Lessons Learned from the Destruction of Jerusalem and the Second Temple: How to Truly Make America Great Again

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Abstract

The Second Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70 C.E. and a large part of the Jewish population was either killed, sent into exile, or sold into slavery. The sages of the Talmud and Midrash attempted to answer the question as to why Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed. This paper will examine some of the reasons and see what lessons for today may be learned from them. One major lesson is that baseless hatred can tear apart a company.

Keywords: Romans, destruction of Jerusalem, Talmud, Zealots, Sicarri, Second Temple, baseless hatred, OxyContin, and corruption.
Introduction

Roman control of ancient Israel began when Pompey conquered Jerusalem in 63 B.C.E. This led to great turmoil, both politically and religiously. For much of that time, Roman procurators ruled the country. Religiously, there were four key groups: Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and an emerging sect, the Hebrew Christians. The Pharisees were not a monolithic group and there were various factions. Hillel and Shammai were Pharisees who founded two important academies: Beit Hillel (literally the house of Hillel) and Beit Shammai. Hillel and Shammai had different philosophies which influenced their students. The Talmud records 316 disputes regarding Jewish law between the two schools. The opinions expressed by the Shammai school tended to be considerably more rigid and severe than that of the Hillel school (Jastrow and Medelsohn, 2002). The Talmud states that when the disciples of Shammai and Hillel who had not served their teachers sufficiently grew numerous, disputes increased in Israel, and the Torah became like two Torahs. In other words, there were many conflicting rulings which caused much confusion (Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 47b).

The Talmud describes an incident that occurred before the destruction of the Temple. The students were asked to go up to the upper chamber of the house of Channaniah b. Chizkiyah b. Garon. Unfortunately, the students from the School of Shammai took out spears and swords and killed (most commentaries cannot accept that Shammaites killed Hillelites and interpret this passage to mean threatened to kill) any Hillelite that was about to climb the steps and vote. Lau (2007: 223-224), cites evidence from the Cairo Geniza that there was an actual civil war between the two schools. It appears that the Shammaites did kill the Hillelites. Needless to say, the
Shammaites were in the majority and passed religiously stringent laws known as “The Eighteen Articles” (Jastrow and Mendelsoh, 2002). The Talmud (Jerusalem Talmud Shabbos 1:4) notes that “this day was as grievous for the Jewish people as the day on which the Golden Calf was made.” These measures erected a ritualistic barrier between Jew and Gentile making it difficult for the two groups to socialize (Schmidt, 2001: 140-141).

A different story is told in the Babylonian Talmud (Shabbos 17a) involving Shammai and Hillel personally. There was a disagreement between the two regarding when grapes become susceptible to ritual impurity (tumah). Hillel presented some compelling arguments supporting his more lenient position. Shammai then told him: “If you continue to provoke me, I shall also decree ritual impurity with respect to the harvesting of olives.” The Talmud then describes how Hillel was humiliated and made to sit submissively “bent over like one of Shammai’s students.” The Talmud notes that this day was “as grievous for the Jewish people as the day on which the Golden Calf was made.”

Politically, there were Jews that were friendly with Rome, those that were anti-Roman but did not feel that the Jews were strong enough to defeat the Romans, and those that opposed Rome. The Zealots were extremists, who wanted total independence from Rome and were quite willing to go to war; they became active around 6 C.E. The Sicarii used terror tactics and killed anyone who sympathized with Rome. The word sicarii means short dagger in Latin; the Sicarii’s favorite weapon was a short dagger which they concealed in their clothing and used to murder their victims in public places. The Zealots and the Sicarii joined forces to fight the Romans. The rebellion against Rome started in 66 C.E. and ended with the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E. The Shammaites supported the Zealots and did not want to yield to a foreign power (Jastrow and Mendelsohn, 2002). According to Zeitlin (1961), the Sicarii were an offshoot of
the Pharisees. Another offshoot, Apocalyptic Pharisees, firmly believed that only God could rule over people. They were opposed to violence and preached love and, according to Zeitlin, were the “forerunners of Christianity” (Zeitlin, 1961).

To make matters worse, the Office of High Priest was totally corrupt. The position of High Priest often went to the individual willing to pay the largest bribe to the Roman Procurator. For example, Yehoshua ben Gamla married the extremely wealthy widow, Martha from the Boethos family, a family of High Priests. She bribed the king and was able to secure the position of High Priest for her husband in the year 64 C.E. or so (Babylonian Talmud, Yuma 18a, Yevamos 61a). The aristocracy, the wealthy, and the Temple priests tended to be Sadducees (Wein, 1995: 144).

The Second Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by Titus in the year 70 C.E. and a large part of the Jewish population was either killed or sold into slavery. The Talmud and Midrash attempt to answer the question as to why Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed. This is one of the greatest tragedies to befall the Jewish people and many sages have attempted to answer this question. This paper will examine some of the reasons and see what lessons may be learned from them.

**What is the Talmud?**

What is the Talmud? Jewish written law is contained in the Pentateuch (the Five Books of Moses, *i.e.*, the Torah). The Talmud, Judaism’s Oral Law, is primarily a collection of rabbinical discussions and commentaries on the Torah’s written text. The Talmud, compiled separately in academies in Israel and Babylonia, explains, expounds, and elaborates on the Hebrew Bible and consists of the *Mishna* and the *Gemara*. The *Mishna*, originally an old oral tradition, was compiled and redacted by Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi (*Nasi* means President, he was
the President of the Sanhedrin), known as Rebbi, about the year 189 C.E. The *Gemara*, which consists mainly of commentaries and discussions on the *Mishna*, was completed in approximately 500 C.E. The scholars of the *Mishna* are called *Tannaim* (from c. 10 CE to 220 CE) and the scholars of the *Gemara* are called *Amoraim* (from c. 200 CE to 500 CE). There is a little overlap; some *Amoraim* were also considered *Tannaim* (e.g. Rav). The *Amoraim* analyzed, explained, and elaborated on the *Mishna*. By studying the Talmud, we are examining the wisdom of sages who lived during a 500-year period. The names of approximately 150 different *Tannaim* are mentioned in the *Mishna* (Margolis, 2000: IX). It is not clear how many different *Amoraim* there were since many had several names. Gray (2008) estimates that the number of *Amoraim* is probably around 2,000.

The Talmud, mainly concerned with *halachah* (Jewish law), also provides a detailed record of the beliefs of the Jewish people, their philosophy, traditions, culture, and folklore, *i.e.*, the *aggadah* (homiletics) and is replete with legal, ethical, and moral questions. The Midrash, a separate scripture, records the views of the Talmudic sages and is mainly devoted to the exposition of Biblical verses. There are two versions of the Talmud: the Jerusalem Talmud, a product of the academies in Israel, and the Babylonian Talmud, a product of the academies in Babylon. The Babylonian Talmud, considerably larger than the Jerusalem Talmud, is more authoritative. Both often use a case-method type of approach to illustrate a particular problem or a proposed solution. The *Midrash* is essentially devoted to the exposition of Biblical verses. There are two types of *Midrash*: *Halachic Midrash* which is mainly concerned with Jewish law and *Aggadic Midrash* which is homiletic and mainly concerned with morality. The sages quoted and discussed in the Midrash are generally the same sages as in the Talmud.
Reasons Given for the Destruction

Many reasons are given for the destruction of Jerusalem and the Second Temple and the exile from Israel. The following three ideas are used interchangeably since they all occurred at approximately the same time (Zivotofsky, 2004; Chaim, 2017). This paper will focus on some of the major reasons given by the sages.

Lack of Shame

Ulla (Third/Fourth Century) was an Amora who lived in Israel. He claimed that the reason for the destruction was because (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbos 119b) “they had no shame for each other.” People were not ashamed for their misdeeds even when caught. People are supposed to feel shame when they do something wrong. Shame leads to remorse. Those who have no shame or guilt will continue to wrong others.

Lack of Honest People

Rava (c. 280 – 352 CE) stated that Jerusalem was destroyed because “there were no more people of truth there” (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbos 119b). When honest people no longer live in a country it is only a matter of time before it collapses. This Midrash corroborates that Jerusalem was not known as an honest city.

The Midrash (Lamentations Rabbah 2:4) relates that the town of Bethar was so happy over the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem that they lit candles. Apparently, when a person from Bethar came to visit Jerusalem the Jerusalemite would get friendly with him and find out about the property he owned in Bethar. The Jerusalemite would then write out a false deed and steal the property. The people of Bethar who were swindled out of their land would say
they would have been better off had they broken their legs so they would not have gone to Jerusalem. Apparently, the city of Jerusalem had become completely corrupt and there was no justice for victims.

**Not Reprimanding Each Other**

Rabbi Amram, son of Shimon bar Abba, said in the name of Shimon bar Abba who said in the name of Chanina (Third Century) that Jerusalem was destroyed “because they did not rebuke one another” (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbos 119b). When leaders see that their contemporaries are doing something wrong, they have an obligation to speak up and should not hide their heads in the sand. When leaders of a country are afraid to criticize colleagues, a society will eventually crumble.

**Not Reciting the Shema Morning and Evening**

Rabbi Abbahu (Third and Fourth Century) said: Jerusalem was destroyed because its citizens intentionally “omitted recitation of Shema morning and evening” (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbos 119b). Rather than reciting the Shema (Deuteronomy 6: 4-9), a prayer indicating one’s total devotion to God and spiritual values (“You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your resources”), the people were drinking wine and liquor. This is probably the Talmud’s way of describing how the people became materialistic and pleasure seeking and lost interest in living a moral life.
Disparagement of Scholars

Rabbi Yehuda (Third Century) said that Jerusalem was destroyed because “they disparaged scholars” (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbos 119b). Once people start mocking those that are trying to teach them the ethical way to behave, there is little hope for a society.

Neglecting the Education of School Children

Rabbi Hamnuna (Third Century) said that Jerusalem was destroyed because “they neglected the education of school children” (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbos 119b). A society that wants to prosper must invest in education. It is not only technical education that matters; character and moral education are just as important (Hanushek & Woessman, 2015; Texas Parenting News, 2011; Tough, 2012; Wilce, 2014). Herring (2018) underscores that: “Virtue, character, ethics - these things matter profoundly, and it is one of the tasks of education to transfer the system of values from one generation to the next.” Hanushek & Woessman (2015) demonstrate that a nation’s long-term prosperity is directly related to “knowledge capital,” i.e., the cognitive skills of its population.

Equating Small and Great People

Rabbi Yitzchak (Third Century) asserted that Jerusalem was destroyed only because they equated small and great people (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbos 119b). A society that does not appreciate truly great people and instead extols insignificant people will cease to produce great people. In many countries, a wealthy business person, sports figure, actor, or musician will be held in greater esteem than an educator or scholar. This tends to destroy a society’s values, especially when these celebrities have no morals or scruples.
Baseless Hatred

The Talmud asserts that the Second Temple (which was in Jerusalem) was destroyed because of baseless hatred. In fact, the Talmud claims that the sin of baseless hatred is equivalent to the three cardinal transgressions of idolatry, forbidden sexual relations, and bloodshed (Babylonian Talmud, Yuma 9b). There was not only a great deal of strife between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, but even the Hillelites and the Shammaites did not get along. The Shammaites actually butchered the Hillelites to ensure that they would be the majority. This, of course, led to the rebellion against Rome that resulted in the destruction of the Temple.

Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (1816-1893), known as the Netziv, Dean of the famous Volozhin Yeshiva, feels that the destruction was due to a very specific kind of baseless hatred. He blames it on a kind of extremism or “excessive righteousness” in which colleagues accused those who disagreed with them as heretics (apikorsim). This kind of extremism is something God abhors.

Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan (1839-1933), popularly known as the Chofetz Chaim, blames the destruction on lashon harah (malicious gossiping) which goes together with baseless hatred (Zivotofsky, 2017).

Love of Money and Baseless Hatred

Rabbi Yochanan ben Torta (Second Century) maintains that Jerusalem was destroyed because of love of money and baseless hatred (Jerusalem Talmud, Yuma 4b; Tosefta, Menachos 13:4).

Love of profit has resulted in the most horrific drug crisis in American history. Hundreds of thousands of people have died (and continue to die) because of the opioid
epidemic started by Purdue Pharma, the company that introduced OxyContin in 1996. As early as 2000, there were warnings that opioids were turning people into addicts who would then switch in desperation to heroin and, eventually, fentanyl. Sadly, it is now clear that this epidemic did not have to happen. Back in 2000, Art Van Zee, a doctor in St. Charles, Virginia, was writing letters warning Purdue Pharma about the epidemic that was starting to happen (Macy, 2018). Van Zee (2009) describes how OxyContin was aggressively marketed and overpromoted. This resulted in it being overprescribed.

**Not Reprimanding an Evildoer and the Extremist Views of Rabbi Zecharia ben Avkolos**

The following story is known as “Kamtza and Bar Kamtza” and the Talmud (Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 55b-56a) attributes the destruction of the Second Temple to what happened in this incident.

*Story of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza: Destruction of Jerusalem*

There was a person whose friend’s name was Kamtza and his enemy’s name was Bar Kamtza. He made a big feast and told his servant to invite Kamtza; the servant inadvertently invited Bar Kamtza. When the host saw Bar Kamtza at the party, he told him to leave. Bar Kamtza was ready to pay for the entire party if the host would allow him to stay; the host refused. Bar Kamtza suffered great humiliation and was angry at the sages because he felt that they should have protested at his public humiliation. According to the Talmud, Bar Kamtza made the observation that since the sages did not say anything, they apparently felt there was nothing wrong with the host’s action. His embarrassment turned into anger and he decided to make trouble for the Jewish people with the Roman emperor. According to the Midrash (Lamentations Rabbah 4:3), Rabbi Zechariah b. Avkulas was one of the sages
present at the party when Bar Kamtza was publicly humiliated by being ejected.

Because of this incident, Bar Kamtza denounced the Jewish people with the Roman emperor and stated that the Jewish people were rebellious. The proof was that they would not sacrifice anything offered by him in the Temple. The emperor sent a calf to Jerusalem to be offered as a sacrifice. Bar Kamtza made a minor blemish on the calf so that it would be disqualified as a sacrifice. The blemish was so minor that it would not be an issue for pagan sacrifices but would be a problem for a sacrifice in the Temple. The rabbis were ready to sacrifice it in order not to cause problems with the Roman government (Jewish law allows most laws to be superseded in cases where human life is at risk). Rabbi Zechariah b. Avkulas, however, asserted that people would say that blemished animals are permitted as sacrifices and told the rabbis that they were not permitted to sacrifice the calf.

The rabbis then considered killing Bar Kamtza so that he would not go back to the emperor and denounce them (Jewish law allows this even in a case where one person is at risk, e.g., when an individual is pursuing another with intent to kill and there is no other way to prevent the murder). Rabbi Zechariah remarked that people would then think that one who makes a blemish on an animal that is consecrated for the altar is punished with death. They let Bar Kamtza go and he informed on the Jewish people to the emperor who then sent an army against them. One of the sages of the Talmud remarks about this incident: “The meekness of Rabbi Zechariah b. Avkulas destroyed our house, burnt our temple, and caused us to be exiled from our land” (Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 56a). According to the Midrash (Lamentations Rabbah 4:3), the criticism is about Rabbi Zechariah’s meekness at the party where he did not complain when Bar Kamtza was thrown out.

This story points out a distorted value system. Rabbi Zechariah was extremely
scrupulous when it came to offering sacrifices. Jewish law allows many laws to be set aside in cases where life is at stake. Thus, the Sabbath may be desecrated to save someone even if the probability of success is infinitesimal. Jewish law would obligate that the sacrifice be made in order to preserve the peace. There are those who claim Rabbi Zechariah b. Avkulas was the extremist Zealot, Zacharias son of Phalek, described by Josephus in *Wars* 4.4.1 (Urbach, 1994: 595). This would explain why he would be quite happy to offend the Roman emperor.

This story also demonstrates how craven the rabbis were. No one would tell the host that it was wrong to publicly shame a person by throwing him out of a party. The Talmud suggests that what really got Bar Kamtza angry was that not one of the sages present at the party would stand up for him. As Bar Kamtza himself noted, the sages felt that there was nothing wrong with what the host did to him.

Gottlieb (2007) cites the opinion of the Maharal of Prague (16th Century) who asserts that a major lesson is hidden in the pre-party description that “there was a man who was a close friend of Kamtza and an enemy of Bar Kamtza.” This describes the atmosphere that existed in Jerusalem before the destruction: “a social reality that was marked by divisiveness and exclusionary relationships.” In this kind of society, “even friendships can be less than wholesome when they serve to further create boundaries and hostility” (Gottlieb, 2007). A society with this much strife and disunity cannot survive for long.

**Not Adjudicating Beyond the Letter of the Law**

Rabbi Yochanan (c. 180-279 CE) avers that Jerusalem was destroyed because the judges established their rulings on the basis of Torah law without going beyond the letter of the
law (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 30b). The Talmud sees going beyond the requirements of the law — *lifnim mishurat hadin* (literally, inside the line of the law) — as a Torah requirement; obeying the strict letter of the law is not enough.

**Corruption of the Law**

The Midrash (Tanchuma Shoftim 1) attributes the destruction of Jerusalem to the corruption of the law. The Midrash indicates that the legal system was completely corrupt. They did not even bother obeying the letter of the law.

**Remaining Silent in the Face of Injustice**

This story is probably a paradigm to describe conditions right before the destruction. This is a good example of what can happen in a shameless society.

There was an incident involving a certain man, a carpenter’s apprentice, who coveted his master’s wife. One time, his master needed to borrow some money. His apprentice said to him: Send your wife to me and I will lend you the money. The master sent his wife to the apprentice and the apprentice spent three days with her. The master arose early the next morning and said to the apprentice: Where is my wife whom I sent to you? The apprentice said to him: I sent her back immediately but I heard that the youth took advantage of her on the way [he hinted that she committed adultery willingly which would then make her forbidden to her husband]. The master asked him: What should I do? The apprentice said: If you listen to me, you should divorce her. The master said: But her *kethubah* [marriage contract] is large and I do not have the money to pay it. The apprentice said: I will lend you the amount and you will then pay her the *kethubah*. The master arose and divorced her, and the apprentice went and married her. When the time for the debt came due and the master did not have the means with which to repay it, the apprentice said to him: Come and work off your debt in my service. The apprentice and his wife, would be sitting, eating and drinking, while the master, the woman’s first husband, would be standing over them and serving them their drinks. And tears would fall from his eyes into their cups.
It was at that moment that the Divine decree against the Jewish people was sealed, for remaining silent in the face of this injustice. Some say that the Jewish people were punished for two wicks in one lamp, a euphemism for the sin of adultery committed by this couple while the master was still married to the woman (Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 58a; translation based on Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz at Sefaria.com, ArtScroll, and Zivotofsky).

Discussion

Let us examine the above ideas to see if they have any relevance to modern times. To summarize the different opinions as to what caused the destruction of Jerusalem and the Second Temple:

- Baseless hatred. This seems to be the major cause
- Shameless society. People engaged in all kinds of immoral behaviors and felt no guilt or shame. No one was rebuked for wrongdoing
- Remaining silent in the face of injustice
- People with no moral and ethical values were held in great esteem
- Corrupt legal system. Jerusalem, the capital of Israel, became known as a corrupt city
- Love of money
- Decline of ethics and honesty
- No respect for scholars or scholarship
- Religious extremism

How would one characterize the United States today? Terms that are being used include political polarization and dysfunction; polarized society; widening income inequality; free market fundamentalism; growth of tribalism; lack of trust in institutions; declining social mobility; increase in xenophobia, racism, and sexism; shameless society; and lack of civility.
People are willing to talk freely about the lowly and disgusting acts they have committed in the social media and mass media.

Keyes (2004: p. 5) asserts that “deception has become commonplace at all levels of contemporary life… It is now as acceptable to lie as it is to exceed the speed limit when driving.” Indeed, some feel that we are in the “age of post-truth.” The term “post-truth” became the Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year in 2016 (Wang, 2016). Transparency International (https://www.transparency.org/) has been measuring corruption in various countries since 1995. Their Corruption Perception Index ranges from 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean). In 2017, the United States ranked 16 out of 180 countries with an unimpressive score of 75. It should be noted that corruption is a destroyer of economic growth and prosperity (Lopez-Claros, 2014).

The annual Edelman survey measures people’s trust in institutions such as government, business, media, and NGOs. According to the 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer, the United States suffered a record-breaking drop in trust among the public.

Trust in US institutions, including the government and media, is imploding, according to the 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer … No country saw steeper declines than the United States, with a 37-point aggregate drop in trust across all institutions. At the opposite end of the spectrum, China experienced a 27-point gain, more than any other country (Lockie, 2018).

Jonathan Haidt co-founded Heterodox Academy to promote “viewpoint diversity” on campus (Goldstein, 2017). Haidt has been criticized for his absolutist stance on free speech which his critics feel “is at odds with the need for a diverse and inclusive university.” Haidt insists that the new moral culture that is prevalent on many college campuses “values victims, prioritizes emotional safety, silences dissent, and distorts scholarship. It is a culture that undermines the university’s traditional mission to pursue truth” (Goldstein, 2017). Haidt feels
that colleges are responsible for exacerbating the culture of victimhood.

Haidt believes that the list of “Sacred Victims” continues to grow. It now includes: Blacks, women, LGBT, Latinos, Native Americans, people with disabilities, and Muslims (Goldstein, 2017). According to Haidt, about 70% to 75% of America is now in a protected group. It is difficult to be a candid, truthful social scientist when “you have to try to explain social problems without saying anything that casts any blame on any member of a protected group. None of these groups can have done anything that led to their victimization or marginalization” (Leo, 2016).

Haidt is predicting that the political dysfunction we are seeing together with the use of social media to portray the other side at its worst will ultimately lead to violence and hundreds will die (Goldstein, 2017). One group that is not on the Sacred List is the poor working class. Donald Trump may be president because this group felt that the Democratic Party was indifferent to its needs.

Brooks (2018) has the following to say about the United States today:

In the decades before Trump, the Republican Party stood for an idea: character before policy. To Mitt Romney, John McCain, the Bushes and Ronald Reagan, personal character and moral integrity were paramount. They stood for the idea that you can’t be a good leader or a good nation unless you are a good person and a good people. Trump asked the G.O.P. to reverse those priorities. He asked the Republican Party to accept the proposition that it doesn’t matter if your leader is a liar, a philanderer and a narcissist. It doesn’t matter if he is cruel to the weak and bigoted toward the outsider. What matters, when you’re in a death match in which the survival of your nation and culture is at stake, is having a bastard in charge who understands and is tough enough to win.

The central Republican bet is that Trump’s moral nature won’t matter. You can be a bad person and have a successful presidency. You can’t have a good nation without good moral norms. Trump asked for the party’s soul, and he got it. That was the story of 2016 and 2017.
The question of 2018 is whether the Democrats will follow suit. The temptation will be strong. In any conflict the tendency is to become the mirror image of your opponent. And the Democrats are just as capable of tribalism as the Republicans, just as capable of dividing the world in self-righteous Manichaean binaries: us enlightened few against those racist many; us modern citizens against those backward gun-toting troglodytes.

Acemoglu & Robinson (2012) compared successful economies with unsuccessful economies (e.g., South Korea with North Korea) and discovered that the difference has nothing to do with natural resources. Rather, the economic and political institutions in a country are more significant in determining whether a county will thrive. Countries that have trustworthy institutions that encourage people to work hard and save, prosper. If America wants to continue to flourish, it has to have trustworthy institutions that are concerned with the welfare of people. Nothing is more destructive than leaders that are only concerned with enriching themselves.

Chua (2007) examined several of history’s hyperpowers such as the Achaemenid Persian Empire, the Tang Dynasty, the Mongol Empire, the Dutch, and the British Empires to see what made them so great. She found that these societies were, at least for their times, quite tolerant and pluralistic. This enabled them to tap into the creative abilities and talents of various groups that were excluded in other countries.

Gilens & Page (2014) examined more than 1,800 U.S. policies from 1981 to 2002 and assert that the United States political system does not serve the interest of the majority of Americans. Rather, it serves the needs of special interests such as corporations; the country resembles an oligarchy more than a democracy. Legislation is much more likely to follow the preference of the wealthy elite at the 90th percentile of income than the majority of people at the 50th percentile. Apparently, special interest groups are gradually transforming the United States
into an oligarchy that is concerned only about the needs of the wealthy.

President Donald Trump promised to “drain the swamp” that Washington had become.

Instead, according to Bloomberg’s Tim O’Brien:

Ever since Trump and his family arrived in Washington they have essentially hung a for-sale sign on the White House by refusing to meaningfully separate themselves from their own business interests. That’s certainly not lost on the companies that do business in or with Washington. They know that in Trump’s swamp, you pay to play (Friedersdorf, 2018).

In 1992, the Soviet Union unexpectedly collapsed. The reason, as explained by Mikhail Gorbachev is as follows (Aron, 2011):

The Soviet model was defeated not only on the economic and social levels; it was defeated on a cultural level. Our society, our people, the most educated, the most intellectual, rejected that model on the cultural level because it does not respect the man, oppresses him spiritually and politically.

Nikolai Ryzhkov, Gorbachev’s prime minister, was most concerned about the "moral [nравственное] state of the society" and averred:

[We] stole from ourselves, took and gave bribes, lied in the reports, in newspapers, from high podiums, wallowed in our lies, hung medals on one another. And all of this -- from top to bottom and from bottom to top (Aron, 2011).

According to Sacks (2017), one of Moses’ greatest insights was that only faith, righteousness, and morality can save a society from decline and fall.

Inequalities will grow. The rich will become self-indulgent. The poor will feel excluded. There will be social divisions, resentments and injustices. Society will no longer cohere. People will not feel bound to one another by a bond of collective responsibility. Individualism will prevail. Trust will decline. Social capital will wane (Sacks, 2017).

The Social Progress Index (SPI) (http://www.socialprogressimperative.org/) measures the
true well-being and quality of life of people living in various countries and is a much better measure of how well a country is doing than per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP). It was created so that it would be easy to determine whether or not a country was providing for its people’s basic needs as well as see whether opportunity is provided for citizens of a country to achieve their full potential. According to the 2017 SPI, the US ranked 18th out of 128. Michael Green, CEO of SPI, stated:

The United States’ failure to improve quality of life for its people has far-reaching effects. We see it in a 20-year decline in competitiveness; rising discontent and a sense of unequal opportunity; divisive politics, as citizens turn on fellow citizens; and declining participation and trust in democracy (Social Progress Imperative, 2018).

Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089-1167), philosopher, poet, biblical commentator, highlights that the remedy that will lead to the restoration of the Temple is stated in the verse “You shall love your fellow as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). Baseless hatred – the foremost reason for the destruction of Jerusalem – wreaks havoc with a country. A country that is divided into factions that hate each other and cannot cooperate will eventually collapse; a civil war might even result. Compassion and concern for others, on the other hand, builds and strengthens a country.
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