

PRACTICAL LESSONS IN PERSPECTIVE

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

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Topic: The Tenth of Teves - Practical Lessons in Perspective

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Rav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch writes that the Torah took the moments of prosperity and success of our nation and made them into holidays. This was done so that our nation would have a tradition of remembering these times, and use them as opportunities to sanctify ourselves. In a similar vein, he writes, our Sages established times when we are to remember the moments of denigration and decline in our nation's history. Our Sages wanted to deepen our intellect to realize that the low points in our nation's history were not to be buried and forgotten. Rather, these declines were just a change in the forum, the stage, in the play of our nation's history. These happenings serve an educational purpose and enrich our heritage. Our Sages saw that just as we can manifest our fear and love of G-d in times of joy, so too can we manifest the deep belief and strong ties we have towards G-d in times of sorrow.

The days on which our Sages decreed that we fast are connected in some fashion to our nation's exile. The Sages recognized that our exile was an affliction put upon us out of love, so that we would learn from our errors. We would learn to separate ourselves from the drive for self gratification and egotism - vices which take away from the vast fortune given to us by G-d. The Sages determined that the immediate objective during the period of exile was to promote repentance and renewal. The ultimate goal was to place the education of the populace in the forefront, so that all would learn what is to be expected and what is to be accomplished. The Sages knew which pedagogical methods to employ to impart meaningful rebukes and lasting lessons. One method which they considered particularly effective was a review of the past, of our history.

On the Tenth of Teves, Nevuchadnezzar, King of Bavel, lay siege on the city of Jerusalem. This event marked the beginning of our downfall: the first Temple was later destroyed and the Jewish nation was exiled. The Talmud tells us that the first Temple was destroyed because the Jewish people

were steeped in idol worship, illicit relations, and murder. These sins were crimes against G-d, against one's self, and against one's neighbor. What was the root cause of the proliferation of these three evils? The pursuit of sensual pleasures, self gratification. The self was placed before anyone else. An individual was concerned solely for his welfare and benefit. No one else mattered, especially G-d. The individual. "I," was deified.

What was the cure for this malady? The individual's pursuit for that which benefited him solely was what caused the split and collapse of the Jewish nation. It was this pursuit that needed to be weakened. Unification of the nation was called for. The unification, although forced and painful, came in the form of exile. The entire nation was linked together by their common affliction. Each person needed his neighbor for support, and together they all needed G-d for salvation. It was through exile that the nation went through a purification process, which resulted in a nation that together could withstand any persecution which came its way. It resulted in a nation that realized that its only true prized possession was the Torah, that its only source of support was G-d, and that its only task in life was to serve Hashem by adhering to His Torah.

We live nowadays in a society which places great emphasis on the self while simultaneously espousing the virtues of giving of one's self for the collective good. The Fast of the Tenth of Teves was established as a lesson in history, in sociology, and in ethics. The source of this lesson was a horrific tragedy. Malnourished children perished while trying to coax milk out of the bosoms of their starved mothers. Casualties were great, and the suffering and persecution was enormous. The events leading to the exile were not lost on the generation that followed. The exile experience changed them. And our Sages said that this experience must change us as well. Me or We? The answer is clear - and the point of this fast day is to bring this answer into focus, so that the practical application is not lost.

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