

17TH OF TAMMUZ: WHY WE FAST - PART 1

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

The question we will deal with is: why do we fast on Shiva Asar B'Tamuz?

The first mention that we find of this fast day appears in Zecharia 8:19, where the verse mentions "the fast of fourth month...." As the fourth month counting from Nissan (which is referred to as the first month) is Tamuz, the fast of the "fourth month" is Shiva Asar B'Tamuz. The Mishna in the tractate of Ta'anis 4:6 explains that we fast because of the five tragedies that befell the nation of Israel on this day. The five are: The "Luchos," the tablets upon which the Ten Commandments were engraved, were broken by Moshe; The Korban Tamid, the continual daily sacrifice, was discontinued; The wall around the city of Jerusalem was breached; Apustamus burnt the Torah scroll; As idolatrous image was placed in the "Haichal," the sanctuary of the Holy Temple.

The Gemora (28b) on this Mishna tells us the source of our knowledge that these things happened on this day. However, in order to fully understand each of these incidents, we will consult other commentators who fill in some more details.

1) The breaking of the "Luchos"

The Gemora tells us that we know the Luchos, containing the Ten Commandments, were broken on this day by means of a simple mathematical calculation. Although there is disagreement as to when the Ten Commandments were given to the nation of Israel, all agree that Moshe went up to Mount Sinai to get the Luchos on the seventh day of the month of Sivan. As proof of this, the Gemora brings the verse in Sh'mos 24:16 which says that Moshe "was called (to the mountain) on the seventh day." We also know from a verse (Sh'mos 24: 18) that Moshe "was on the mountain for 40 days and 40 nights." As Sivan that year was 30 days long, Moshe was on the mountain for 24 days in Sivan, and the first 16 days of the next month, Tamuz. On the seventeenth day of Tamuz, Moshe descended from the mountain. Seeing what the nation was doing with the Golden Calf, he broke the "Luchos."

2) The discontinuance of the Tamid

The next tragedy the Gemora discusses is the discontinuation of the Tamid offering. The Gemora tells us that we know this happened on this day because we have a tradition from our forefathers that this is so. Rashi explains that the reason why the sacrifice was no longer brought was because

the government at the time forbade it.

The Tiferes Yisroel, a commentator on the Mishna, gives another possible explanation. We see from the Gemora in Baba Kama (82b) that there were two brothers who were members of the Hashmonean family (of Chanukah fame). These brothers, Aristabulus and Hyrkanus, fought each other for the throne of Judea. Aristobulus laid siege to Jerusalem, where Hyrkanus was headquartered. As lambs were needed for the daily sacrifice and there were none in Jerusalem, the inhabitants worked out a deal with the lamb-sellers outside of the city. Everyday, the Jerusalemites would lower a basket full of gold coins over the wall. In return, the lamb-sellers would supply a lamb, which was then hoisted up. One day, an elderly man outside of the wall advised the sellers to supply a pig instead of a lamb. As the pig was unknowingly being hoisted up, the pig stuck its claws into the wall, and all of Israel quaked. From this day until the end of the siege, the daily offering was not brought.

The R"av, also a commentator on the Mishna, gives another explanation. He explains that the Tamid was discontinued during the period of time when Jerusalem was under siege prior to the destruction of the Temple. The Tiferes Yisroel elaborates on this and says that the R"av is referring to the three year siege of Jerusalem by Nevuchadnezzar, at the time of the destruction of the first Temple.

3) The Breaching of the wall around Jerusalem

The Gemora then discusses the tragedy of the wall of Jerusalem being breached, the event which led to the overrunning of Jerusalem by our oppressors and the eventual destruction of the Temples. The Gemora notes that there is an inconsistency between our Mishna and the verse in Yirmiya 52:6, which implies that the wall was breached on the ninth of Tamuz, not the seventeenth as the Mishna says. The Gemora resolves this inconsistency by explaining that the verse in Yirmiya is referring to the time of the first Temple, while our Mishna is referring to the time of the second Temple. If that is the case, why do we fast only on the 17th of Tamuz, and not on the ninth as well?

The Talmud Yerushalmi (Jerusalem Talmud) explains that in reality, the breach of the walls occurred on the 17th during both eras. However, in the time of the first Temple, because of the stress and upheaval of the time, the people became confused and miscalculated the days in the calendar. Therefore, they thought the breach occurred on the ninth. Yirmiyah, when recording the event, wrote it down according to the erroneous calculation of the people, which was the prevalent belief as to the date of occurrence. The Tur in Shulchan Aruch Orech Chayim 549 writes that the breaches did occur on different dates. However, because having two fasts in such close proximity would be a burden on the community, only one fast day was established. The fast day was established on the day the wall was breached at the time of the second Temple because the tragedy was greater regarding its impact on us: the exile that began at that time is the exile we currently live in.

4) The Burning of the Torah Scroll by Apustamus

The Gemora tells us that we know this event happened on the seventeenth of Tamuz as a tradition from our forefathers. The Gemora does not tell us who Apustamus was, or what the significance of the Torah scroll was. The R"av writes that Apustamus was a Greek officer at the time of the second Temple. The Tiferes Yisroel offers two possible explanations as to the significance of the scroll. One is that this scroll was the one written by Ezra HaSofer, Ezra the Scribe. The text was the most authoritative, and all other Torah scrolls that were written were checked against this one for accuracy and errors. Another understanding is that he burnt every Torah scroll he could find. No matter the explanation, the intent behind Apostamus' actions remain the same: to eradicate Torah from the nation of Israel.

5) The Placing of an Idol in the Sanctuary

The Gemora tells us that we know from the verse in Daniel 12:11 that this event occurred on the 17th of Tamuz, as the verse says that "on the day the Tamid offering ceased to be brought, an idolatrous image was placed in the Temple." Although the Gemora here does not mention who placed the idol in the Temple, the Gemora in the Talmud Yerushalmi mentions that there is debate as to who did it. Some say that Apustamus placed the idol in the Temple as well as burning the Torah scroll. Others say it was placed by Menashe, an evil Jewish king, in the time of the first Temple.

For those who are unfamiliar with the names of some of commentators mentioned in the post, here are some brief biographical sketches:

Tosfos YomTov - Rabbi Yom Tov Lipman Heller, 1579-1654. Was Chief Rabbi of Prague and Krakow. His work is a clarification of many complex and difficult problems that arise in the Mishna, using the Talmud and Codes as a basis.

R"av - Rav Ovadya of Bartenura, 1440-1516. Born in Italy and lived in Jerusalem from 1488 until death. Wrote what is now a primary commentary to the Mishna, based on Rashi's.

Rashi - Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, approx. 1040-1105. Lived in France. Wrote commentary on Talmud and Torah that is the fundamental tool in understanding the text of both.

Tur (Ba'al HaTurim) - Rabbi Yaacov ben HaRash. approx. 1275-1340. Lived first in Germany, then Spain. Wrote the Arba'ah Turim, a codification of Halacha that remains a standard source text for Halacha 'till this day.