

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED THIRTY-SEVEN

by Rabbi Yitzchok Rubin

David Hamelech understood the human soul better than anyone can imagine. He sought out words that would offer help at every level and wanted to give light to the darkness that would engulf any of the future generations. In this most moving psalm, he speaks of times that he only knew of through Divine prophecies. The destruction of the Sanctuary, and the Jewish exodus from our homeland was something that was far from his reality. He was living in a time where the Yidden were thriving and when that very Sanctuary was about to be built. However, Hashem gave him the gift of this foreknowledge so that his poetic soul could put into words the thoughts that were as yet unknown.

And how powerful these words are; they sear through us and touch the most vulnerable points of our hearts. It is one thing to know of people's pain, yet it is another dimension altogether to understand the force of future pain that would entail not only our loss but that of Hashem's as well.

Nothing was as devastating as our loss of the first Beis Hamikdash, and from that moment on, all future sorrow would carry a tinge of this pivotal loss. In it we saw not only the exile of a people, but more tragically, we witnessed the exile of Hashem's essence from this mortal realm.

Al Naharos Bavel ... "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat and we wept, when we remembered Zion."

In a scene that would sadly be replayed in future times, the Yidden were chased out of their homes and found themselves weary, dragged to the very edge of the rivers of Babylon. It was there that they realized the enormity of their plight. Not only were they homeless, but their dream of Zion was laid to ashes as well.

Al Aravim ... "Upon the willows in its midst, we hung our harps."

We were once a joyful people, but because of our sins we have become so smitten with our pain that we have hung our instruments of music in the branches of the weeping willows that line the riverbank. Why do we discard these wondrous instruments?

Ki Sham She'alunu Shoveinu ... "For there our captors demanded of us words of song, and our tormentors asked of us with mirth; Sing to us from the songs of Zion."

Adding to our fresh wound, our enemies laughed and asked us to sing the songs that were the holy order of service in the Sanctuary. We threw our instruments away; we beat our breasts, "have we

fallen so low that they mock us in this way?"

Eich Nashir ... "How shall we sing the song of Hashem on alien soil?"

Here is the nub of the tragic problem. David knew that once we are no longer living in our designated land, with our holy Beis Hamikdash, then all the songs, even those once sung only for Hashem, would lose some of their special quality. The soul would always feel this void, and therefore our hearts would no longer be completely at one with our words.

Reb Yisrael of Ruhzin explained these words to mean: "How can we sing songs when the Shechina is in a strange land." This psalm speaks to the double-edged despair that would always be our fate in the future. Not only would we be in pain and lost, but Hashem's essence would be in exile as well. We may sing, we may feel joy, but the cloud that is Hashem's galus still hovers in our hearts. This was a new sadness that David had to articulate, and in these few lines he does so with holy insight.

Im Eshkacheich ... "If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its movement."

The galus has been very long, and we often forget what is real. We go along eating and drinking, never really focusing on the loss we have to carry within us. You get used to anything after a while, even something as vital as Hashem's centrality in our lives. His galus seems to fade from thought, after all we have another bill to pay, another deal to clinch.

But we say these words just before *bentching* to remind us of our reality, and that we truly are at a loss, and that our right hand, our true force, is crippled by the galus.

Tidbak leshoni lechiki ... "May my tongue cleave to my palate, if I remember you not: if I set not Jerusalem above my highest joy."

May we be honest for a moment? Have we taken real stock of how we go about living our lives of late? I mean our emotional lives where we really live. It isn't always simple to remember that not only are we in galus, but that the Shechina is as well. This doubles the woe of it all and it should never be far from our thoughts. However, Hashem does not want His children to despair and lose hope. Even in this dark dirge of pain there are the seeds for hope.

Bas Bavel ... "Daughter of Babylon, it is you who is the annihilated one; fortunate is he who will repay you for all you have done to us."

The Psalmist sees in his prophetic vision that the great and triumphant Babylon will fall and crumble. They, who were bloodthirsty and destroyed everything we had created, would come to the same miserable impasse.

Ashrei Sheyocheiz ... "Fortunate is he who will take and dash your little ones against the rock."

We understand this to mean that just as they wrought horrific pain upon the children of Israel, so it will be their fate as well. Those who triumph over them will despise them and hold them for naught,

just as they did Hashem's children.

Where is the light in all this? We learn from these words that there will be justice, and that with this will come our redemption. Hashem will return us to our sacred land, and the Shechina will return as well. This entire kapitel is not an easy one; it carries much of our pain in its words. However, when it is dark in one's life, you need just remember that Hashem is there in the darkness with you and that justice will be done. If we go through the galus with this in mind, it makes it all possible.

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