



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

When Managing Chaos, a Little Humility Wouldn't Hurt

by Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hachon

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,672, August 3, 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: During chaotic crises, the systems in place to handle such events must stay cognizant of their limitations. As the Talmudic sages taught in their *aggadot* about the Destruction of the Temple, situations can get out of control, and not every solution is in the people's hands.

The Talmudic sages who established the mourning practices for Tisha b'Av shaped the Jewish memory of the Destruction of the Temple for thousands of years. But that is not all they accomplished. In their *aggadot* on the Destruction, they offered lessons to future generations that go beyond fashioning a historical memory that would be part of the national heritage.

The sages sought to put the lessons of the Destruction in a conceptual framework that could guide both individual and collective behavior during states of emergency. They offered a Talmudic theory about the reality faced by individuals, society, and the state when faced with upheavals wrought by the unforeseen.

The *aggadot* on the Destruction begin with a general statement: "Rabbi Yohanan said: Blessed is the man who is always wary" (Tractate Gittin). With these opening words, Rabbi Yohanan offered an interpretive key to the *aggadot*. Without going into details, a basic idea is presented in the *aggada* of Kamsa and Bar Kamsa that posits that Jerusalem was destroyed because of an error in an invitation to a party that resulted in an undesirable person attending it. The unwanted guest ended up being thrown out in disgrace. But how is it that connected to the destruction of Jerusalem?

The story illustrates the way minor events—the kinds of everyday trifles that experts do not generally regard as worthy of attention—can spin out of control and have unforeseen consequences. These kinds of factors can erode a strategic situation assessment, allowing the situation it was designed to control to descend into chaos.

From that standpoint, the *aggadot* dovetail with the notion of individuals and societies losing control over events in the midst of an unforeseen state of emergency.

The upheavals in the Middle East initially dubbed the “Arab Spring” help to clarify the strategic outlook put forward by the sages. In December 2010, in a small, unknown town in southern Tunisia, Muhammad Bouazizi set himself alight after the police destroyed the illegal vegetable stand that was his livelihood.

Bouazizi, a 26-year-old man with a university degree, was unemployed, hungry, and in despair, like millions of others in the Arab world. His friends posted his picture and his story on Facebook, and thus began a regional upheaval that continues to this day.

Rabbi Yohanan would almost certainly have included Bouazizi’s story in the set of *aggadot* about the Destruction of the Temple. Taken together, such stories make it easier to explain how great events can begin with small matters that gather steam and lead to tremendous upheaval. The problem with such events is that they usually remain minor, and it is only a unique and random concatenation of circumstances that turns one rather than another into a catalyst for wide turmoil.

The uniqueness and randomness of such events are exactly what prevent experts from putting their expertise to use to deal with them from their outset. If, indeed, experts lack the ability to predict calamitous events, it has to be asked on what and on whom the citizens of the modern state can rely in the face of the randomness of fate.

The state’s promise of stability, prosperity, and security is based on faith—common to both the citizens and the leadership—in the salvation to be offered by reason and science. This can be reduced to the simple essential assumption that for every significant problem a solution must exist. We may not know it yet because we have not turned to the right expert, or the right expert has not yet been found, or the path to the needed discovery has not yet opened—but with the right effort, both the expert and the solution will be identified.

In that vein, Israeli public discourse about the coronavirus crisis over the past few weeks has centered around the desire to find a “project manager”—a savior who will know how to handle it.

But in light of the global reach of the crisis, with its full economic and social repercussions, it is worth returning humbly to the simple truth taught by the Sages: situations can spin out of control, and not every solution is in our hands. This is not just a theological maxim. When the leaders and citizens of a country take into account the full complexity of a reality and acknowledge that, when it comes to worldwide social and economic phenomena, not everything is under their control, they can begin to view what is happening differently. The understanding that we are navigating the unknown then becomes a point of departure for adjusting the expectations of both leaders and citizens.

Considering the magnitude of the coronavirus crisis, the Israeli PM should have spoken forthrightly to the people about the necessity for an adjustment of expectations. He should have explained with humility that this is not a technical crisis like a train crash that can be placed in the hands of experts, but a chaotic and unprecedented event (though not without important technical aspects, such as testing and ventilators).

By recalibrating expectations in this way, the state—as a governmental system—forfeits its image as the citizens’ Rock of Salvation. It is not, of course, entitled to shirk its responsibility as far as its capabilities will allow, but it must acknowledge its limitations and its dependence on the efforts of the citizens. The citizens, for their part, must give up the illusory certitude that somewhere in the state institutions there is someone who will rescue them from the crisis. What is needed instead is an awareness of common responsibility, with citizens fully cognizant of their own role in creatively adjusting to a new situation.

The rescue of the British army from Dunkirk at the end of May 1940 illustrates the indispensability of state-citizenry collaboration in the face of a looming national disaster. Churchill’s emergency call for thousands of civilian boats and volunteers to rescue the British army from the German siege generated an effective improvisatory response. The secret of creative adaptation revealed at Dunkirk stemmed from the unique character and culture of the British people.

Churchill’s earlier experience as First Lord of the Admiralty, and his familiarity with the seafaring culture of the British nation, formed a critical condition for the emergence of the idea. Here arises the great question about national leaders’ modes of management and to what extent they are attentive—

especially in states of emergency—to the cultural profile and unique needs of the nations they serve.

In the Israeli case, against the backdrop of the *aggadot* on the Destruction of the Temple—which describe the way reality must sometimes be managed on the brink of chaos—it is interesting to consider what Rabbi Yohanan would have said about the current crisis of leadership.

The Talmud summed up the Kamsa and Bar Kamsa story with this statement: “The humility of Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkolos [head of the Sanhedrin] destroyed our Temple and burned our Sanctuary, and we were exiled from our land.” The Talmud thus charges the head of the Sanhedrin with personal responsibility for the Destruction of the Temple because at a fateful moment he held back from making a decision.

Without going into details of the dilemma, the indictment resides in the expectation that a leader, especially in a time of emergency, must dare to decide and to act even if he errs—and will not evade the urgency of having to decide. Deeply aware that “Blessed is the man who is always wary,” and comprehending the nature of states of emergency, the Talmudic sages taught us much about the duty of leadership to decide and to lead.

This is an edited version of an article that appeared in Israel Hayom on July 31, 2020.

Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacohen is a senior research fellow at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. He served in the IDF for 42 years. He commanded troops in battles with Egypt and Syria. He was formerly a corps commander and commander of the IDF Military Colleges.