

A FAST FOR TORAH

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

The Tenth of Teves - A Fast for Torah

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The Rambam, as we have mentioned in the past, writes in the fifth chapter of Hilchos Ta'aniyos (The laws of Fasts) that we fast on days that calamities occurred to us "because it can serve to arouse our hearts and to open ourselves to the paths of repentance. It serves as a reminder of our wicked conduct and that of our ancestors which resembles our present conduct, and therefore brought these calamities upon them and upon us. By reminding ourselves of these matters, we will repent and improve our conduct, as the verse says in Vayikra 26:40, 'And they will confess their sin and the sin of their forefathers...'. The Mishna Berura elaborates on this by stating that "our repentance needs to be for those deeds that caused our forefathers and us to suffer the pains, which we still bear." (see vol. I:28)

When we attempt to apply the words of the Rambam and the Mishna Berura, the Fast of Asarah B'Teves presents a particular difficulty. This fast commemorates the day the siege of Jerusalem began in the time of the First Temple (see vol. I:63 for further information). It appears that this event may be difficult to relate to our present lives because the exile that followed this event ended with the construction of the Second Temple. Our current exile and all the tragedies that have befallen our nation stem from the destruction of the Second Temple, which has no connection to the Tenth of Teves. What pain, then, are we still suffering from that stems from the events of the Tenth of Teves?

In one of the Selichos (special penitential prayers) for the Tenth of Teves, we find a list of the tragedies that befell the Jewish people in the month of Teves. "For these three events," the author of the prayer writes, "I instituted a fast: (on the eighth day of Teves) the Grecian king forced me to translate the Torah into Greek...I was reproached on the ninth...on this day was torn away the giver of beautiful works, Ezra the Scribe." The third event the author describes is the siege of Jerusalem, which occurred on the tenth of Teves. Rav Matisyahu Solomon writes that by understanding the underlying connection between these three events, we will understand how we are still feeling the

effects of the Tenth of Teves.

The translation of the Torah into Greek caused irreparable damage. The Torah was given to us in one language and one language only. The nuances, subtleties, and implications of the specific words chosen are lost in translation. The "70 facets of Torah" which our Sages wrote about can't readily be seen or gleaned from a translation. In addition, when one translates, one is forced to choose a specific interpretation that he or she feels best express the meaning of the original words. Alternate meanings or interpretations are discarded. It was this aspect of the translation of the Torah that was most harmful. It gave license for people to begin explaining the Torah as they saw fit, ignoring other relevant and applicable meanings that came from Sinai as well. The teachings of the Sages were disregarded, and the holy words of the Torah were corrupted. For this reason, a fast was warranted.

The death of Ezra caused a blow to the world of Torah study as well. Until the time of Ezra, the script that we use nowadays in our Torah scrolls was unknown to the masses. There was a Torah scroll written in that script - but that scroll was in the holiest of places, and reserved for limited use by the holiest of people. What was so special about the script used? The formation of the letters and the crowns which adorn many of these letters carry with them meaning. Ezra knew how to understand the Oral Law from these letters. Prior to Ezra, the populace was familiar with the Oral Law, and written aids were not needed. However, during the lifetime of Ezra, the populace became less fluent in the Oral Law. Ezra saw that an emergency measure was needed to preserve the continuity of the teaching and understanding of the Oral Law. He therefore taught the people how to write with this script, and how this script carries with it the clues to knowing the Oral Law. Our sages tell us that had Moshe not been the one to present the Torah to the nation of Israel, Ezra would have - and nevertheless Ezra was still the one who presented the holy script to the nation. Ezra's demise was the end of an era. For this reason, a fast was warranted.

The Rambam writes that the wise and the prophets should desire the arrival of Moshiach not because the stature of the Jews will have changed for the better, nor because they can then rejoice, but rather because they will be free to study the Torah without distraction. Exile is a time when we are all burdened with worries and afflicted by persecutions. Exile is not conducive to Torah study. With the start of the siege of Jerusalem, our exile effectively began. The splendor of the Torah began to dim. For the first time in our history, we were not in the optimal setting for Torah study. We were in a decline. With death of Ezra years later, the distance from the proper method of Torah study increased. With the translation of the Torah into Greek, we fell to a new low: not only were we in exile, but we were faced with the new challenge a translation presented.

The three events that the Fast of the Tenth of Teves commemorate share an unfortunate common denominator: a decline in diligent Torah study. This decline started with the siege of Jerusalem and remains with us until this very day. It is very clear what pain we are still suffering from that stems from the events of the Tenth of Teves. We should all feel this pain. We should all realize what a great loss we have been afflicted with. Most importantly, we should implement the words of the

Rambam by reminding ourselves of these matters, so that we repent and improve our conduct.

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