

What a mess we made!

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The Fast of the Seventeenth of Tammuz we have just passed, initiates a three-week period of mourning for the loss, twice, of Jerusalem and the Temple. The official rabbinic reason for the disasters given in the Talmud is *Sinat Chinam*. Needless hatred. Internal divisions and antagonism, amongst Jews. Sadly we have always been very good at that from Abraham onwards. Looking around us today, the bitter divisions throughout the Jewish world confirm that the rabbis were right.

However, there is another factor that historically I think is more significant. If you look at the early history of the Jewish people three thousand years ago, as recorded in the Bible, you cannot fail to notice what a mess our kings, priests, judges, and tribal chieftains made of everything, time and time and time again. Sure they thought they were making the right decisions. But it turns out they rarely were.

At the time of the Judges, the tribes were so divided they only came together once to settle an internal dispute. They demanded of the tribe of Benjamin that murder on their territory should be punished. Benjamin refused and the other tribes went to war. Eventually, they all but destroyed the tribe and had to rebuild it.

David and Solomon's unified rule lasted two generations. Then the kingdom split into two. The southern kingdom of Judea had Jerusalem as its capital and the temple. The ten northern tribes, known as Israel, broke away and immediately set up two pagan temples. The two kingdoms were occasional allies but much of the time they were killing each other.

Both Kingdoms were caught between the rival great powers Egypt, to the south and to the north east Aram (Damascus) then Assyria and after, Babylon. The Israelite kings had to choose who to ally themselves with and sadly, they invariably made the wrong choices.

The northern kingdom of Israel could boast such awful rulers as King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. It changed dynasties and kings regularly. Ten of its nineteen rulers were assassinated. All Judean kings, good and mostly bad came from the house of David. The only exception was a brief interlude when Jezebel's daughter (or perhaps grand daughter) Athaliah, ruled, having killed all her

son's bar one.

The northern Kingdom soon became a vassal state of Aram. When Aram succumbed to the Assyrian empire Israel was expected to pay tribute to the Assyrians. But they tried to break away. Terrible decision. The last years of Israel were marred by internal conflict.

One king replaced another in quick succession. Zechariah was killed by Shalum. He was murdered by Menachem who was followed by Pekachyah. His son was murdered by Pekah who was killed by Hoshea. By this time the Assyrians had enough of this unstable dependent and, to quote the poet Byron, "The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold, and his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold." They took the lot them into exile and scattered them around the Assyrian Empire in 720 BCE.

Having disposed of Israel in the North, the Assyrians then attacked a rare good Judean king Hezekiah. But with a little help from the Almighty and a plot back at home in Nineveh against Sennacherib, Judea got away with buying the Assyrians off. But then Egypt emerged from a period of passivity and tried to persuade the Judeans to remain neutral in its war with Assyria.

Some sixty years later another good King Josiah (and by good I mean ethical and loyal to Torah) made another disastrous miscalculation and intervened on behalf of Assyria in an attempt to thwart the Egyptian advance. Even though Pharaoh Necho had begged him not to. Josiah backed the wrong horse again and Pharaoh killed Josiah at Megiddo in 609 BCE.

Josiah's son Yehoachaz, now technically a vassal of Egypt, was deposed by Pharaoh Necho for betraying the alliance. Pharaoh appointed his son Yehoakim in his place but he too was made a mess of things and Egypt replaced him with his brother Eliakim and changed his name to Yehoakim.

I hope you are still following this. Life in the Middle East was never boring. It was a bit like drug gang warfare in Central America. By now Babylon had defeated Assyria. Nebuchadnezzar eager to secure his new boundaries sent mercenaries to secure Judea. Yehoakim agreed to be his vassal but then switched to Egypt. Another bad political decision which caused Nebuchadnezzar to intervene indirectly in 598 BCE and replace him with his son Yehoachin.

Can you believe it, Yehoachin proved untrustworthy too. Nebuchadnezzar lost his patience. He captured the king and carted him and the elite of Judea off to Babylon. They, together with the next group of exiles would constitute the largest Jewish community anywhere for the next one thousand years.

Nebuchadnezzar then appointed the uncle of Jehoachin, Mattaniah, king and insisted he change his name to Zedekiah (literally the Pious One of God). If ever there was a misnomer this was it! He too promised to be a faithful ally. But once again he made the fateful decision to rely on Egypt.

Nebuchadnezzar by now was furious with these devious Judeans. He invaded in 586 BCE, destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple, killed the king's sons before his eyes, and then blinded him. That was the rule in those days! And he sent everyone with any skill back to Babylon in chains where they joined the earlier exiles. Leaving only a few farmers to make sure the land didn't fall into disrepair.

Judean dysfunctionality did not end there. Gedaliah was left in charge by the Babylonians but two pro-Egyptian Judeans assassinated him. The remaining Judeans including the prophet Jeremiah fled down to Egypt for fear of retaliation. So that for the first time since Joshua, there were no Israelites living in the once Promised Land. And that is probably why we have the fast of Gedaliah the day after Rosh Hashana to remind us how we lost the Promised Land and left it devoid of any Jews. We tend to remember our disasters as much if not more than our victories.

The amazing thing is that in Babylon, exiled king Yehoachin was taken out of prison and rehabilitated as the semi-autonomous king of the Judeans. Which explains why the Judeans managed to preserve their national identity in exile, unlike the northern tribes. When Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon and ruled an Empire from India to the Mediterranean, he wanted to secure his western border. So he allowed those Judeans who wanted to go back (most didn't) under Zerubavel to try to rebuild Jerusalem and its temple.

Then, as in our time, those who had settled in Judea and Samaria in their absence, objected to the Judeans returning and took up arms to block their efforts. Only under King Artachshasta (Ataxerxes) was Chief Minister Nehemiah allowed to go back with reinforcements and re-establish a Second Commonwealth under the religious authority of Ezra the scribe. That too soon split into rival camps of priests who were the new aristocracy and the followers of Ezra who initiated what we would call Rabbinic authority. What a mess we made of it all.

With a record of so many bad or failed kings, I often wonder why we pray for the restoration of the David monarchy. In three weeks' time, it will be the Ninth of Av. And if you have the patience as we get closer I will tell you why the Second Commonwealth ended up almost as bad a mess as the first one.

All this makes me wonder why so many people still think that the Jews want to control the world when they couldn't even control their own small bit of it. But then neither logic nor facts were ever very effective against prejudice or hatred.

History does not repeat itself exactly. But we really ought to learn from the mistakes of the past. But human nature being what it is, I'd rather put my faith in a Higher Power!