

Off The Pulpit

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Torah: To Elevate Or Denigrate?

"Jerusalem was destroyed" teaches the Talmud, "because judgments were rendered strictly upon the law of the Torah." In other words, the quality of mercy was missing from the courts of the day. Untempered by humility and humanity, the law is destructive.

On the page where that statement is made (B.M. 30b) the Tosafot (medieval exegetes) ask how could that be, when we learn elsewhere (Yoma 9b) that the Temple was destroyed because of baseless hatred? Their answer is that both contributed to the destruction.

We might understand the two to be related. When people feel hostile they use the law not as a means of justice, but as a vehicle for punishment. Usually people quote the Torah with love, but sometimes they use it as a cudgel, to beat or even humiliate those whom

they dislike or of whom they disapprove. Like all power, the power of knowledge can elevate or denigrate.

Each day, we too, make the choice between rebuilding and destruction in our lives. Perhaps with an eye to history we can speak more gently, judge more kindly, and remember that our past holds lessons we would be wise to embrace.