HOPEFULNESS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

These are the accounts of the Mishkan, the Mishkan of testimony . . . (Shemos 38:21)

REBI AKIVA AND his colleagues were once walking within eyeshot of the Temple Mount when they saw a fox emerge from the place of the Kodesh Kodashim, the Holy of Holies. The colleagues cried. Rebi Akiva laughed, so they asked him:

"Why do you laugh?"

He asked them, "Why do you cry?"

They answered him, "A place about which it says, 'And the stranger that comes close shall be put to death' (Bamidbar 1:51), has now become the place of foxes and we shouldn't cry?"

He answered them, "That is why I laugh! It is written, 'And I will call to testify for Myself trustworthy witnesses, Uriah the priest and Zechariah the son of Yeverechyahu" (Yeshayahu 8:2). What relevance does Uriah the priest have to Zechariah? Uriah lived during the First Temple while Zechariah lived during the Second Temple! Rather, the verse makes the prophecy of Zechariah dependent upon the prophecy of Uriah. Uriah's prophecy says, 'Therefore Tzion, for your sake will be plowed as a field, etc.' (Michah 3:12), but Zechariah's says, 'So said the Lord of Hosts: Old men and women shall yet sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each man with his staff in his hand because of old age' (Zechariah 8:4). As long as Uriah's prophecy had yet to be fulfilled, I feared that Zechariah's prophecy might not be fulfilled. But now that Uriah's prophecy has been fulfilled, I am certain that Zechariah's prophecy will also be fulfilled." (Makkos 24b)

What Rebi Akiva told his colleagues was that the "bad" sign which disturbed them—a fox leaving the Kodesh Kodashim—was really a "good" sign—that the Temple will one day be rebuilt—which lifted his spirits. They accepted his interpretation, and it changed their perspective:

They told him, "Akiva, you have comforted us! Akiva, you have comforted us!"

The question is, how? Uriah's prophecy about the fox leaving the Kodesh Kodashim predicted the aftermath of the destruction of the FIRST Temple. Zechariah's prophecy spoke of its reconstruction, that is, of the SECOND Temple. The only problem is that while Rebi Akiva comforted his friends, they stood by the RUINS of the very temple of Zechariah's prophecy! Yes, Zechariah's prophecy HAD been fulfilled, but it had also been undone by the Romans, who destroyed the Second Temple in 70 CE! What comfort was there in THAT?

The answer is not obvious, but definitely insightful. To understand it, one has to go back in time, to just after the destruction of the First Temple.

The destructions of the First and Second Temples do not faze us because, living long after and since witnessing the survival and rebuilding of the Jewish people, we have hope for a third and final temple. We've even witnessed a Holocaust, and how the Jewish people could survive such devastating destruction and go on to return to their homeland and rebuild a presence. Destruction and recovery have become part of the national consciousness.

This had not been the case after the destruction of the First Temple. Until that time, the Jewish people had not yet experienced recovery from catastrophic destruction. They had not come to know how God could turn His back on them so totally, and yet they could still remain His people:

So says God: "Where is your mother's bill of divorce, with which I have put her away? Or to which of My creditors have I sold you?" (Yeshayahu 50:1)

The prophet said this because the Jewish people had become confused. They had thought that the destruction of the House of God, which should have been impossible, and their subsequent exile to Babylonia meant that God had divorced His people. If the covenant had ended and the situation was hopeless, they thought that they were no longer obligated in mitzvos. They had pushed God TOO far, past the point of no return.

Yeshayahu was sent to set them straight. Yes, the House of God had been destroyed. Yes, they had been exiled to a foreign land to live under a harsh ruler. Yes, it would be some time before they would see their beloved land once again. BUT, it was not divorce, just separation. The covenant had not ended, and the situation was NOT hopeless.

It would take getting used to at first, but in 52 years, once Koresh became the king of Persia, they would witness the stirrings of redemption. In 370 CE, they would be allowed to return to Eretz Yisroel and commence rebuilding the destroyed First Temple. It would not be finished until Herod's time, hundreds of years later, but it was a taste of redemption nonetheless. There is life for the Jewish people after devastating destruction and long and difficult exile.

This was the comfort Rebi Akiva gave to his mourning colleagues. He had told them that just as Zechariah's prophecy about the Second Temple came true after the destruction of the first one, likewise would the Second Temple be rebuilt as the Third and Final Temple.

The hopeless situation of Babylonian Jewry, Rebi Akiva reminded them, was turned over, beginning with Koresh and ending with Mordechai and Esther. Our situation likewise will go from hopelessness to hopefulness. That is the pattern. We only have to maintain our emunah and wait, and take comfort in that fact of Jewish history.

In truth, the Talmud tells us, it is a historical fact because God ALWAYS creates the "medicine" before the "illness." Destruction of ANYTHING Jewish cannot occur until the recovery has been set in

motion. It may not be clear at the time, and usually is not, but it is an immutable rule in Jewish history.

This, ultimately, was Rebi Akiva's comfort for those witnessing ANY Jewish destruction, personal or national. He was teaching us how to look at the destruction and see the seeds of redemption, just as God told Moshe Rabbeinu to do when he complained about the increased slavery of the Jewish people in Egypt. It is what people mean when they say that the State of Israel was founded on the ashes of the Holocaust.

In fact, the GR"A says, when the Jewish people are unworthy of a miraculous redemption, it will always come through suffering at first. And, the suffering will be the worst just prior to the redemption, just as the night is the darkest before the dawn. It was this way in Egypt in 1312 BCE, as well as in the time of the Holocaust in 1942.

Therefore, when the Torah says:

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and Rashi explains:

The word "Mishkan" is mentioned here twice in allusion to the Temple that was taken as a pledge—mashkon—being destroyed twice because of the sins of the Jewish people (Midrash Tanchuma, Pekuday 5).

A Jew has to know and realize that, even when the Temples have yet to be built, and their destruction is being prophesied, there is hope, REDEMPTION hope.

In fact, the predicted destruction IS the hope, created long before the "illness" has even had a chance to do its damage. The Torah is telling us that by being given the opportunity to build a Temple, we ourselves will have helped to create our future "cure" to our future "sickness." Something will exist in the world that will counterbalance the Jewish people, and will be destroyed instead because of their sins. This way the Jewish nation will be able to continue even if their temples do not.

"Akiva, you have comforted us! Akiva, you have comforted us!"