

Good morning and Shabbat Shalom,

A few weeks ago I received an email from a friend. He has been reading some pretty frightening predictions about the future. Not the cool stuff - an asteroid hitting the Earth, or intelligent machines taking over the world - but rather more mundane, and truly frightening, analysis on the effect of special interests on our political system, the corruption of our financial system, and the general incompetence of our elected leaders. I am an economist, and my friend wanted to know what I thought. I will get to that in a minute. What struck me most about it, though, is the timelessness of the message: haven't we always worried about these things? Hasn't our history given us good reason to?

Tomorrow evening is Rosh Hodesh Av, and for a while now the Jewish calendar has been trying to focus our minds on the theme of national loss: Tuesday of last week was the 17th day of Tammuz, the day when the forces of the Babylonian king breached the walls of Jerusalem. Tisha be'Av, of course, is the day when the temple was burned down and the Jewish people lost their homeland, the very epitome of national ruin. But, by a quirk of the calendar, this week we celebrated the 4th of July, marking the birth of a new nation. We also marked this week the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg. As Jews, we need to reflect on what has gone wrong. But here in the relative peace and prosperity of America, also: what has gone right, and how can we keep it that way?

Traditionally, Jews have seen the events leading to and culminating in the destruction of the temple as divine retribution for our faults. The Talmud tells us that the first temple was destroyed because the people were deeply immoral, they were unfaithful to God and to each other: there was idol worship, and there was bloodshed. The second temple, however, was destroyed because the people were riven by divisions: the rabbis called it *sinat chinam*. In Israel, where I grew up, the phrase many people associate with Tisha be'Av is *sinat chinam*, and the lesson seems to be that unity in the face of adversity is of the utmost importance: united we stand, divided we fall. That is of course a message taken very seriously here in the United States, the very name referencing this idea.

But I want to go back to the first temple, the one destroyed because of our faults. This week's *hartarah* is the second in a series of readings from Yirmiyahu, who lived during that time. Today we get the original of what has come to be known in the West as a *jeremiad*: in beautiful, poetic language, the prophet Jeremiah lists the many iniquities of the Jews of that time, speaking the words of God, as a husband to his wayward wife, with love and disappointment, yet also with expectation that the people will see the error of their ways and return. Listening today, we know what happened: they didn't. Indeed, Jeremiah was persecuted for his prophecies, and ended up in prison, only to be released by the victorious Babylonians. Among his complaints today, one strikes me as especially poignant:

וְאָבִיָּא אֶתְכֶם אֶל-אֶרֶץ הַכַּרְמֶל, לֶאֱכֹל פְּרִיָּהּ וְטוֹבָהּ ; וַתָּבֹאוּ וַתִּטְמְאוּ
אֶת-אֶרְצִי, וַיִּנְחַלְתִּי שְׂמֹתְכֶם לְתוֹעֵבָה .

“And I brought you to the land of Carmel, to eat of its fruit and of its goodness; and you came and defiled my land, you put it to unholy use”.

This sentence strikes a chord with anyone who cares about the environment and the effects of human development on the natural world. But it can also be seen in a wider context: that we have been given certain gifts coming into this world, and that we must cherish them, and never take them for granted. Among these gifts are all the blessings of this beautiful Earth we live in, true, but also, I would argue, are some man-made gifts. I would count among them, for example, the Declaration of Independence, signed on the 4th of July.

I had a wonderful history teacher in high school in Jerusalem. Her name was Michal. She was one of those earnest teachers who really care about their subject, so as a teenager, naturally, I wasn't sure what to make of her. But I do remember one class where we read the text of the Declaration, in Hebrew of course. It made a strong impression on me: the simple assertion – which you know so well in English – was revelatory to me as I read it.

מקובלות עלינו אמיתות אלה כמוכחות מאלוהים, שכל בני-האדם נבראו שווים, שהבורא העניק להם זכויות מסוימות שאי-אפשר לשלול מהם, וביניהם הזכות לחיים, לחירות ולרדיפת האושר

I was surprised, I remember, and deeply happy, to discover that people I had never heard of, long dead, and none of them remotely related to me, could so eloquently express ideas which I believed in with all my heart. We are all living with this gift, this basic commitment to our life, liberty, and possibility of happiness, a commitment which has been protecting the people of this country for over two centuries, though, being man-made, not equally well, and not always. Its promise endures, though; the Wikipedia page devoted to it exists in about 60 languages: I saw Arabic, Farsi, and Russian among many others.

I did not take honors history with Michal (at the time, I thought math and science were more useful), and so never studied 19th century American history. As a result, my first encounter with the Gettysburg Address came through the soundtrack of "Hair". There is a song there called "Abie Baby", and I suffered a small humiliation when my friend, who did take that class, had to patiently explain about the civil war and Lincoln. The address (and the song) cherishes those ideas written down in the Declaration as gifts, and as a call to duty. Remembering that makes the sacrifice of all those who died at Gettysburg perhaps a bit more bearable.

The protection of these ideas, enshrined later in the Constitution, is all around us. It means that we can protest in front of the White House, but we don't storm inside. We can criticize the President harshly on TV, and are not taken off the air. We can publish articles and books filled with jeremiads predicting impending doom due to failed policies, but we are not thrown in prison. Recent events in Egypt, Turkey, and Syria remind us how blessed we are.

We did nothing to earn this protection, in the same sense in which we did nothing to earn the thin ozone layer in the atmosphere which protects us from harmful solar radiation. But we also do not take either of these protections for granted, and here I think we are different from those Jews in the time of Yirmiyahu, and also from modern day Egyptians, Turks, and Syrians. I think we have learned our lesson. I'm not being naïve; far from it. The people who signed the Declaration were not either. They knew that power corrupts, that politicians shy away from difficult choices, I daresay they even knew the seductive power of money. So they designed a system of government which would force cooperation and prevent

tyranny, which would allow disparate voices to be heard but would also allow decisions to be taken. When that system was tested most severely 150 years ago, it survived through the sacrifice of many who fought to preserve it and make it better.

My friend was concerned about a modern jeremiad, just one of many we hear every day. We are warned of the effects of climate change, of income inequality, and of America's declining influence in the world. All are real concerns to some extent. This particular one, by a former government official, claims that we are somehow led in the dark by the military, the Federal Reserve, and Wall Street, led down a path that will take us to inevitable decline and dissolution unless we reverse course before it is too late. We should return to the gold standard, abolish the Fed and the income tax, adopt Isolationist policies, etc. I think that is utter nonsense and told my friend so in reply to his email. But even if it were partly true, I believe the country has what it takes to reform itself. It has a legacy.

Going into next week, with Tisha be'Av coming up, our main task I think is to preserve those blessings which we already have: the gifts of peace and liberty, of pluralism of thought and opinion, of non-violent discussion, and of thoughtful and open deliberation. Whatever the challenges ahead, if we do not take these for granted, if we are willing to fight for them if necessary, we will prevail. Until a true Jeremiah comes along, don't listen to all those jeremiads.

Shabbat Shalom.