

# THE REAL \$24,000 QUESTION

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

## Friday Night:

Parashas Devarim always must be read before Tisha B'Av (Ninth of Av), which is the Jewish day of infamy, so-to-speak. Tisha B'Av is the day the spies came back with their evil report about the Land of Israel (Parashas Shlach Lecha), which led to thirty-eight extra years of wandering in the desert. Then, 889 years later, the first Temple was destroyed on the ninth day of Av by the Babylonians, and another 490 years later, the second Temple was destroyed by the Romans on the same day. Even the Inquisition that ended the Golden Era of Spanish Jewry was said to have begun on the ninth day of Av. For this reason, from the first day of Av (Rosh Chodesh) until the tenth of Av, the Jewish people lay low and avoid any unnecessary risks, such as air travel and law suits, especially those involving non-Jews.

On Tisha B'Av itself we read Eichah (Lamentations), which was written by the prophet Jeremiah about the Jewish people who were led into bitter exile to Babylonia. It bemoans the Jewish fall from grace, poignantly speaking of how the nation gave up the serenity of serving G-d on their own land for servitude at the hands of the non-Jewish nations in exile. Eichah means "how," as if to say:

**"HOW** could this have happened to you? **HOW** could you have let this happen to yourselves? You had it so good? **HOW** could you have been so blind that you wantonly transgressed and pushed G-d to abandon you, when all He wanted was closeness with you? **HOW** could you have been such fools?"

Read properly and with the proper intonation, one can't help but cry over what once was and is no longer.

This is the connection to this week's parsha, which contains the word "eichah," when Moshe asked:

■ *"How can I myself bear your trouble, and your burden, and your strife?" (Devarim 1:12)*

The historical setting of this verse is that Moshe Rabbeinu was about to die and leave the Jewish people. The nation reached the border of Eretz Canaan, and was ready to enter under Yehoshua's leadership, as commanded by G-d. However, just as Ya'akov before him criticized and blessed his sons on his deathbed, so too did Moshe try to offer direction one last time before being taken from

this world.

The truth is, throughout the forty years in the desert, the Jewish people rarely transgressed. However, the few mistakes they did commit were serious ones, such as the making of the golden calf and the incident with the spies. This is why Moshe was forced to review those mistakes, and to rebuke the future generations to avoid making the same errors in their own way. However, by using the word "eichah," Moshe was really alluding to the root of all errors, for the word eichah appears elsewhere in the Chumash, at what must have been the most catastrophic and tragic error in the history of mankind: the eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

After Adam ate from the tree, and hid behind the brush, G-d called out to Adam, "Aiyeka!" (spelled eichah), which means, "Where are you?" Never have three words said so much, for, the rabbis teach, G-d's question wasn't merely a way of locating Adam in the garden; it was a question intended to locate Adam within the scheme of 6,000 years of history!

According to Kabbalah, before the fateful transgression, Adam had been no ordinary man. His level of consciousness was so spiritual that it literally reached up toward the heavens, and his perception enabled him to have a Divine understanding of all of creation. There is no way to describe the bliss the first man and woman must have known during their short sojourn in the garden.

Yet, in spite of all this, they ate, and plummeted from the greatest heights to the lowest depths almost instantaneously. Whereas once Adam spoke openly with G-d, he **NOW** had to conceal himself from G-d, and was forced from Paradise into what has amounted to, so far, 5,757 years of anything **BUT** paradise!

And for **WHAT**, in the end? For a forbidden fruit? To know good and evil, when we once we knew truth and falsehood? To live with intellectual doubt when we once lived with perfect clarity?

One of the reasons we eat matzah on Pesach is to remind us that bread is one part dough, and many parts air. Bread is inflated matzah. It may look bigger, and better, but in truth it is just an illusion, and one created by the yetzer hara, **TO TEST US**, to see if we will follow after our eyes, or after our minds. In the "end" though, we will find out what **REALLY** was important and what wasn't. However, by that point, what was done will have been done, and there will be no reversing our mistakes then.

This had been Moshe's warning to the Jewish people: ask **WHAT** and WHY now, and you won't have to ask **HOW** later. Go into your hearts, and see what is really driving you, whether your motivations are selfish, or selfless, whether you are truth-seeker, or just a seeker of whatever makes you feel good. Even if the non-Jewish world there is a belief that "you have to pay the piper," that is that life and truth have a strange way of catching up with us, of making us realize what really matters in life.

I heard a story about a woman who was terminally ill, and was about to die from the sickness. A rabbi had come to visit her, and she told him,

*"Rabbi, this year has meant everything to me. Because of my sickness, I have learned what*

*life is about, something I don't believe I would have every taken seriously had I not become so ill."*

Then the rabbi asked the woman something that most of us probably would have asked ourselves, but not the women,

*"If you had the choice to have had this illness or remain healthy, what would you choose?"*

The woman answered without batting an eyelid,

*"Rabbi, I would rather have the sickness, because now I know what life is about."*

Aiyeka, eichah-it's the same thing. **WHERE** are you now? HOW did you stray so far? HOW did you so miss the point of life, and your purpose within creation? It is during these nine days and on Tisha B'Av itself that we confront the issue head on, that we must take stock of who we are, how we got here, and whether we're on track.

It is our own corrective measures that exhibit a lack of need for G-d's.

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## Shabbos Day:

In the desert, on the first day of Av, in the year 2488/1273 BCE, Aharon HaKohen died (BaMidbar 20:22). Just like Moshe, he had participated in the hitting of the rock, and was told by G-d that he would not enter Eretz Yisroel and would instead die in the desert. His death resulted in the removal of the "Clouds of Glory" that had enveloped and protected the Jewish people throughout the forty years in the desert. As a result of this, the Talmud says, Amalek felt it safe to attack the Jewish people.

The Clouds of Glory, which are symbolized by the thatched roofs we put on top of our Sukkos for seven days, didn't just protect us from the dangerous elements of the desert, they constantly elevated the Jewish people's spiritual awareness. Just as the mezuzah on the doorpost is supposed to remind us on the way into and out of our private environments that G-d runs the world, and that everything is a function of Divine Providence, how much more so was that the case with the Clouds of Glory.

The truth is, Aharon HaKohen functioned the same way, not just because he was a kohen, but because he was Aharon. What was unique about Aharon? The mishnah says in Pirke Avos:

*Be of the students of Aharon, loving peace and pursuing peace (Avos 1:12)*

The midrash tells us that Aharon HaKohen (in his "spare" time!) used to go out and make peace between his fellow Jews. If two men quarreled with each other, Aharon found a way to make peace. If a husband and wife were at odds with each other, Aharon found a way to return the "shalom bayis." He became famous for this.

He became famous for **THIS**?

What about his Talmudic erudition? What about the way he masterfully and precisely performed the Temple service? What about his incredible humility and self-sacrifice for the Jewish people?

The answer is not so much **WHAT** he did, but **HOW** he did it. It wasn't just that Aharon made everyone happy and confident enough to swallow his or her pride and make peace. It was more that to see Aharon was to get a cold slap across the face-not from Aharon himself, of course, but from reality.

To be in the presence of greatness is to realize how great one is not and ought to be. To be in the presence of the humble is to realize how humble one has yet to become. To be in the presence of one who has his act together and his priorities straight, is to realize how one's own priorities need correcting. Just to look at Aharon was to wake up to reality and see life as it really was, not as the yetzer hara made it appear. In this light, petty squabbles seemed just that, petty. Peace was inevitable.

Aharon's pursuit of peace was none other than a pursuit of G-d, of the profound truth of Torah, for peace is born out of such striving. His understanding of Torah was mind-boggling, and his capability as a Kohen Gadol was awesome. But the true measure of his greatness was how it made him see life as it really was, how he rose above jealousy and pride, and how peace was the main result of all he did.

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## Seudah Shlishis:

The Talmud says:

*"Come and see how great the strength of embarrassment is, that The Holy One, Blessed is He, helped Bar Kamtza, and destroyed His house and burned His courtyard." (Gittin 57a).*

The story of Bar Kamtza is a bizarre one. Just before the destruction of the Second Temple, a certain man in Jerusalem made a feast and invited all of his friends, which included Kamtza. However, he happened to have an enemy whose name was Bar Kamtza, whom he did not want to invite at all. However, as Divine Providence would have it, the messenger in charge of inviting people erred, and invited Bar Kamtza instead.

To Bar Kamtza it appeared that the invitation was a peace-offering, a way to end the quarrel.

However, at the feast itself, the host, upon noticing his enemy, came to promptly eject him from his simcha. Bar Kamtza, realizing that an error had been made and that peace was not at the top of the man's priorities, offered to pay for his meal to avoid being thrown out. However, the host would hear nothing of it. Fearing humiliation, Bar Kamtza offered to pay for half the meal. **"NO!"** came the reply. "How about the **WHOLE** feast!" offered Bar Kamtza, to which the host responded by throwing him out in humiliation.

Angry and humiliated, Bar Kamtza ran to the Roman authorities and claimed the Jews were rebelling. The Romans investigated the situation, and became convinced that indeed, the Jews had not subordinated themselves to the Roman will. This marked the beginning of the end of Jerusalem, the Temple, and the Second Jewish Commonwealth.

And all because Bar Kamtza was humiliated?

How is it possible that G-d could punish the whole nation because of one person, and a person who could instigate the Romans at that!

The Talmud hints at the answer. On the way out, while Bar Kamtza was suffering terrible embarrassment, no one at the feast got up to defend him. Even the wise men who had been present at the feast didn't reprimand the host for doing what the Talmud teaches one ought to jump into a fire for rather than commit. How could they have become so insensitive to the plight of a fellow Jew?

However it happened, the Talmud warns, such insensitivity leads to tremendous destruction. The incident of Bar Kamtza may have been an isolated one, and a small one (Kamtza means "small," Bar Kamtza means the "son of small thing," which is even smaller) but it revealed an insensitivity that was bound to grow and show up in other area of spiritual importance. When spiritual insensitivity festers it poisons the entire mind, until one's belief in G-d becomes terribly distorted. It is **THIS** that leads to Temples being destroyed and the destruction of the Jewish people.

Tisha B'Av is a day that comes to wake us up to reality, and to re-sensitize us. All of the mourning and "activities" of the day are meant to refocus us so that we can reverse the trend of insensitivity. And to do this is to begin, and to complete the process of building the third and final Temple, hopefully in our lifetimes.

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## MELAVE MALKAH: THE FOURTH MEAL:

This Shabbos is called "Shabbos Chazone," because the first words of the Haftarah are "Chazone Yishiyahu ..." the vision of Yishiyahu. The Pri Tzaddik points out that the last two week's haftaros started of with the words, "The words ..." and, "Listen ..." respectively. In other words, these three haftaros are a progression from speech through hearing to seeing.

To make a long story short, the haftaros were arranged in this order to help us build to a higher level of intellectual awareness. Sight represents not just physical vision, but, as we have been saying all along, mental vision. Sight is indicative of one's mental vision of reality, which can lead him either toward self-destruction, G-d forbid, or spiritual completion.

As we turn the corner and face Tisha B'Av head on, our work is cut out for us. We have to lift our sights, and employ ALL of our senses to set our priorities in order. Then, when G-d asks US, "Where are you?" we'll know exactly what to answer, and we'll be able to feel proud about what we say.

Shabbat Shalom,  
Pinchas Winston

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