

Some of you may remember the legend of Johnny Appleseed from grade school. In the early 1800's Johnny Appleseed (John Chapman in real life) roamed what was to later become Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, and Illinois with a bag of apple seeds on his back. When he found a likely planting spot, he cleared the land by himself, planted an orchard of apple trees, and then moved on, possibly never to return.

What does John Chapman, who, by the way, was a Christian missionary, have to do with the Three Weeks?

Actually, a lot.

The *midrash* (*Vayikra Rabba* 25:5) recounts a similar story about the Roman emperor Hadrian who once passed by an old Jewish man who was planting a fig tree. When the emperor asked the old man what point there was to planting a tree from which it was unlikely he was going to be able to benefit, the man replied, "the same way my ancestors planted for me, I am planting for my descendants."

Many of us have lived through the "me generation," commonly thought of as the most self-absorbed generation in American history (hence the name.) However, as we can see from the *midrash* above, "me generations" and "me attitudes" long predated 20th century America. Hadrian typified what must have been a very self-absorbed Roman "me generation." This is evidenced by his perspective on planting the tree – he expects the old man to see the folly of his ways once he realizes that there's "nothing in it for me."

At this time of year, when we mourn the destruction of the *Beit Hamikdash*, we need to realize that cultural norms and attitudes have a profound effect on us all. At the time of the destruction of the Second Temple, many Jews resisted complete adoption of the practices of the Roman host culture. Nevertheless, they were so immersed that culture that they certainly had adopted the "what's in it for me" attitude – review the story about *Kamtza* and *Bar Kamtza* in the *Talmud* (*Gittin* 56) or read about how the Zealots behaved during the revolt against the Romans. It is this self-centered, "what's in it for me" attitude that ultimately leads to *sinat chinam*, the sin for which our tradition teaches us the *Beit Hamikdash* was destroyed and has not yet been rebuilt.

So, too we cannot help being influenced by the prevailing cultural norms and attitudes. This is true across the gamut of Jewish observance – the ultra-Orthodox in Williamsburg, Borough Park, and Monsey are affected, and the Modern Orthodox on the Upper West Side, in Teaneck, and in Highland Park, are affected. Even though we may avoid TV, the movies, newspapers, and other media, we are so immersed in the culture that we often fail to appreciate what a profound effect it has on us. It's in the air we breathe and the water we drink.

The level of discourse among Jews of differing opinions frequently echoes the level of national dialogue in general – who needs to make a positive case for anything when it is so easy to sling mud at your opponent? It seems that we are so self-centered that we have lost all respect for others. I feel ashamed when I think of

some of the things I read nowadays on the Internet, coming both from the right and the left wings of Orthodoxy. Often, I think how disappointed someone like the *Chofetz Chaim* might be were he to have the opportunity to read what passes as discourse nowadays.

Johnny Appleseed and the old man with the fig tree show us that the antidote to self-centeredness lies not in thinking differently – it lies in making a conscious choice to act differently. We need to realize that our primary purpose here is not to serve ourselves – it is to serve others. We can affect our attitudes by making a conscious choice to act in a selfless way, like Johnny Appleseed and the old man. Sure, there may not be anything in it for us. Does that really matter? When we act in a selfless way, doing for others without expectation of compensation, we make the world a better place.

When I was in the sixth grade in Jewish day school, my principal, Rabbi Gerald Werner, spoke at an assembly and told us students that we would never be able to repay our parents for sending us to day school. While this might be factually true, it misses an important point. When I, as a parent, make the same sacrifices to send my children to day school that my parents made for me, I actually am repaying my parents, in a way. (As an aside, it is interesting that this selflessness is a key component in the transmission of our *mesorah*. Perhaps the general lack of selflessness during the Roman period following the destruction of the Temple is what concerned *Rabbi Yehuda HaNassi* enough to commit the Oral tradition to writing.)

Engaging in selfless acts for others – either others in our current generation, or others in future generations – helps to counteract the “me generation” culture in which we cannot help being immersed. Small, selfless acts may not amount to much. However, in the words of one of my *rabbaim*, Rabbi Hirsch Isenberg of blessed memory, “*levenah al levenah*,” brick by brick, over time, these selfless acts can build a mighty structure – one full of *ahavat Yisrael*, and capable of bringing about a *geulah shlemah*, speedily, and in our days.

Shabbat Shalom,

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<i>ahavat Yisrael</i>	Appreciation of all fellow Jews
<i>Beit Hamikdash</i>	First and Second Temples
<i>Chofetz Chaim</i>	Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan (1838 – 1933), an influential Eastern European rabbi and ethicist who wrote widely about the power of speech
<i>geulah shlemah</i>	Complete redemption
<i>mesorah</i>	Tradition
<i>midrash</i>	Rabbinic legend
<i>rabbaim</i>	Teachers
<i>Rabbi Yehuda HaNassi</i>	Rabbi Judah the Prince, redactor of the <i>Mishna circa</i> 200 CE
<i>sinat chinam</i>	baseless hatred