

APPRECIATION

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

This year, Tisha B'Av is on Shabbos itself, causing the fast day to be pushed off until Sunday. Shabbos is normal, for the most part, at least until Chatzos, the halachic mid-point of the day, at which time some limitations do apply to acknowledge that, if it wasn't for Shabbos, it would be Tisha B'Av in every respect.

It is well known that the Talmud states that if the Temple does not get rebuilt in a particular generation, it is as if it was destroyed in that generation (Ta'anis 29a). That's quite an incrimination and condemnation of every generation since the destruction itself occurred. After all, it would seem easier to lose what you already have than to get back what has since been lost, especially hundreds, and then thousands of years later. Is the Talmud to be taken literally?

The question is predicated on a faulty assumption. It presumes that each subsequent generation has to work just as hard as the previous one to bring back the Temple, when in fact, this is not true. For the statement of the Talmud to be true, one of two realities has to be true: Either each generation remains as spiritually capable as its predecessor, or the demands on any given generation have to be relative to its declining spiritual stature.

It works the same way in families as well. A parent can have several children, each with varying degrees of intelligence and spiritual sensitivity. A fair parent will not expect the same level of accomplishment, in terms of results, from each child. Rather, he will only expect each child to try his best to be successful according to his own personal level of ability, even though the results of one child, in the end, will be less than the results of another. This is what the rabbis mean when they say:

According to the effort is the reward. (Pirkei Avos 5:26)

In other words, impact on history is a relative thing, but personal effort is an absolute value, since it is concerned only with the person in his or her own world. Any evaluation of the person is relative only to his abilities, which can include everything from natural talents to family situations, to upbringing and to potential strength of will. The only comparison that can be made between one person and another, and even one generation and another, is this.

The implication of this is staggering. It means that, as distant a reality as the last Temple is, and as much as we have spiritually descended compared to the generations before us, nevertheless, the return of the Temple would be possible in our time if we only focused on what we, in our generation,

can do to convince God that we deserve it. The lack of such a focus may be the reason why we are undergoing certain political difficulties, which, from a Divine Providence point of view, may be to force us to focus on such priorities.

I think that there is a similar example of this idea in recent history. The fact that it is hard for many to swallow does not negate its truth.

When the modern State of Israel was formed, it was rejected by many Orthodox groups as being counter-redemption for the simple reason that such a holy goal could never be achieved by such an unholy people, that is, by secular Jews, many of whom rejected Torah Judaism. If anything, their accomplishments were the work of the Sitra Achra, the impure force within Creation.

In the meantime, they have fought war after war with miraculous success, against all of the odds, while at the same time building up the country in every direction, with minimal natural resources. Even the Torah world has grown significantly under its rulership, even receiving unprecedented funding from a government that many, on principle, have rejected. Sixty-four years later, the miracle continues, and many are hard pressed to continue to attribute their success to the force of impurity (though many parts of their lifestyle certainly fit the bill).

As a result, retroactively, some Orthodox Jews have changed their view of what happened back in 1948, in a favorable direction, raising the question once again, how could such an important part of the Final Redemption come about through such seemingly spiritually unworthy proponents of the Jewish people?

The truth is, one good, hard look at Jewish history and it will be clear that it often has, if only because Jewish history needed it at that time, and they were in the right place at the right time. The same thing could be said about the secular Zionists, who in 1948, after the Holocaust, had been the only ones really pushing for an independent Jewish homeland, who were willing to bear the wrath of the world to establish it, and were prepared to do whatever was physically necessary to build up the land.

For all we know, that is all God needed from Jews at that time to warrant giving them the land at that time. For all we know, given their background and experience, and perhaps, even their gilgulim—reincarnations—that is all God expected from them, to make them worthy of being that particular link in the redemption-chain. From Orthodox Jews, trying to accomplish the same thing, He may have expected more, and the more just didn't surface at the time.

However, though their desire to re-build a Jewish homeland, and the willingness to drain the swamps to do it, may have been enough to be the vehicle to initiate the third commonwealth, it is not enough, obviously, to warrant the completion of the redemption, and the Third Temple. They may have wanted the land, but they certainly hadn't wanted the Temple, and all that it represents.

But, apparently, neither has the Orthodox world, sufficiently. We may never be able to mourn the

loss of the Temple as the generation that actually lost it, or even on the level of Jews from a couple generations ago, but if we could only do on our own potential level, it would be enough to have it returned to us. The only question is: What is sufficient enough for our generation?

The answer to this question comes in a roundabout way.

Someone, upon asking his doctor after his diagnosis, why he fell ill, was told, "You're asking me why you're sick? Why don't you instead ask me why you're not sick more often! Given the multitude of failures that could occur in the body at any given moment in time, and the countless miracles necessary to keep them from occurring throughout one's life, it is wonder that people aren't deadly ill all the time!"

It is a brilliant answer, and illustrates just how backwards our approach to life can be. The one asking the question had assumed, wrongly so, that health is a natural right of every human being, and so he resented being ill. He was told, in response, that personal health is actually a huge miracle, and that he should be grateful, instead, for whatever amount of it he had.

We tend to approach life in very much the same manner. We assume that peace and success are the natural order of the day, and when we lack either, we wonder why and become somewhat resentful. The truth really is that chaos is the natural order of Creation, and that when we experience it in only small amounts, we should be grateful, given how bad it could really get based upon the effort we make to keep it at bay (Shabbos 88a). We have seen just how overwhelming chaos can be in history.

As a result, for some, when they arise in the morning to thank God for being able to start a new day, they do it half-heartedly, knowing the difficulties that have to face that day and in the future. Only a few might actually marvel at the fact that they actually woke up for another day, and are able to crawl out of bed before beginning a whole host of other daily activities. They feel little or no sense of entitlement, and therefore, only gratitude when it comes to daily life.

The difference between the two attitudes to life may seem marginal, but in truth, it is what stands in the way of the Temple returning in any given generation. And, it is a problem that stretches all the way back to the first destruction, not of the First Temple, but of the first man. For, as Rashi points out, when Adam blamed God for his sin because He had created Chava, he denied the good that God had done for him, and subsequently lost the right to stay in the Garden of Eden.

Hence, the main theme of Eichah, which we read on Tisha B'Av, is how we fell from grace. How could we have had it so good, and lost it? How could we have been so high, and fallen so low? How could we have been so protected, and yet become so vulnerable? How could we have built a House for God, and then allow it to become destroyed?

On a smaller scale, we have watched it happen to individuals who have gone from rags to riches, only to do scandalous things and undo so much of their success. So, we scratch our heads in

wonderment and ask, "Why?" As if talking to them, we say, "You had it so good! Why didn't you just leave well enough alone and instead go out in a blaze of glory, instead of a blaze of humiliation?"

The answer is simple, and tragically, so human. We ask the question because, lacking their success, we appreciate what they have accomplished. While asking the question, we'd be ever so grateful and thankful to receive what they have already received, but since, have taken it for granted. By forgetting how much of a gift their success has been, especially when it has been the result of fortuitous circumstances, such as natural abilities, they put themselves on a path to losing some or all of it.

In a generation of increased entitlement, in a world in which so much materialism is available at affordable prices, and so many people seem to own so much, it is very easy to belong to the half-empty cup society. It is so easy to feel resentment in this generation, and so easy to stop appreciating the miracle of life, since so much distraction exists to focus us elsewhere. And where goes appreciation of life goes appreciation of the Source of life, and where goes the appreciation of the Source of Life goes the Bais HaMikdosh—the Temple.

The Three Weeks come to help us get back on the appreciation track. They are supposed to remind us that this is a not a world of entitlement, and that chaos lurks around every corner ready to pounce on mankind at any moment, and would do so if God did not help us keep it at bay (Kiddushin 30b). They are supposed to snap us out of the illusion that makes us discontent with our portion, since other people have more than us. Culminating in Tisha B'Av, the period snaps us back into reality, making us ever so grateful for the gift of life, and for the gifts that we have in life, and therefore, to the One from which they come.

If enough of us do that enough of the time, based upon our ability and opportunity to do so, then we can be the generation to witness the greatest accomplishment of history to date, not even achieved by previous generations: The Final Redemption, and the Final Temple, may it happen quickly in our time.

Text

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Rabbi Winston has authored many books on Jewish philosophy (Hashkofa). If you enjoy Rabbi Winston's Perceptions on the Parsha, you may enjoy his books. Visit Rabbi Winston's [online book store](#) for more details! www.thirtysix.org