

POINTS TO PONDER

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

As we have mentioned, during the three weeks between the 17th of Tamuz and the 9th of Av, we conduct ourselves as one would while in a state of mourning. These three weeks commemorate the end of the existence of our Holy Temples, and the last days before we were sent into exile.

The Talmud (Kesuvos 66b) relates that after the destruction of the Temple, R' Yochanan ben Zakkai was riding on a donkey outside of the city of Jerusalem. His students were following behind him. R' Yochanan saw a young woman collecting barley kernels from the dung of the neighboring Arabs' animals. When she saw R' Yochanan, she asked him for his financial assistance. He asked her who she was. She replied that she was the daughter of Nakdimon ben Gurion, one of the three wealthiest men before the Temple was destroyed. R' Yochanan told his students that he remembered that when he signed her Kesubah (marriage document) the dowry that her father provided was enormous. He then started crying and said "How fortunate is the nation of Israel! When they do the will of G-d, no nation can rule over them, and when they do not do the will of G-d, G-d gives over them to other nations, and not just to the nations but their animals."

The Maharal asks why R' Yochanan made the comment of "How fortunate is the nation of Israel!" At that moment, R' Yochanan saw an awful sight: the daughter of one of the wealthiest and most distinguished men of his time forced to search for food in a degrading and humiliating fashion - by picking through the dung of animals for barley. How was R' Yochanan's statement a proper response to such a terrible spectacle?

The Maharal explains that the nation of Israel does not exist in a state of mediocrity. The nation of Israel exists in a state of "Shlai'mut," "completion." Either they listen to the word of G-d or they do not. Either they rise to the pinnacle of strength, to the height of greatness, or they fall to great depths. There is no middle ground, no in-between the two extremes. When R' Yochanan saw how great was the disgrace of the nation of Israel, he wept. Simultaneously, however, he acknowledged the reality of the situation - that this horrendous downfall was the flipside of the fantastic heights to which the nation could rise.

R' Yochanan saw Divine Providence working in this situation. A nation, when not at its height in power and splendor, need not be the object of scorn, derision and persecution. It can be left alone and ignored. It can be left to languish in its average status. But the nation of Israel is not average. The depths to which the nation has sunk and the severity of the persecution the nation has endured illustrates that the downfall is not ordinary. Only G-d, because of the place he holds for the nation of

Israel, could cause such a downfall. Only because the nation of Israel is a nation of "Shlai'mut," a nation which must always rise above mediocrity, could such a terrible downfall occur. It is because R' Yochanan vividly saw that the nation of Israel has the capacity for greatness that he uttered "How fortunate is the nation of Israel."

R' Yochanan's actions leave us with several lessons to ponder during the Three Weeks. R' Yochanan encountered a sight that shook him. He wept when he saw the extent of the suffering and degradation of the nation of Israel. At the same time, he remembered and acknowledged whatever there was positive about the situation. This trait, acknowledging good amid the bad, is not easily acquired. It is not enough to verbalize a positive "spin" on a situation. A person should try to feel that good actually exists. While recognizing the good may not eliminate the pain of a situation, it may bring some comfort.

Remembering the source of the comfort is another lesson learnt from R' Yochanan. R' Yochanan knew that such a terrible tragedy could only occur through the hand of G-d. Knowing that G-d is nearby can and should be a source of comfort during times of pain. Pain and suffering are not the result of G-d deserting us. When a parent punishes a child, the child feels the pain, as the parent is actively inflicting the punishment. The punishment of a parent is to be out of love for the child, and should pain the parent as much as it pains the child. Although the child suffers, if he or she recognized that this punishment was done out of love, there is some comfort. "Fortunate is the nation of Israel," R' Yochanan said, because of the close relationship He has with His nation. He will not let a nation of kings and queens act in any way other than that befitting royalty. R' Yochanan realized that such a downfall happened only because G-d loves us. G-d was with us when we fell, and is there to help us back up. We have to realize the same when we suffer. (see III:10)

Recognizing that we can achieve greatness is another lesson to be learnt. G-d only expects from us that which we are capable of. While we may not think we can act up to a certain standard, the truth is that G-d gave us a great amount of fortitude and strength. When we apply ourselves, and truly believe that we can do something, that strength becomes apparent. G-d will not accept mediocrity from the nation of Israel. The nation must exemplify Shlai'mut. Rav Chaim Brisker explains that we find in the Kuzari (a book of Jewish philosophy) five categories of existence on this earth: The inanimate and lifeless; vegetation; those with life; those with the power of speech; the people of Israel. These categories are mutually exclusive. When an animal ceases to exist, it does not become vegetation. It becomes a dead animal. When vegetation dies, it does not enter the realm of the inanimate and lifeless. Rather, it is dead vegetation. When the nation of Israel ceases to exemplify Shali'mut, they do not fall to the rank of the rest of mankind. They are removed not only from their category, but from any categorization. They remove themselves from their special ranking and fall to the opposite extreme. We can rise above mediocrity. We can maintain greatness. All this takes is true effort on our part.

The Rambam writes that fasting should be an impetus for repentance. (see I: 28) During the three

weeks between the fasts of the 17th of Tamuz and the 9th of Av, we have an opportunity for introspection, for seeing how the lessons of R' Yochanan fit into our lives. We have an opportunity to strengthen our relationship with G-d. We have an opportunity to start our climb to greatness. The Jerusalem Talmud says that every generation in which the Temple is not rebuilt should consider itself as if the Temple was destroyed in its days. Our generation should be the one to see the Temple rebuilt. We have the capacity to make that happen. What we have to do is make it happen.