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By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Why were our Temples in ancient Jerusalem destroyed? Jewish tradition offers answers.

The first Temple was destroyed in 586 BCE by the Babylonians--because of the sins of the people of Israel. This is evident especially from the prophecies of Jeremiah. The Talmud notes that the Israelites of that period committed major sins. The destruction and exile were brought about "because of our sins."

The second Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70CE. The Talmud suggests that the destruction was a punishment for the sin of "Sinat Hinam," Jews hating each other without justification.

The theme of being punished "because of our sins" weaves through religious tradition. We chant these words in the Musaf on our festival days. We hear these words from various rabbis and teachers who attempt to explain each of our tragic periods as the result of our sins.

Yes, certainly we have made sins. Yes, certainly we should remember our sins, introspect, and repent.

But is it really fair to blame ourselves and our sins for all the sufferings we have undergone? How about those wicked nations and people who have tortured, murdered, exiled and humiliated us? Shouldn't we be aiming some of our anger and frustration against them? Whatever sins were committed by the Jews of Temple days, weren't the sins of the Babylonians and Romans far worse? Instead of blaming ourselves, shouldn't we be blaming the vicious enemies who perpetrated such evil against us?

Should victims of evil focus on their own shortcomings, and ignore the shortcomings of their enemies? Isn't this an added wound and insult to the victims?

Maimonides, in his Letter on Astrology, notes that our ancestors suffered for their sins. But the sins were that they did not act practically in their self-defense! They looked to astrologers and to magic to find supernatural ways out of their troubles. Their sin wasn't of a ritual nature; it was of a practical, organizational and military nature. If they had been more clear-headed, they could have found ways to

defend themselves better; they could have developed better foreign policies.

As we prepare to observe Tisha B'Av, we should certainly have thoughts of repentance in mind. We should reflect on our religious shortcomings. But we should also keep Maimonides' view in mind. It is not fruitful to blame ourselves and our sins for all the problems we face. Many of these problems aren't caused by our ritual sins, but by the ruthlessness and hatred of our enemies. Our task must include practical strategies for strengthening ourselves against those who would hurt us. We don't solve our problems by wishful thinking and chasing after the words of wonder-workers.

Teshuva entails repentance and improving our religious lives.

Teshuva entails clear-sighted, practical work to help our people stand tall and strong.

As we fast and mourn the destruction of our ancient Temples in Jerusalem, let us also give thanks to the Almighty that we live at a time when Jerusalem is a thriving and beautiful city under Jewish sovereignty. And let us thank all those heroes of the Jewish people who have worked, and who continue to work, for the strengthening of Jerusalem and the entire State of Israel.

Angel for Shabbat