and affordable Jewish education was available to all Jewish children, irrespective of their religious affiliation or financial status, the issue of assimilation, intermarriage, and basic Jewish spiritual indifference would be solved. It is absolutely clear that the only thing separating affordable, universal Jewish education from becoming a reality is the communal determination to pay for it. If we really cared about our children, we could—and should—mobilize the necessary resources to properly fund Jewish schooling for all our kids.

The U.S. government's stance toward education funding is extraordinary and should be emulated. It has become public policy that American children must attend school until their 16th birthday. If children violate this obligation, they are considered "truant" and subject to criminal prosecution. As well, if parents knowingly allow their children to skip school, the government can impose substantial sanctions.

The government adopted the policy of mandatory education in the clear recognition that an educated citizenry is necessary to maintain the continuity of this great republic of freedom and democracy.

It is so essential for democratic continuity that each local community is obligated to educate all children residing within its corporate boundaries. If a family has one child or 10 children, the citizens of that community will absorb the total costs of education.

It is clearly understood that funding education is a communal responsibility. It is true that communities have taxing powers that enable them to fund this community mandate; however, the underlying principle remains constant. If communal funding of education is a desired policy goal, then the method of collection is of little matter. If we want our children to maintain Jewish continuity, it must be recognized that funding our schools is a community-wide responsibility.

Therein lies the quandary and the essential issue. We are witnessing the destruction of the Jewish spirit in our succeeding generations. We know that the solution is providing meaningful Jewish educational and spiritual experiences for our children. This can only happen if we allocate enormous cash resources to make universal education a reality. While we live in the most prosperous Jewish community in the history of our people, we continue to do nothing and watch our children lose their Jewish future because no one really cares about the other guy's kids.

Somehow, funding Jewish education has become the burden of the individual parents themselves, many of whom are clearly unable to pay. Therefore, because of the extremely high cost of Jewish education (\$10,000 to \$19,000 per student annually), the only children who attend these schools are those whose parents are rich or who are willing to make debilitating financial sacrifices to send their children to school.

When each Jew cares about the children of another Jew, that will mark the beginning of *ahavat chinam*, the unmitigated concern of one Jew for another.

On this Tisha b'Av, with these pressing issues of Jewish education ignored and our children falling away day by day, we must ask ourselves: When did our Jewish children become dispensable? And are we witnessing history repeat itself?

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