

“MEMAAYAN HACHAIM”

Mussar talks from the Masgiach Rabbi Chaim Walkin shlit"a

“The Paths of Zion are in Mourning . . . “ (Eicha 1:4) : The Profound Expression of our Loss, of what We are Missing as the Result of the Destruction of the Bais HaMikdosh

We are now in the midst of the part of the year called Bain HaMetzarim, “Between the Fences”, that period of pain and mourning over the destruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, the Bais HaMikdosh. It is incumbent upon us during this time of the year to introspect, to think deeply into what is our purpose, what are our obligations during these solemn days. It would seem that we must better appreciate what we have lost, to increase our sensitivity for our people’s exile and the spiritual void created in the footsteps of the tragedy of Jerusalem’s destruction. Let us expand upon this topic a bit more.

In Megillas Eicha, the Navi Yirmiyahu laments with the verse cited above: “The paths of Zion are in mourning, bereft of travelling pilgrims . . . “ The language in this verse is most difficult. What can possibly be the connection of an act of “mourning”, a uniquely human action, ascribed to inanimate objects such as the roads of the land of Israel? What is the meaning of the verse when it says that “the paths of Zion are in mourning”?

The Sages in Midrash Eicha on this verse shed some insight on this question. “Rabbi Huna said, (What is the meaning of the phrase ‘the paths of Zion are in mourning’?) Everything seeks to fulfill its purpose.” It is true, explains R’ Huna, that mourning is a specifically human activity. The behaviors of mourning reflect our deepest feelings of loss, our awareness of what we are missing, and as such, these actions are uniquely appropriate to recognize the passing of a close relative or loved one. In a similar fashion, the connection in the Scriptural text between “the paths of Zion” and mourning can be understood. According to R’ Huna, everything in the world has a

purpose, even “the paths of Zion”; the aspiration of these roads is to bring pilgrims to the Festivals three times a year at the Bais HaMikdosh in Jerusalem. Hence, now that the Temple has been destroyed and the fulfillment of this purpose is no longer possible, just as we mourn in awareness of our private loss, the very “paths of Zion” can indeed mourn in awareness of their inability to fulfill their exalted mission.

The sense that everything in Creation has a *raison d’etre*, even inanimate objects such as the roads of Israel, brings us to a clear recognition: this purpose has been negatively impacted by the destruction of Zion and everything in the World must mourn over this loss. If even Zion’s roads can realize, as Yirmiyahu testifies in Eicha, the forfeit of their sublime goal as a result of the Churban and thus can, in some sense, mourn, how much more is it required of each and every Jew in this Exile to nurture such an emotion of palpable loss within his soul and to identify in every area of his life how it can be expressed!? Every one of us has a Divine purpose as expressed in the service performed in the Bais HaMikdosh, and with its destruction, this purpose can no longer be achieved. Hence, our mission today must be to identify this lack in our spiritual makeup as a result of our National Tragedy and to mourn from the deepest part of our hearts and souls this loss, to be restored with the rebuilding of the Temple, speedily and in our days.

In Brachos 3a, the Gemara relates an incident when R’ Yosi met Eliyahu HaNavi: “I was once walking along the road when I entered the ruins (of an old abandoned building) among the ruins of Jerusalem to pray. I noticed that Eliyahu, of blessed memory,

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came and guarded the entrance for me and waited at the entrance until I finished my prayer.” After the Gemara cites a halachic discussion between the two, the story continues: “Eliyahu asked me, ‘What voice did you hear in that ruin?’ I responded, ‘I heard a Heavenly voice, like an echo of that roar of the Holy One, Blessed be He (Maharsha), cooing like a dove and saying: Woe to the children, due to whose sins I destroyed My house, burned My Temple, and exiled them among the nations.’ And Eliyahu said to me, ‘. . . (any time Hashem’s greatness is evoked, such as) when Israel enters synagogues and study halls and answers (in the kaddish prayer) ‘May His great name be blessed’, the Holy One, Blessed be He, shakes His head and says: ‘Happy is the king who is thus praised in his house. (When the Bais HaMikdosh stood, this praise was recited there, but now) How great is the pain of) the father who exiled his children, and woe to the children who were exiled from their father’s table.’”

This passage teaches us that Hashem laments every day that He has sent His children into exile. What is “exile”? The simple meaning of the word is “not in one’s place”, i.e. when a person is uprooted from his natural environment. This raises an important question for all of us: do we truly feel the discomfort of being in exile? Is it our experience that we are “not in our natural place”—by definition, a place which includes the existence of the Bais HaMikdosh! Or, do we enjoy our current situation, do we feel a sense of permanence and stability in spite of our “Golus”-state?! We must use these days to better appreciate the meaning for our lives of exile, in general, until we can personally feel ‘woe to the children who were exiled from their father’s table.’

My father, of blessed memory, once shared that a visitor had come to the home of the Chofetz Chaim, zt”l., commented about the dilapidated condition of the furnishings and questioned why the Sage hadn’t made the effort to replace them. The Chofetz Chaim responded, “Does my Father in Heaven have it any better? (I.e. His house is also in a state of disrepair!) How can a son live better than the Father?!” The Chofetz Chaim lived with Golus and the Churban, felt

them deeply, the sense of being “out of place”. If my Heavenly Father is suffering, mourning over the destruction of the Bais HaMikdosh, how is it possible that the son’s life is more orderly than that of his father!? This is how the past generations lived. They felt “out of place” because they understood their natural place was in Jerusalem with the Bais HaMikdosh.

One of the individuals who spent the war years in Shanghai related how they lived in the shadow of the Churban. My Grandmother had made some homemade jam and placed it in a small jar on top of the storage cabinet. If one of the children would get ill, Savta would take down the jar, put a small teaspoon into the jam, and give it to the child. Once, she herself wanted to take a small taste of the jam. She climbed up on a chair to reach the jar, took a small spoon of jam, and then, before she put the spoon in her mouth, she stopped! And she put the spoon back, and cried out, to herself: “Oy, Ribono Shel Olam, the Bais HaMikdosh has been destroyed—how could I imagine to take pleasure from the jam!” She was of a generation that lived in the shadow of the destruction and exile, to the point where she could not allow herself the pleasure of a “lick” of jam, because—the Bais HaMikdosh is destroyed! Even a “taste”, a lick, was a violation of their sense of illicit indulgence, inappropriate under the influence of the Churban. It is our job, too, to plant in our heart that passion of “Zecher l’Churban” and feel it always. In this way, we can truly experience the words of the Sages, “When the month of Av comes, we lessen our joy”—as we protect this sentiment of awareness of the Destruction.

The Ohr Somayach, R’ Meir Simcha M’Dvinsk, zt”l., once told my father zt”l., that R’ Avraham Yitzchok Kook, zt”l., came to him with the following halachic inquiry: It had already been quite a long time since R’ Kook had had an opportunity to visit father. Now, he was traveling to a city close to where his father lived, but that his encounter would take place during the week in which Tisha B’av fell. Rav Kook’s question for R’ Meir Simcha: was it permissible to visit his father, understanding the tremendous joy this

would entail, during the week of Tisha B'av!?

Once again, we see how the previous generation experienced Churban and Golus as a part of their daily lives, so much so that these days—Bain HaMetzarim—were days in which they potentially eschewed any joy which might cause them to forget, even a bit, the pain of the exile. Even the joy of visiting one's father was subject to halachic review by a Rav!

The Chofetz Chaim famously asked why, if it is customary to include in mortgage contracts, insurance documents, and the like numerous clauses regarding all manner of contingencies, is it not commonly accepted to include a clause “what are the consequences of Moshiach's arrival?!” The answer, the Sage ruefully answered his own question, is because to don't think about the coming of Moshiach at all. We do not live with the implications of the destruction of the Bais HaMikdosh, it doesn't take any significant amount of our brain-space, how our National Tragedy continues to affect us today. Indeed, a terrifying answer, but one which urges us to increase our sensitivity to the pain of the Churban in our daily lives.

I heard from Rav Hutner, zt"l., who was wont to say, “The days of mourning for the Destruction are like the opportunity to tear up the monthly notes of our spiritual “mortgage book”. Just like when a person purchases a home with a mortgage, he receives a book scheduling his monthly payments for the property, and as he pays each month, he tears up another sheet until he completes all his payments and can finally take possession of the home. So, too, should we view these days, Bain HaMetzarim, the days of mourning for the destruction of the Bais HaMikdosh, as if they are the Jewish people's spiritual “mortgage book”. As we go through this period, each day is another page of the book, torn up, that Klal Yisrael must pay throughout history. Only when the book is completely ripped, discarded, through the pain and mourning now and throughout each calendar cycle, will we be able to eventually receive permission to “own the dirah”, as the Sages tell us: “Anyone who properly mourns for the destruction of Jerusalem will

merit and see it's rebuilding.” When we pay the “mortgage”, we will finally own the home, and merit to see the building of the Bais HaMikdosh.

In Makkos 24b, the Gemara tells us the following incident which occurred with Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya, Rabbi Yehoshua, and Rabbi Akiva.

“. . .They were ascending to Jerusalem (after the destruction of the Temple). When they arrived at Mount Scopus (and saw the site of the Bais HaMikdosh), they rent their garments (in mourning, as is the halacha). When they arrived at the Temple Mount, they saw a fox that emerged from (the site of) the Holy of Holies. They began weeping, and Rabbi Akiva was laughing. They said to him: ‘For what reason are you laughing?’ Rabbi Akiva said to them, ‘For what reason are you weeping?’ They said to him, ‘This is the place concerning which it is written: “And the non-priest who approaches shall die” (BaMidbar 1:51) and now foxes walk in it; and shall we not weep?’

Rabbi Akiva said to them, ‘That is why I am laughing, as it is written, (when Hashem revealed the future to the Navi Yeshaya) “And I will take to me faithful witnesses to attest: Uriah the priest and Zechariah the son Yeverechiah . . . “ (Yeshayahu 8:2) Now what is the connection between Uriah and Zechariah? (Rabbi Akiva clarifies the question: Uriah was a prophet during the First Bais HaMikdosh and Zechariah was a prophet during the Bais Sheni!) Rather, the verse established that fulfillment of the prophecy of Zechariah is dependent on fulfillment of the prophecy of Uriah.

“In the prophecy of Uriah it is written: “Therefore, for your sake Zion shall be plowed as a field, and Jerusalem shall become rubble, and the Temple Mount as the high places of a forest” (i.e. where foxes are found.) (Michah 3:12) (There is a Rabbinic tradition that this was prophesied by Uriah.) In the prophecy of Zechariah it is written: “There shall yet be elderly men and elderly women sitting in the streets of Jerusalem.” (Zechariah 8:4). Until the prophecy of Uriah regarding the destruction of the

city was fulfilled I was afraid that the prophecy of Zechariah would not be fulfilled (as the two prophecies are linked.) Now that the prophecy of Uriah was fulfilled, it is evident that the prophecy of Zechariah remains valid.”

The Temple lies destroyed, foxes scamper in the place that was the Holy of Holies, Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah, and Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Akiva’s colleagues, are sobbing in mourning, and Rabbi Akiva—he is laughing! What’s more—he wonders, why are they crying!!? Rabbi Akiva was already living in tomorrow, he saw in his present moment the fulfillment of the future prophecy “there shall yet be elderly men and elderly women in the streets of Jerusalem”, the budding of the final redemption. His secret? Rabbi Akiva’s strength derived from his ability to live today in tomorrow’s moment. He was forever the optimist. Thus, for him, now was no time for sadness and tears but for joy and happiness. This attitude is also our secret, how to survive in a world in exile. Rather—specifically in exile and darkness—to live with a vision of the light of Redemption through a desire, a passion to see the rebuilding of the Bais HaMikdosh.

We must always remember, as we constantly ache for the rebuilding of the Temple: the promise of our Sages, “All those who mourn over the destruction of Jerusalem will merit and see its rebuilding”; the image of Rav Hutner zt”l., that if we pay off the mortgage, we will one day enjoy our ownership of the home; the serious, earnest nature of these days, whose ideas we imbue ever slowly but surely into our homes and children; how we can experience in our lives throughout the year, but especially during Bain HaMetzarim the pain and loss of Golus, of Churban; the importance of developing that small but intense yearning in our hearts for Hashem and His destroyed home; and finally, that everything in Creation has a Divine mission, and that this mission is profoundly

diminished without His Sanctuary and the service it contained, and that this fact mandates that we mourn to show our awareness of our loss.

We can experience the pain of the children whose Heavenly Father has banished them from his munificent table. We can learn to feel that we are not in our natural place, just as our grandfathers who rose at midnight to say Tikkun Chatzos, and our grandmothers whose eyes poured tears as they tried to feel intimately the reality of Golus and the loss of Churban. These were generations who lived in the shadow of the Bais HaMikdosh, and thus could not permit themselves to take more than the most necessary pleasures, as my Grandmother said: “The Bais HaMikdosh is destroyed and I am going to allow myself to indulge?” Though we may not always be at such a level of pristine spirituality, to always refrain from pleasures; but we can try to at least always hold ourselves back a little, to create that special place in our hearts for Hashem’s Sanctuary. And most importantly, we can embrace Rabbi Akiva’s secret--- to live today with the certainty of the prophecy of “there shall yet be elderly men and elderly women in the streets of Jerusalem”, basking in a vision of the light of the Redemption, so that despite the darkness of Golus, passionate anticipation of the immediate rebuilding of the Bais HaMikdosh will protect us.



[Written and translated according to understanding of writers]

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