A PRIEST, A MINSTER AND A RABBI
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A priest, a minister and a rabbi walk into a bar. David Letterman once remarked that he knew three words that could get any person to begin singing, the magic three words, 'Here's a story'. When I was in high school a popular light beer commercial could be the cause of hotly contested debates amongst people who had never even tasted the beer. Back in the '80s if I were to stand up in a crowded room, or stadium and proclaim, 'Tastes Great" your conditioned response would be…. "Less Filling" to which my conditioned response would be "Tastes Great" and back and forth we would go. Boy the '80's were fun.

And so when we hear the line, "a priest, a minister and a rabbi walk into a bar." Our conditioned response is to laugh, just at the anticipation of the joke. But in fact no joke is about to follow that line at all. Believe it or not the story I am about to tell is actually about a Priest, a Minister and a Rabbi, it is in point of fact a true story, and, well this you may find funny, all three, the Priest the Minister and the Rabbi were Jewish. What makes this story so interesting, aside from the fact that we have a Jewish priest, minister and rabbi is that it is from this story that the most fundamental and important of Jewish conditioned responses was born. No, not, feeding chicken soup to a cold, this is even more fundamental than that.

Our story begins a little over nineteen-hundred years ago this week, in the city of Jerusalem. Technically just outside the city of Jerusalem and to the north in an area known as Bezetha, which means New Town. Bezetha had only recently been added to the walled city; it didn't have many inhabitants and old graves could still be seen between

the houses. Its walls were high and a series of sixty foot high towers dominated the scene, but for the Romans there was at least one advantage: there was no valley in front of these walls, as there were on the other sides of the ancient city. It was therefore the logical place to attack the holy city. And so it was from there that the siege of Jerusalem was begun during Passover in the year 66 ce led by the Roman general Titus. And it was there in that very spot, on the 17th of Tammuz, just 8 days ago according to the Hebrew Calendar that the walls of the Old City were finally breached, and the holy temple became visible to the conquering Roman armies who had assembled to destroy it and crush the will of the Jewish people who held it as there most sacred place. The Romans would succeed in doing so in less than three weeks time, when on the 9th of Av, Tisha B'Av the Second Temple, the holiest of places in all of Judaism would be destroyed. Such was the calamity of these events that to this day we commemorate them with 2 days of fasting and prayer on the 17th of Tammuz and the 9th of Av.

This was not a war fought for religious conviction, it was not a crusade. Christianity was in its infancy at the time, and the Romans really could careless about the animal sacrifices and meal offerings performed by this odd group of Jews on this small mountain in the middle of the fertile crescent. What they did care about and perhaps the root of all wars, was money. The Romans were heavily taxing the inhabitant of Jerusalem, and when the level of patronage could not keep up with the level of taxation, the Romans did what the Romans so often did, they went to war. As they say, "when in Rome, and when not in Rome, watch out for Rome".

As they breached the walls of the Old City on the 17th of Tammuz, the Roman commanders knew that the Jews within would fight for every inch of their holy city, and

understood that the final battle of Jerusalem would take a long time. And so, Titus changed his plans. There were signs that the supplies of Jerusalem were giving out: some Jews had left the city, hoping to find food in the valleys in front of the walls. Many of them had been caught and crucified - some five hundred every day. (The soldiers had amused themselves by nailing their victims in different postures, its worth noting that ours is not the first nation to show images of the dead to strike fear into its enemies, rather only the most recent.) The Romans decided to starve the Jews into surrender. In three days, Jerusalem was surrounded with a 5 mile long barricade. All the trees within 10 miles of the city were cut down, and the Roman troops set camp in the streets of the New Town, right upon the grave stones.

The death rate among the Jews increased daily. Soon, the Kidron valley and the Valley of Hinnom were filled with corpses. One defector told Titus that their number was estimated at 115,880. Desperate people tried to leave Jerusalem. When they had succeeded in passing their own lines and had not been killed by Roman patrols, they reached the barricade. There they surrendered: as prisoners, they were at last entitled to some bread before being forced into slave labor to help strengthen the Roman lines against there own brothers.

It was amongst these heinous conditions that our three men met, the high priest and leader of the Sadducees Simon; Elizar, a local minister and leader of a band of religious Zealots, and a Rabbi and beloved teacher Yohanan ben Zakkai. Simon, Elizar and Yohanan huddled together in a room just outside the Temple courtyard, in truth it probably wasn't a bar, but it gives the story some local color.

With the destruction of their people and their holy temple inevitable, these three faced one of life's most difficult situations, a situation that even without Roman armies laying siege to our cities we have all faced before. What do you do when in the midst of a crisis you can see the inevitable and unavoidable outcome looming on the horizon? How do you respond when the handwriting is on the wall, when the end is near, but time has not yet run out?

The Talmud teaches that there are four potential responses to a crisis such as this, four conditioned reactions that all humans will consider as they stare into the abyss. These four reactions are found in the story of the Israelites as they were standing at the shores of the Red Sea with the whole of the Egyptian army bearing down upon them, and a seemingly insurmountable expanse of sea stretched out before them. One group wanted to give up and return to Egypt, urging that it was better to spend a life in slavery than to die at the hands of there pursuers or to drowned senselessly in the unfamiliar and vast waters before them.

A second urged that it would be better to fight the Egyptians with what little defenses they could muster. Sure they would loose, it was in many respects a form of suicide, but better to go down with a fight than to give up in defeat. Still a third group, stood on the shore of the sea, looking back over there shoulders are the approaching armies and forward at the impassable sea. The Talmud relates that they just stood there and cried, paralyzed by fear and indecision, of them the Talmud relates, both the sea and the Egyptian had both beaten them, thus there defeat was doubly painful.

And that last and fourth group, because of whose courage we are still a people today; they reasoned that to return to slavery was only to delay the inevitable destruction

of themselves and there people, to stay and fight, given the unequivocal facts of the situation was equally self destructive and would only make the inevitable end more painful; to stand and scream and cry, though attractive and an accurate expression of what they were feeling, that would accomplish nothing and only bring about the same inevitable outcome. Thus for them, the only response to this gathering storm was to move forward into the waters, to seek out a new path, to abandon home, and anger and fear and seek out the distant shore upon which they would make a new life. That hope and promise, was not miles away, across a raging sea, but just inches away, it was in the first brave and courageous step they took out into the uncharted waters before them. The Jewish response, our conditioned response to a crisis, and perhaps what has enabled us to survive as a people, the oldest religion in history, is that when all hope is lost, when fighting no longer makes sense and we have no chance of winning, when giving up would just be giving in, when crying and wailing would only result in more crying and more wailing, the Jewish conditioned response, one conditioned through the heart ache of slavery and persecution and watching our most sacred places be desecrated by those who hate us the most. The response of our people has been and will continue to be, to find new hope, to find another path to happiness and peace and contentment.

And so our three men, a Priest, a Minster and a Rabbi, what did they do? Simon the High Priest was unable to image a world without the Temple and its sacrificial rites, he and his followers, fought the Romans valiantly and briefly, loosing more than there lives but also nearly all memory of there traditions and rituals. The Minister Elizar, he was bold and resolute, he and his followers fought there way out of the city and escaped to the Roman fortress at Masada. There they only postponed the inevitable, as the

Romans laid siege to them again three years later compelling them to take there own lives. What it must have been like to look down and see the ramp being built up to there fortress. How excruciating the pain to witness the coming inevitable destruction yet a second time, of them like those who would have stood at the shore and screamed, our tradition relates that there death was doubly painful because they had latched on to false hope.

But of our Rabbi and beloved teacher Yohanan ben Zakkai, he sought out the distant shore, he made the hard choice to cut his losses, save what he could of himself and his beliefs. When all hope was lost, he found something new to hope for and set his course toward that goal. The story goes that Yohanan ben Zakkai aided by his students escaped Jerusalem in a coffin, convinced the Romans that he and his students would leave the city and not contest it, or shed blood in its name if they would simply allow them a fresh start in the city of Yavneh where they would build a school and study Torah. What made Yohanah ben Zakkai's response so remarkable, was that to even consider it, he had to abandon Jewish tradition up to that point. He had to give up on the ways and practices and customs that preceded the Roman siege and find a new way for his people to pray and connect with God. His creative response was prayer and study, they would replace the temple and its sacrificial rites and become the core of Jewish practice and observance. For the Romans it meant they would have one less group to fight in the streets of the city, for the Jewish people it was the single most significant act in the salvation of our people since that very day Moses and the Israelites stood upon the shore and took that courageous step forward.

Our tradition commemorates these days with solemn prayers and fasting, we cry and bemoan what we have suffered and what we have lost. But not me, as a modern Jew I can appreciate the great loss, but also celebrate the restoration of hope that came from these horrible events. Rabbi David Wolpe writes, that we must allow life changing events to be life changing. The Jewish people have learned that lesson time and time again, and if these days of awe and sadness are to serve any modern purpose, then we would do well to take to heart that lesson in our own lives as well. When all hope is lost, when our most scared dreams and visions are dashed, we can respond as is the Jewish way, we can find new hope, we can allow the life changing events to be life changing and with courage step forward into the waters.