‘‘Tisha B’Av, Freud and public humiliation’’

By Jeffrey M Cohen

At this time of the year, with the issue of *sin’at chinam,* causeless hatred, highlighted as the central factor in the events that led up to the destruction of the Temple, we are expected to focus on our own relationships and attitudes, especially toward those with whom we have a serious issue that calls for resolution? How do we conduct the process of dispute resolution and the restoration of harmony?

Our sidra opens with a verse that indirectly touches on this issue. V. 1 offers a description of the geographical location of where the Israelites were encamped when Moses addressed them for the last time in the 40th year: אלה הדברים אשר דבר משה אל כל ישראל בעבר הירדן במדבר בערבה מול סוף בין פארן ובין תפל ולבן וחצרות ודי זהב

> These are the words which Moses spoke to all Israel beyond the Jordan; in the wilderness, in the Arabah, over against Suph, between Paran and Tophel, and Laban, and Hazeroth and Di-zahav.

It is impossible, however to use these places as determinants of the specific location the Torah is referring to. ‘In the desert and the Aravah’ is too vague and vast an area. The Aravah, West of the Daead Sea, is far to the north of the Midbar, the Sinai Peninsula, and both are a considerable distance from

Trans-Jordan. And the term בעבר הירדן, Trans-Jordan, can hardly be described as in the proximity of Paran, the desert to the east of the River Nile and stretching eastward to the Gulf of Suez. As to the other locations, Rabbi Yochanan says: חזרנו על כל המקרא ולא מצאנו מקום ששמו תפל ולבן (See Mid. *Dev. Rabb*. on 1:1, and Rashi *ad loc*.) So why is the Torah so vague when it comes to pinpointing the location of Moses final speech?

The rabbis resolved this problem by interpreting these names not as locations, but, employing the Midrashic approach, as 'allusions' to the particular sins of ingratitude and loss of faith *about which Moses was reproving them.*

So, for example, בין פארן ובין תפל ולבן they interpreted to mean 'In the desert of Paran they degraded (*tofel*, or *tafeil*, means something that is secondary, of lesser quality) v'lavan , 'the white stuff', that is 'the Manna'. Again, *v'chatzerot v'di zahav* they interpreted to mean, 'At Chatzerot they angered God over *Di zahav*, 'the object of Gold', i.e. the Golden Calf.

Moses was reminding the nation here of its backsliding, and demanding that it does not repeat such sins. Rashi explains that the Torah employed such subtle allusion, or word-association, in order to spare Israel's humiliation and preserve its honour and self-respect at the same time as it received its deserved rebuke.

Anglo-Jewry was recently rocked by 'the Rabbi Dweck affair' which, *inter alia*, highlighted the issue of how to – or, more accurately, *not to* – reprove another. The allegations against the rabbi came to the fore in the full glare of media publicity conducted by his detractors. The latter would have done well to have followed Moses' approach and employed sensitivity and concern for Rabbi Dweck's feelings, honour and position.

The Torah gives guidance as to how to administer rebuke. The verse, in Vayik 19:17 states: הוכח תוכיח את עמיתך ולא תשא עליו חטא. –

'You shall surely rebuke your neighbour, but not bear sin on his account (i.e. by issuing a rebuke that totally demoralises and impairs the self-regard of the rebuked party)'.

The comment of the Sifra on this verse clarifies the approach to rebuke that should be adopted:

יכול מוכיחו ופניו משתנות , תלמוד לומר ולא תשא עליו חטא, וזה מלמד שבתחלה התוכחה שראוי לאדם להוכיח **בסתר ובלשון רכה ודברי נחת**, כדי שלא יתבייש. ואין ספק שאם לא חזר בו בכך, שמכלימין אותו ברבים ומפרסמין חטאו

I may have assumed that one is permitted to issue rebuke even to the extent that the person's face is transformed (that is, becomes red or pale with shame), therefore the text states, 'but not bear sin on his account'. This reaches that, at the outset of the process of reproof, the one issuing it should do so in private, in a gentle manner and with moderated speech, so the person is not humiliated. There is no doubt, however, that if he remains obdurate (and does not admit to his misdeed and its negative consequences), one may shame him publicly and publicise his sin.

The sum of this is that Jewish law demands that anyone whose actions are perceived as wrong, sinful, misguided or a spiritual or moral danger to the

community – which was the nub of the allegation against the rabbi - must first be reproved in private so that he is not humiliated; and only if he does not retract and change his ways may the situation be publicised.

This Talmudic guidance/instruction was clearly not followed when R. Dweck was publicly denounced by a colleague in a most unseemly and humiliating manner. The rebuke and corrective action should have been initiated entirely in private by the colleague who first discovered the alleged transgression or indiscretion. If his rebuke fell on deaf ears he should then have referred the matter *privately* to a Bet Din or court of Rabbi Dweck's peers whose task it would have been to conduct a thorough-going enquiry *in camera*, and, if the allegations were substantiated, to prevail on him to express remorse and rectify the alleged offence or offences, and to put in place any safeguards that they may have thought necessary. *I cannot fathom why it was necessary for any details of the compromise agreement reached, to enable Rabbi Dweck to retain his position, to have been made public. While it is commendable that the agreement has taken the issue out of the public domain, it has inevitably impaired - possibly irreparably - Rabbi Dweck's authority, image and reputation, and confidence.*

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I want to broaden the discussion and deal now more generally with the subject of the general reaction to blame. The urge to shift the blame from oneself and reprove another, for a perceived fault or misdeed, seems to be instinctive. Take the first recorded transgression in history: When God reproves Adam for eating of the forbidden fruit, what is his response? 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. It was Eve who enticed me; but, don't forget God, that You are also not entirely free of blame here. After all, '*You* gave the woman to me' in the first place. (It has to be noted that Adam conveniently overlooks the fact that God only provided that wife after Adam displayed profound loneliness – ולא מצא עזר כנגדו - and 'couldn't find a partner compatible to him' (Gen. 2:20).

Let us consider the next, more serious, transgression. Had Cain been of calm spirit and rational mind, he would have realised that his brother Abel was wholly innocent of any wrong-doing toward him. They were both worshipping God in their own independent manner; there was no recorded prior rivalry between them on this issue. Certainly no malice aforethought. Neither of them expected God to reject Cain's and accept Abel's offering.

But Cain did not stop to think. He acted instinctively and, therefore, rashly. He couldn't direct his anger at God for rejecting him and showing partiality to his

brother since he had already clearly incurred God's displeasure and he could not, therefore, risk serious divine punishment. Instead, he vents all his frustration and anger on his brother, Abel, and slays him.

Freudian psychology refers to this as 'Displacement', that is an unconscious defense mechanism whereby the mind re-directs attention or strong emotion, such as a sense of hurt or blame, away from its original and primary cause and focus, to a substitute, in the form of a more vulnerable, object.

This mechanism is activated in a situation where confronting the primary cause of one's hurt is perceived to be too fraught with danger, or when the consequences for the offended party would be too painful, or when the subconscious knows that such retaliatory feelings are fruitless or would easily be deflected or rebuffed, or when it knows instinctively that the primary focus is immune to blame, such as is God in the Cain scenario.

This may be exemplified in a situation where a boss constantly insults, demeans or discriminates against a woman employee. Her antipathy towards him reaches boiling point, but she fears to challenge the boss as she knows she'd lose her job; so instead she redirects all her frustration and anger at her husband, mother or sister. Displacement occurs when we shift our emotions and actions from the actual desired target to a substitute target. This unconscious defence mechanism releases the pent up emotions by directing

them elsewhere. Often the emotion – and it can be love and desire, hate or anger - is redirected at the therapist or psychiatrist.

I have previously suggested (See Jeffrey M Cohen, ‘‘Displacement in the matriarchal home’’, *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 2002), I referred to the episode wherein Sarai (Sarah) blamed 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 (Gen 16:5) –

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.’

I suggested that Sarai was here displaying that psychological ploy of displacement. In other words, instead of venting her anger on God for creating her barrenness – an act that she knew instinctively was both futile and possibly fraught with danger - she switched the trajectory of all that pent-up emotion and redirected it, firstly at Hagar, and then at Abram. Instead of resenting her own barrenness, she resents Hagar’s fecundity, and her husband Abram, as activator and beneficiary of that fecundity.

Another example, this time of double-displacement, is provided by the most well-known of the several Talmudic attempts to pin-point the specific cause of

the destruction of the Temple. History records that there were *several* highly explosive internal social, political and religious tensions within Judea, in addition to the simmering anti-Roman feelings, all of which directly fuelled the final conflagration. Yet the Talmud, employing displacement, suppresses mention of all those major contributory factors, and focuses instead on one, otherwise unknown, individual's sense of grievance.

We are all familiar with the Talmudic account of the host who publically humiliated Bar Kamtza at a vast banquet, and threw him out, at which he was so incensed that the leading sages were all there, yet none of them reproved the host and attempted to persuade him to be reasonable, and save B.K's face. So incensed was Bar Kamtza that he went to the Roman governor and informed on the Jews that they were about to stage an armed rebellion; and *that single act*, allegedly and bizarrely, sparked off the violent Roman offensive.

I call it an example of double-displacement since Bar Kamtza also responds using that psychological ploy. He realises that it is futile attempting to dissuade the host from humiliating him and unceremoniously booting him out, so what does he do? He re-directs his blind rage against the rabbis present at the banquet, subconsciously blaming them for the humiliation he has suffered.

So, for those moderns who claim that they find it hard to home in on 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,' that is to take it out of one's nearest and dearest by directing one's pent-up frustrations at them. 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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There are many committed Jews who find difficulty with the prayer for the restoration of the Temple, fearing the cataclysmic international ramifications of displacing the Muslims from the Temple Mount. Others, surveying the lamentable factional divisions within Jewry, cannot possibly contemplate a situation wherein peace, harmony and co-operation will be restored to our people, or agreement reached on such contentious issues as the restoration of the sacrificial order.

The prayer is expressed thus: יהי רצון מלפניך ה' אלקינו ואלקי אבותינו שיבנה בית המקדש במהרה

...בימינו – 'May it be Your will… that the Temple may be built speedily in our days'. The biblical verb בנה is also found, however, in the sense of 'repairing' or 'rectifying.' A way of preserving the prayer's relevance, especially for those who find difficulty affirming its literal sentiment, might be to read it, therefore, as a plea for God to 'rectify, speedily in our days,' those moral shortcomings – such as causeless hatred – which, according to tradition, were responsible *for the destruction of* our Temple.