

## PERSPECTIVES ON FAITH

By Alvin H. Rosenfeld

Special to the Bloomington, Ind., Herald Times  
July 24, 2010

On Monday evening, a group of faithful Jews in Bloomington gathered at Congregation Beth Shalom to observe Tisha b'Av — the saddest day on the Jewish calendar. The day marks the destruction of the first Temple, by the Babylonians, in the year 586 BCE, and also the destruction of the second Temple, by the Romans, in 70 CE.

Various other historical calamities, including the expulsions of the Jews from England, in the 13th century, and from Spain, in the 15th century, are said to have occurred on that day.

And so, many centuries ago, this day was set aside as a day of fasting, remembering, mourning and deep spiritual reflection.

Those of us who gathered in prayer at Beth Shalom removed our shoes, sat on the floor in semi-darkness, and chanted, by candlelight, from the Book of Lamentations. Throughout the world, our co-religionists did the same, adding “kinot,” or special elegiac poems, written in the medieval period in response to massacres during the Crusades.

The Jews are nothing if not a people of long historical memory, and on Tisha b'Av our memories focus on some of the darkest aspects of our national experience — and of human experience in general.

What accounts for the unleashing of the destructive impulses in human affairs?

According to traditional Jewish understandings, the answer is “sinat hinam” — “causeless hatred,” or a hatred without any basis in fact. Unrestrained hatreds are always harmful, but some are understandable, even if not condonable, as reactions to hateful causes.

What happens, though, if hatred disconnects from its specific cause, which might be remediable, and becomes a pervasive force in its own right? Calamity happens, as Tisha b'Av reminds us, and brings on destruction upon destruction.

Are we living in such an age today? Let's hope not, and yet anyone alert to each day's news has cause for concern.

The catastrophe of 9/11, brought on by the unleashing of jihadist passions, is but one example. There are many others. The deep polarization in our country's political life and the hostile passions that accompany it may be fertile ground for the growth of causeless hatreds at home. If such negative energy deepens and spreads, the results cannot be good.

Can "sinat hinam" be restrained and possibly defeated?

According to Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, one of the most influential Jewish teachers of the 20th century, it can be, but only if enough people live according to its opposite — "ahavat hinam," or "causeless love."

To embrace and disseminate such love is the challenge, and also the urgent task, of our generation.

**This guest column was written by Dr. Alvin H. Rosenfeld, a founder and retired director of the Jewish Studies Program at Indiana University; and current director, Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism; Irving M. Glazer Chair in Jewish Studies; professor of Jewish Studies and English.**