

# MOURNING ON THE 9TH OF AV: THE REASONS

*by Rabbi Yehudah Prero*

## Guest contributor - Rabbi Jacob Mendelson

The Fast of the 9th of Av, which concludes the Three Weeks, begins at sundown on Wednesday, August 9, 2000 and ends at nightfall on Thursday, August 10, 2000.

We find the catastrophe of Tisha B'av attributed by our Sages to a variety of causes:

"Why was the First Temple destroyed? Because of three things: idolatry, immorality, and bloodshed." (Yoma 6b)

"Judea was exiled out of affliction-because they ate Chometz, leaven, on Pesach (rather than the bread of affliction, Matzah)." (Medrash Eichah Rabba - on Eichah 1:3)

"Why was the Land lost? Because they abandoned My Torah-because they did not say a Bracha (blessing) on learning Torah." (Nedarim 81a)

"Jerusalem was destroyed because they violated the Shabbos; ...because they neglected to say the Shema morning and evening as it says, "Woe to those that get up early to drink beer;" ...because the children did not go to Cheder (school), ...because they had no shame; ... because they did not rebuke each other; ...because they ridiculed scholars. (Shabbos 119b)

These four sources appear to be in conflict over the reasons for the destruction of the First Bais Hamikdosh (Temple). Upon closer scrutiny, however, I would suggest that they do not disagree. Rather they refer to different aspects of the Churban, the destruction. Each of the statements of Chazal, our Sages, describes the tragedy with a distinct word. The first speaks of "Churban," destruction; the second refers to "Galus," exile; the third mentions "Avdan," being lost; and the fourth focuses on Yerushalayim, Jerusalem.

Beginning with Churban, destruction, let us look for its connection to the three cardinal sins of idolatry, immorality, and murder. These three are all crimes of passion. [While this is quite obvious with immorality and murder, we are taught that idolatry, as well, was a sin of passion in the days of the First Bais Hamikdosh. The Yeitzer Horah, or Evil Inclination, for idolatry was very active and almost irresistible in those days. Upon building the Second Bais Hamikdosh, the Sages prayed successfully that the power of the Yeitzer Horah should be curtailed in the area of idolatry. It is therefore difficult for us to understand the extreme nature of the temptation for idolatry in those days. Thus idolatry in its heyday was indeed a crime of passion.]

Passion burns in the human heart. When it is channeled towards good, then passion leads to great accomplishments in Torah, Chesed (kindness), and every area of human development. In marriage it produces a strong stable family and household. When passion is misused, however, it destroys families and homes, and brings destruction to society - all symbolized by the destruction of the Temple. To put it another way, the Psalmist says ""We will go to the House of Hashem with \_feeling\_." The Bais Hamikdosh is the place for the fiery and passionate expression of emotion to Hashem in prayer, repentance, thanksgiving, and joy. But if the passion is wrongly directed, then its fire consumes the holy place. Thus destruction is the result of passion.

The second passage speaks about the exile of the Jews from their land. We have seen that the misuse of passion results in the loss of vehicles for positive and meaningful emotional experiences, but it does not necessarily result in exile. We lost our right to our Land, not because of passion, but because of arrogance, as symbolized by eating Chometz on Pesach. Chometz is the opposite of ""Lechem Oni,"" bread of affliction. Chometz - with its rich, fermented, expansive development - is the bread of opulence, of power, of haughtiness. It bespeaks gloating self-assuredness. As the Torah says in Parshas Eikev, ""And you shall eat and be satisfied ... and your heart will soar..." The Torah then goes on to say that we will be driven from the Land of Israel. Our People should have celebrated our continued freedom with Matzah, the bread of affliction, showing that we did not rise to success on our own, rather our freedom and power comes from Hashem. Instead we ate the bread of arrogance, thus eliminating the true Source of our power, and forfeiting our very claim to the Land. For we have only one ultimate claim to Eretz Yisrael (as the commentator Rashi says at the beginning of Bereishis), and that is that Hashem gave it to us. Thus exile is the result of arrogance.

In terms of the Talmudic passage in the tractate Nedarim, it says that we were lost because our People did not say a Bracha on the Torah. The Ran, a commentator, explains that the Torah did not seem important enough to them that it should warrant a Bracha. When the Torah is not special, when it is not the touchstone of wisdom and value, when it is not the measure of all things, when it is just another subject, then we are missing our moral compass and we are truly lost. The incredible nihilism, reflected in the ""anything goes"" attitude of contemporary culture, the total lack of any real values that is so prevalent today is to a great degree traceable to the fact that contemporary man has no moral anchors, no areas of complete certainty, no strong, fundamental beliefs. Our generation is all adrift. Thus being lost is the result of not appreciating Torah.

Finally, the passage in the tractate of Shabbos addresses itself to the destruction of Jerusalem. In general we find that in our prayers we emphasize the City of Jerusalem more than the Bais Hamikdosh. For example in the daily Shemoneh Esray, we say ""And to Jerusalem your city,"" asking for the restoration of Jerusalem ""\_Your\_ City,"" without a specific reference to the Temple. The same emphasis exists in the Haftorah of Shabbos Chazon as well as in the prayer of ""Nachaim,"" said on Tisha B'Av in the afternoon. The simple explanation for this emphasis on the City and not the Temple is, of course, that the Navi, in the Haftorah of Chazon, decries the People's insincere devotion to the

Temple and its rituals, at the expense of righteousness and justice. However we can look deeper.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsh writes (in Bereishis4:7) that the word "Ir," which means city, is related to the word "Ur," which means awaken. The city, with its concentration of people in close proximity, and the constant exchange of ideas, offers the possibility for the greatest development of man. In the city a person utilizes and develops his most human capabilities. It is in cities that civilization develops. While the country provides food for the body, it is the city that provides food for the mind and the spirit.

Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan (in "Jerusalem, the Eye of the Universe") develops this idea further by reference to a statement of Chazal that "there is no city but Jerusalem," (Kesubos 111b) meaning that Jerusalem is the quintessential city. With the Sanhedrin (the great court) and all its great Sages, with the Bais Hamikdosh and its ten daily miracles, with the presence of the Shechina, the Divine Presence, a person has the opportunity, more than in any other place, to develop his human and spiritual side. That is why we are bidden to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, "Aliya Leregel" on the three Festivals of Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot. The commentator the Maharsha adds that all other cities are but suburbs of Jerusalem, B'nos Yerushalayim, Daughters of Jerusalem. In other words, all civilizations should be nurtured and developed by relating to Jerusalem as the model civilization.

When the Gemara speaks of the destruction of Jerusalem, it means the loss of that shining example of human development that Jerusalem was meant to be. All the causes mentioned in the Gemara, are factors that destroy civilization. \_Shabbos\_. Moshe Rabbeinu (Moses) was able to convince Pharaoh that he should give the slaves a day of rest because civilization cannot exist and be productive without a Sabbath. \_Shema\_. When people do not say the Shema, reaffirming priorities and basic direction in life, but instead run straight to the nearest bar (read "drug dealer"), there can be no civilization. \_Cheder\_. Without a well functioning system of (elementary) education, no civilization can survive. \_Shame, Rebuke...Sages\_. When people have no relationship with each other and are complete islands, when they don't care enough to criticize one another's behavior, and when they cannot learn from those who are wiser, then the entire function of the city, as it was conceived to be, is wasted. Instead of being a cradle of civilization the city becomes a hellhole of degradation and crime, a phenomenon that we all too often witness.

We need desperately to re-connect to our spiritual moorings, through learning Torah and seeking out -from our Torah luminaries- its teachings in all areas of contemporary life. For only the Torah, its Halacha (laws) and its Hashkafa (philosophy), can effectively guide us through the confusion of contemporary existence.

Through clarity in the Torah, we can "find" ourselves again. Through remembering that our freedom and power derives only from Hashem, we can once again deserve our Land. Through a passionate re-dedication to Hashem, we can once again merit the Bais Hamikdosh, may it be built speedily in

our days. Through an appreciation of the vast spiritual resources inherent in Jerusalem and the Mitzvos connected with it, may we merit to experience its rebuilding.

Have an easy fast.

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