

FALLEN GLORY - THE MESSAGE OF TISHA B'AV

by Rabbi Daniel Travis

From The Heights of Greatness

"Rebbi was reading sefer Eicha. When he came to the verse 'You threw from the Heavens to the earth the glory of Yisrael' (2:1), the sefer dropped from his hands. In response to what transpired he exclaimed me'igra rama ad bira amikta, '[they fell] from the greatest heights until the lowest depths' (Chagiga 5b)."

One morning, as I was walking home from Shacharis, this gemara was going through my mind. It was quite clear to me that something was going on behind the simple presentation of this story. Rebbi must have seen some connection between the verse that he had just read and the fact that the sefer fell down; what was it? Why did that connection inspire him to make that particular comment?

When I got to my building, I went to check the mailbox. There was no mail, but inside was a thick pamphlet from an organization raising money for needy families in Israel. The thought, "another tzedaka request" was about to enter my mind, when I caught myself. Have the vast amount of tzaros that we are experiencing today made you so insensitive to other people's problems!? I thought. I took a quick look at the leaflet and my spirits dropped as I confronted the largest collection of catastrophes that I had ever seen:

Young orphans who would never see either of their parents; a great Torah scholar who suffered years of painful operations and was then taken abruptly from the world; a mother who lost her husband and children at the hands of a suicidal terrorist; story after story after story; seemingly endless misfortunes, each one more tragic than the one before.

Each personal calamity made me wonder more and more: How can it be that a nation of princes has been targeted for such blows? Where is the honor of the King that our people once proudly bore? How long will Hashem's children have to suffer so much pain, which appears to be getting tragically worse each day?

Suddenly I realized that buried within my questions was the explanation of the above-mentioned gemara.

After almost two thousand years of destruction, we may come to think that the powerful words of Eicha are poetic exaggerations. When the sefer fell from Rebbi's hands as he was reciting the words "The glory of Yisrael has been thrown down from the Heavens to the earth", he took this as a

message from Above that this verse was indeed meant to be taken literally. Faced with such a powerful revelation, he articulated the vast extent of our fall, "from the greatest heights until the lowest depths."

Living in the shadow of the Temple's destruction and accustomed, as we are, to the tribulations of galus, we are liable to forget how far we have fallen due to the absence of the Beis Hamikdash. Our Sages wanted to make us realize vividly that as long as Hashem's splendor is tarnished and the Beis Hamikdash is in ruins, the honor of Am Yisrael has been almost totally effaced. Therefore on Tisha B'Av they instituted a number of halachic practices in order to internalize the understanding of how low galus has actually taken us.

A Night of Mourning

Almost inevitably, the first thing that a person notices upon entering a beis haknesses is the aron kodesh, the holy ark. Constructed of marble or mahogany, plated in silver or gold, the aron is the crowning glory of every shul. Each one is adorned with an attractive paroches, or curtain, as a further indication of the beauty of the Torah scrolls that lie behind its doors.

"Hashem has fulfilled His word ..." (Eicha 2:17). The Aramaic translation of these words is baza parpurim dileh - "His majestic cloak shall be removed." Our Sages found a hint in the words of Eicha that on Tisha B'Av two of a Jew's royal garments should be removed, the paroches on the aron kodesh and the tallis worn during Shacharis (Rema 559:2).

On another level, we can understand the removal of the paroches, based on what the Vilna Gaon says, that without the Beis Hamikdash a person cannot understand the Torah properly. Therefore, at the end of the Shemoneh Esrei we ask for the return of the Beis Hamikdash in order that we should get our full portion in Torah. In this vein, we remove the paroches to show that the clarification of Torah through our understanding of it is severely lacking as long as the Temple is in ruins.

Another expression of the mourning is in our prayers. There is a well known verse of v'yehi noam, "And the work of our hands shall be pleasant" (Tehillim 90:17). Nothing can be pleasant when the thought of the destroyed Beis Hamikdash and all of the other tragedies of Tisha B'Av hover so vividly before our eyes. Therefore even though this chapter of Tehillim is generally recited after Shabbos, if Tisha B'Av falls out on a motzaei Shabbos we omit this prayer.

Our Sages wanted us to focus all of our attention on the message of this day. This can only be achieved if we try and let the words of the kinos enter our hearts. Therefore the halacha forbids one from talking about or involving himself with anything else during the recitation of these prayers, both by night and day (Shulchan Aruch 559:5).

This mourning is not limited to thought and words. Everyone sits on the floor, just as a mourner would do. The normally well-lit shul is dimmed. The standard, friendly greetings exchanged at the end of Maariv are forbidden. By the time we conclude Maariv, we should already start to sense the

tremendous fall that the Jewish people has taken.

Sleeping on the Floor

Chazal desired that the feeling of having fallen to a lowly state should stay with us for all of Tisha B'Av without interruption. How did they make sure that even when we go to sleep we would not forget about the mourning?

The Shulchan Aruch cites a custom to sleep on the floor on the night of Tisha B'Av. If this is too difficult one should at least try and minimize his comfort. For example, if a person normally sleeps with two pillows, he should only use one. A sick person or a pregnant woman, who could be adversely affected by such discomfort, may sleep on their bed as normal.

Some exceedingly pious individuals have the custom to sleep with a rock underneath their pillow. On a simple level this act increases the discomfort that one feels on this tragic day. On a deeper level the rock hints to what the Torah writes about Yaakov Avinu, "and he took from the stones of the place where he slept," which our Sages say refers to the place of the Beis Hamikdash (Shulchan Aruch and Rema 555:2).

Splendor Removed

Our Sages divided up the seven days of mourning for a deceased relative into two distinct categories. The first three days are considered "days of tears," and only family and very close friends should come to comfort the avel. After this time has passed and the mourner's grief has subsided somewhat, everyone is permitted to visit him. Did our Sages view Tisha B'Av as like the first stage of mourning or like the second stage?

"Tefillin should not be worn on Tisha B'Av since it is a day set aside for crying for all generations; there is no day which is more bitter than it" (Maharam MeRottenberg, as cited by Tur 555). Even though an avel is only forbidden to wear tefillin on the first day of his mourning, Chazal wanted us to place the grief of this day on a par with that of the initial shock of coming in contact with death. They expressed this reaction by forbidding tefillin to be worn during Shacharis of Tisha B'Av.

Other Rishonim bring another reason for not wearing tefillin on Tisha B'Av. The destruction of Jerusalem and the Beis Hamikdash within its walls caused a drastic decrease in the respect that the nations of the world had for the Jewish people and their Temple. Since tefillin are also called glory, pe'er, it is fitting that they should be removed from the head of every Jew on this tragic day (Haghos Maimonius 5:11:3).

Some poskim suggest that ashes should be put on the part of the forehead where tefillin are normally worn (Darkei Moshe 555:1), in order to fulfill the verse "Ashes in place of splendor" (Yeshayah 61:3). At one time the custom in some shuls in Yerushalayim was that before kinos, the attendant would go around with a plate of ashes for everyone to take (Kaf Hachaim 555:2). However, this is not the general custom nowadays.

No Smoking

"A person should limit his pleasure and prestige as much as possible on Tisha B'Av" (Rema 555:2). If a person is properly observing the five inuyim and is focusing on the kinos, what other pleasure can there be to be limited? The poskim note that smoking falls into this category.

Even a chain-smoker, who finds it unbearable to go for a short time without smoking, must nonetheless refrain, according to some poskim. In fact, smoking on Tisha B'Av may be a reason to put someone in nidui (a ban from the rest of the community). Others write that if someone will suffer anguish from not smoking, he may do so after chatzos, but only in privacy (Mishna Berura 555:8).

A Time of Hope

The afternoon of Tisha B'Av is considered a time of partial consolation. Therefore, during Mincha everyone wears tallis and tefillin. Since the time for Shema has passed, one may not recite it, but Ein Kelokeinu and the shir shel yom, which were omitted from Shacharis, should now be said (Mishna Berura 555:5). As a further gesture of consolation, the paroches is put back in place (Kaf HaChaim 559:19).

Some poskim explain that we should feel consolation because our Sages teach that the Moshiach will be born on Tisha B'Av (Mishbatzos Zehav 555:1). However the Vilna Gaon explains that the lessened mourning in the afternoon is because the Temple was set aflame at that time. At first glance his words are startling; seemingly the burning of the Beis Hamikdash is a reason for increased mourning.

Our Sages explain that the Jewish people were deserving of retribution, but Hashem vented His anger on the wood and stones of the holy edifice. At the very moment of the Temple's destruction, the Keruvim, the cherubic figures on top of the aron kodesh which were a reflection of Hashem's relationship with the Jewish people, were found to be embracing each other (Yuma 54b). There could be no greater sign of Hashem's devotion to His children than His sparing them from complete annihilation.

Being surrounded by so much suffering every week, we can lose sight of the fact that we should not ascribe it to some external factor. We must never forget that the underlying causes of these events are our actions. As long as our hearts are not burdened with pain at the degradation of Hashem's honor, we cannot hope for the return of our glorious past. By undertaking to do whatever we can to reinstate His glory, the Jewish nation will merit returning to its age-old exalted status. The first step in this process is to realize how low we have fallen, and then Hashem will stoop down and pick us up.

Hopefully, thanks to our recognition of the high level to which the Jewish people can attain in contrast to the low abyss in which we have been mired, we will be taken out of our current tzaros and will no longer endure so much grief. Perhaps, as Chazal say, "Whoever made boundaries for his

world and said 'enough' shall put an end to our woe and misery and say 'enough!'" Amen. (Look out for "Days of Majesty - Experiencing the Royalty of Elul, Tishrei, and Shabbos, a new Feldheim production authored by Rabbi Travis.)

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