

It's Not Personal

Thought for the Day

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As I tried to escape the wall-to-wall coverage of a certain football match last weekend, what caught my attention was reports in the media claiming that Donald Trump “totally hates Sturgeon and bitches about her to Theresa May”. The First Minister’s response was that political disagreement is “not personal; it’s about policies”.

That resonated for me with a story in the Talmud that relates to this time of year, and shows the devastating consequences that can result from personal hatred and abuse. This coming weekend marks the anniversary of the destruction, more than two thousand years ago, of the Temple built by King Solomon. Although it was rebuilt, that Temple too – the one familiar from the Christian New Testament – was later destroyed, this time by the Romans.

The Talmud traces this calamity, which all but wiped out the Jewish nation and completely changed the nature of Jewish worship, back to a feud that began with a trivial mistake – a dinner invitation being delivered to the wrong person. The quarrel escalates, the authorities are dragged into the dispute, and finally the Romans decide to take it out on the entire community, religion, and culture.

There are many lessons to be learned from this story. The Roman response is an obvious example of what we now call stereotyping – generalising from the actions of a few people and taking it out on the entire community. But the Talmud is more interested in how the original quarrel got out of control, and it puts the blame firmly on the name-calling, the rejection of all efforts at compromise and mediation, the clyping, and then finally the betrayal to the authorities. The Talmud calls it “baseless hatred”.

What we take from this is the importance of “baseless love” as an antidote to “baseless hate”. Thoughtful words as an antidote to insults. And respectful disagreement as an antidote to conflict. It’s not personal; it’s about policies!