The Spiritual Roots of the Environmental Crisis

Hebrew/English Source Sheet

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Outline of Topics:

I: Spiritual Roots of the First and Second Temples' Destruction
II: Repentance and Redemption
III: Seeing the End from the Beginning
IV. Present in the Moment

I: Spiritual Roots of the First and Second Temples' Destruction

From the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Yoma 9b, Judaic Classics Library translation

Why was the first Sanctuary destroyed? Because of three [evil] things which prevailed there: idolatry, immorality, and bloodshed... But why was the second Sanctuary destroyed, seeing that in its time they were occupying themselves with Torah, [observance of] precepts, and the practice of charity? Because there prevailed hatred without cause. That teaches you that groundless hatred is considered as of even gravity with the three sins of idolatry, immorality, and bloodshed together... Therefore the Holy One, blessed be He, brought them three evil decrees as against the three evils which were their own, as it is written (Micah 3:11): "Therefore shall Zion for your sake be plowed as a field, and Jerusalem shall become heaps and the mountains of the house as the high places of a forest."

From the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin 96b, Judaic Classics Library translation

Raba said: Nebuchadnezzar sent Nebuzaradan three hundred mules laden with iron axes that could break iron, but they were all shattered on a single gate of Jerusalem, for it is written, And now they attack its gate [lit., ‘door’] together: ‘with axes and hammers they smite’ (Psalms 74:6). He desired to return, but said, ‘I am afraid lest I meet the same fate which befell Sennacherib.’ Thereupon a voice cried out, ‘You leaper, son of a leaper, leap, Nebuzaradan, for the time has come for the Sanctuary to be destroyed and the Temple burnt.’ He had but
one axe left, so he went and smote [the gate] with the head thereof, and it opened, as it is written, 'A man was famous according as he had lifted up axes upon the thick trees' (Psalms 74:5). He hewed down [the Jews] as he proceeded, until he reached the Temple. Upon his setting fire thereto, it sought to rise up, but was trodden down from Heaven, as it is written, 'The Lord has trodden down the virgin daughter of Judah [the Temple] as in a winepress' (Lamentations 1:15). His mind was now elated [with his triumph], when a voice came forth from Heaven saying to him, 'You have slain a dead people, you have burned a Temple already burned, you have ground flour already ground, as it is written, 'Take the millstones, and grind meal: uncover your locks, make bare the leg, uncover the thigh, pass over the rivers:' (Isaih 47, 2) 'wheat' is not said, but rather [ground] 'meal.'

The Maharal of Prague, Sefer Netzach Yisrael, chapter four, p. 58-9
The Shechina [Divine Presence] was among them [the Jewish people in the time of] the First Temple. This was the spiritual level of the First Temple—that it was unique in its spiritual level in that the Shechina dwelled in it. Therefore its destruction occurred when it was not fitting for the Shechina to dwell among them, that is, when [the Jewish people] made the Temple impure, [since] G-d does not dwell amidst their impurity.”

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, The Knowing Heart, Feldheim: Jerusalem, 1982, translated by Shraga Silverstein, p. 304
“For one who wishes to effect a complete cure for an illness must seek out its cause, after which he is in a position to remove the effect.”

Discussion Questions:
1. Why were the First and Second Temples destroyed?
2. What does the Talmud teach us about the difference between immediate and ultimate causes?
3. Why do you think it matters for us to understand ultimate causes?

II: Repentance and Redemption

Rab and R’ Chanina and R’ Yochanan and Rav Chaviva taught...Whoever has the ability to protest against the
members of his household but does not protest is punished for [the transgressions of] the members of his household. [Similarly, one who can protest] against the people of his town [but he does not do so] is punished for [the transgressions of] the people of his town. [Further, one who can protest] against the entire world [but does not protest] is punished for [the transgressions of] the entire world.

Maimonides, Mishna Torah, Hilchot Tshuva 7:5, translation by Immanuel O'Levy
All the Prophets commanded us to repent, for Israel cannot be redeemed without having repented. The Torah has already promised that Israel will repent at the end of her exile and will then be redeemed immediately, as it is written, "And it shall come to pass when all these things have happened...and you shall return to the Lord your G-d...and then the Lord your G-d will turn [your captivity, and have compassion on you, and will return and gather you from all the nations, amongst whom the Lord your G-d has scattered you]."

Discussion Questions:
1. How do you understand the idea that repentance leads to redemption?
2. What kind of repentance do you think we need today?

III: Seeing the End from the Beginning

Proverbs 29:18.
Without vision the people destroy, but praised is the person who keeps the Torah.

Ecclesiastes 2:14, Artscroll translation
The wise man has his eyes in his head, whereas a fool walks in darkness. But I also realized that the same fate awaits them all.

Jerusalem Talmud, Tractate Sota, chapter eight, page 23.
Rabbi Meir said, it is written [in Ecclesiastes], "The wise man has his eyes in his head." What about the fool? Where are his [eyes]—in his feet? Said Rabbi Aba Mari: The wise man—when he is at the beginning of a matter, he knows what will be at its end.”

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Tamid 32a.
He [Alexander the Great] asked them [the Jewish sages of the south], “Who is called a 'wise man'?” They responded to him, “The person who sees the consequence of their action.”

1 i.e. there exists the possibility that they will heed his admonitions
“Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai had five [primary] disciples...He said to them: Go out and discern which is the proper way to which a man should cling. Rabbi Shimon says: One who considers the outcome of a deed.”

Commentary on the Mishna of the Rambam to Pirke Avot 2:8, partial translation based on R’ Yosef Kapach's Hebrew translation of the Arabic.
And it says here 'the one who sees the [outgrowth of an action]--which means to learn from what is now to what will come about...[Rabbi Shimon's] intention is seeing in a person's matters—in all his enterprises that exist in reality—to see what comes out of his actions.

Discussion Questions:
1. How can we know the end of the matter when we are at its beginning?
2. Do you agree that this is the definition of wisdom?

IV. Present in the Moment

Psalms 16:8, Artscroll translation.
“I have set Hashem before me always; because He is at my right hand I shall not falter.”

Rabbi Elazar HaKappar says, Jeolousy, lust, and glory remove a man from the world.

Discussion Questions:
1. How can we “become present” as individuals and a society?
2. What difference would it make if we were more present?

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