

10TH OF TEVET - AN AVOIDABLE SIEGE

by Rabbi Naphtali Hoff

I - A Calculated Risk Goes Awry

Asara B'Teves commemorates the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem that would ultimately result in churban bayis rishon (the destruction of the First Temple). It is the first of four fast days that relate to the destruction and/or its aftermath (the other three being 17 Tammuz, 9 Av and 3 Elul (Tzom Gedaliah)). While our historical vantage point leads us to view these dates as fated givens, the reality is that they were avoidable had there only been a greater willingness to adhere to the words of the leading prophets and engage in genuine repentance.

Towards the end of the reign of the righteous king Yoshiyahu, the Babylonians emerged as a world power. At the same time, we find a rising force to the south of Judah, the Twenty-sixth Egyptian Dynasty. Earlier, the Assyrians had formed an alliance with Egypt in the hope of strengthening their position against invading Babylonian armies. In the year 445 BCE, Pharaoh Necho II marched a large Egyptian force through Israel in an attempt to reach Assyria and assist their allies in battle. Yoshiyahu tried to stop him but was killed in the battle.

As the Egyptian army returned home, Necho marched his armies back through Judah, setting up a puppet king Yehoyakim, who displayed loyalty to Egypt. Necho then imposed a heavy tax on Judah, which the Jewish vassal king passed on to the people.

In 442 BCE the Babylonian king Nevuchadnezzar campaigned throughout most of Philistia and Judah, destroying every city in his path. Yehoyakim surrendered to Babylon the next year, sparing Jerusalem for the time being.

This submission would prove short lived. Two years later, Nevuchadnezzar attacked Egypt proper. During this campaign both sides incurred heavy losses. Nevuchadnezzar retreated empty handed. Encouraged by this defeat, Yehoyakim rebelled, again joining with the Egyptians and withheld the customary tribute from Babylon. In response, Nevudachdnezzar marched on Jerusalem in Yehoyakim's fourth year.

"(He took with him) some of the vessels of the house of God ... (and) certain of the children of Israel, and of the royal seed, and of the nobles, youths in whom was no blemish, but fair to look on, and skilful in all wisdom, and skilful in knowledge, and discerning in thought, and such as had ability to stand in the king's palace." (Daniel 1:1-4)

These youths would later become some of the most prominent advisors to Babylonian kings and to leaders of Babylonian Jewry. The best known include Daniel, Chananiah, Mishaël, and Azariah. This event was labeled Galus Yehoyakim, or the Exile of Yehoyakim.

Seven years later, the Babylonians returned to the area and again marched on Jerusalem. Shortly thereafter, Yehoyakim died. His eighteen-year-old son Yechanya was raised to the throne in his place. Three months later Yechanya wisely surrendered to Nevuchadnezzar, thus temporarily saving Judah from destruction. He was exiled together with members of the royal family, other heads of state, the Judean military, and many artisans. In all, out of an estimated total population of over one million, approximately 10,000 people, exclusive of artisans, were exiled. This event is known as Galus Yechanya.

Though the cream of the Jewish crop was now exiled from Judah, the majority of Jews remained after Yechanya's surrender. Most of these Jews, known as the am ha'aretz, were uneducated and inexperienced in political affairs. They lacked the leadership skills necessary to guide the Jewish people through this next delicate phase in their history.

The last king of the Jewish people before the final exile was Tzidkiyahu. He began his puppet reign as a Babylonian vassal when he was only 21 years old. Tzidkiyahu was a weak king with limited experience and poor advisors. Zealous princes in Judah together with other national leaders persuaded him to join forces in rebellion against Nevuchadnezzar.

The advisors used two arguments to support their recommendation. They first claimed the Babylonians would not bother with their small uprising. In addition, they argued that even if the Babylonians did indeed march on Judah, the powerful Egyptians would intercede on the Jews' behalf in order to keep the former out of their immediate region. Neither argument would prove to be correct. By acquiescing to their arguments, Tzidkiyahu acted in open opposition to the prophet Yirmiyahu's advice. The prophet had said that only repentance could save the people from destruction. When his message went unheeded, he realized that destruction was inevitable. He thus counseled submission to Babylon, opposing any talk of revolt.

Tzidkiyahu's decision to rebel proved catastrophic. Nevuchadnezzar arrived shortly thereafter and laid siege to Jerusalem. For a while it appeared that his gamble would pay off, as the Egyptian army came to the city's defense and put a temporary end to the barricade. However, once the Egyptian army left, the Babylonians returned on 10 Teves to resume their siege of Jerusalem. It lasted for two years, until all supplies were exhausted in the city. On the 9th day of Tammuz, 423 BCE, the city walls were breached. A month later, on 9 Av, the destruction of the Temple began.

For breaking his oath of allegiance, Tzidkiyahu was forced to witness the death of his sons before he himself was blinded and exiled to Babylon. Other leading officials were likewise put to death. All but the poorest were sent into exile. The kingdom of Judah was thereby terminated.

II - Why Didn't They Listen?

In the previous segment, we noted how the Judean king Tzidkiyahu's stubborn refusal to listen to the prophet Yirmiyahu resulted in the siege of Jerusalem and the eventual destruction of the first Temple. It is very difficult for us to understand why a leader would refuse to listen to the word of God. We, who continuously crave for clarity and certainty in our daily lives, would rush at the opportunity to hear divine words directly from the prophet! So why didn't Tzidkiyahu and others from his period listen? Some different explanations have been offered to address this problem.

"It's so hard to listen" - It is neither easy nor desirable for people to hear the implication that personal and communal change is in order. Thus, the prophets were painted as forecasters of doom. Their predictions of exile and destruction fell largely on deaf ears.

"How could He do this?" - During this entire time period, the world was divided into two theological camps. The overwhelming majority of the world was comprised of pagans. The Jews alone were monotheistic. Everyone knew that the Jews were different. How then, the Jews argued, could God destroy His own house and terminate His sole source of representation in this world?

"God needs us!" - This point is similar to the previous one. In the relationship between God and His People, there exists an interesting paradox. On one hand, God is omnipotent, completely in control. He issues positive and negative commandments that we are expected to follow. Reward is given for those who adhere to his laws, punishment for those who do not. Yet, we know that "In the gathering of people is the king's glory; but in the lack of people is the downfall of the prince." (Proverbs 14:28) A king cannot function without a nation who is prepared to accept his rule. How then could God exile and seemingly dismiss the Jewish People? Where would that leave Him as King?

"I'll worry about it then" - As scary and real as the words of the prophets may have seemed, they never specified a particular year or era of actualization. Over 90 years had passed since the first prophetic words predicting the destruction were uttered, and all the while the Temple remained standing. The fact that punishment would arrive at some point was not sufficient to generate significant change.

"It can't really be that bad!" - The optimists amongst the Jewish people thought that the prophets were overstating Heavenly retaliation for our misdeeds. They were unable to see that God would actually impose such a strong punishment on His Chosen Nation.

"Who says that they're right?" - There were numerous false prophets in Israel during these years, many of whom dismissed the problems facing the Jewish people and predicted deliverance from their enemies. It was not clear, even in the era of prophecy, as to who actually represented the Word of God.

Sadly, our history has proven that tangible threats, even exile or death, are often the most successful means by which to inspire the Jewish nation to seek repentance.

The removal of Achashveirosh's ring was more successful than forty- eight prophets and seven prophetesses who prophesied to Israel. All these were not able to improve Israel's ways, and the removal of the ring did improve their ways. (Talmud, Megilla 14a)

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