



## NEGLECT OF TORAH AS A CAUSE OF CHURBAN

**Y**irmiyahu HaNavi, in an impassioned line that we read Tisha B'av morning, asks (Yirmiyahu 9:11): *al ma avda ha'aretz* — what is the cause of the churban? Apparently, nobody was able to answer this question according to the Gemara, *Nedarim* 81a. Even angels were left baffled by the query, so Hashem Himself had to give the answer. As the Navi reports (and as repeated by mashgichim and roshei yeshiva from time immemorial), Hashem answered *al azvam es Torasi* — the churban resulted from neglecting Torah.

This statement is not only striking, it is also deeply puzzling. We know the reason for the churban. The Gemara in *Yoma* 9b, teaches that the churban resulted from violating *giluy arayos*, *avoda zara* and *shefichus damim*, sexual immorality, idolatry and murder, the three cardinal sins for which one must surrender his or her life. How can the Navi tell us that the churban resulted

from neglect of Torah when we know that violating these most severe sins caused the churban?

Many answers are suggested. Some note a distinction between the verse in Yirmiyahu which speaks of destruction of Eretz Yisrael *al ma avda ha'aretz*, and the words of the Gemara in *Yoma*, which speaks of churban HaBayis. Yirmiyahu HaNavi teaches that neglect of Torah led to the destruction of Eretz Yisrael and the exile of Jews. The Beis HaMikdash, however, was destroyed because of the violation of the three cardinal sins. Perhaps we can explain this distinction as follows. The Beis HaMikdash is intended to atone for our sins. However, when we commit sins of tremendous magnitude, such as the three cardinal sins, the Beis HaMikdash is unable to fulfill its role and can no longer exist. In contrast to the Beis HaMikdash, however, Eretz Yisrael is not intended to atone for sins of the Jews. Our rights

to Eretz Yisrael are predicated on our acceptance of Torah. Failure to maintain that responsibility, failure to study Torah, causes us to relinquish our rights to Eretz Yisrael.

Others resolve the contradiction between the pasuk and the Gemara in *Yoma* differently. They note that despite violating the gravest of sins, the churban would not have occurred had we studied Torah. In the words of the Midrash at the introduction to *Eicha Rabba*:

הלואי אתי עזבו ותורתני שמרו שמתוך שהיו מתעסקים בה המאור שבה היה מחזירן למוטב.

*If only they would have abandoned Me but observed the Torah, through their involvement in [the study of] Torah, its light would have guided them back to becoming good people.*

Violating the gravest of sins did not ensure churban. Had the Jewish people continued to study Torah, the light of Torah would have returned Klal Yisrael to a place of favor with Hashem.

## The Failure to Recite Birchas HaTorah

Both these approaches follow the simple reading of the pasuk. It was the neglect of Torah, the utter failure to study and engage in its words, which was the cause of churban. However, the Gemara in *Nedarim* interprets the pasuk otherwise.

According to the Gemara, churban results not from neglect of Torah study but from neglecting to recite birchas HaTorah, the bracha that is recited before study of Torah. The Jewish people in fact studied Torah. However, they did so improperly. They failed to recite a bracha when they studied Torah. That is what caused the churban.

Failure to recite a bracha seems to be quite a trivial offense. So what? Why would failure to recite a bracha cause the churban? The RAN in *Nedarim* cites Rabbenu Yona who explains that the Jewish people did not recite birchas HaTorah because they did not consider Torah something significant enough to require a bracha. They did not study Torah for the proper reason, *lishma*, and lacked appropriate reverence for Torah; therefore, they failed to recite a bracha on Torah study. It was this lack of respect for Torah, rather than failure to study Torah altogether, which according to the Gemara in *Nedarim* caused the churban.

## The Conceptual Nature of Birchas HaTorah

Rabbenu Yona's comment that the Jewish people did not view Torah as significant enough to warrant a bracha may reflect on the conceptual nature of birchas HaTorah. Halacha posits three distinct categories of

brachos. There are brachos recited before the performance of all mitzvos, for example, the bracha that comes before one shakes a lulav or eats matza. There are brachos recited as *shevach vehodaah*, praising Hashem for a wonderful gift such as great mountains or other marvels of creation. Finally, there are *birchas hanehenin*, the brachos recited before deriving pleasure, most often before eating.

There is considerable literature that discusses how to categorize birchas HaTorah. Ramban (*Hashmatos to mitzvas aseh* 15) states that birchas HaTorah are brachos of *shevach vehodaah*. The GRA (*OH* 47:18) argues that they are *birchos hamitzva*. The third, often neglected possibility, is advanced by the *Levush* (47:1). Birchas HaTorah is recited before learning, to acknowledge the pleasure derived from the study of Torah.

Rabbenu Yona's comment can be interpreted in light of these three possibilities. If birchas HaTorah is a birchas hamitzva, the Jewish people were negligent in not performing the mitzva properly. The actual mitzva of Torah study must involve exertion and toil. Rashi at the beginning of Bechukosai stresses that following the dictates of the Torah, which is necessary to avoid the dreadful curses of the *tochacha*, means exerting oneself in Torah study. Studying without labor and exertion falls short of the genuine mitzva. This approach finds support in the text of birchas HaTorah recited in many *nuschaos* and based on some *girsaos* of the Gemara, *la'asok b'divrei Torah*: the mitzva is the toil and labor involved in study. *TAZ* (*OH* 47:1) maintains that since the Jewish people studied Torah without exertion, and therefore did not properly perform the mitzva, they did not recite a bracha.

Those who maintain that birchas HaTorah is a bracha of *shevach vehodaah*, a bracha praising Hashem for a marvelous gift, would argue that the Jews deserved exile because they failed to appreciate the beauty and wonder of Torah. The splendor of Torah shines forth most brilliantly in the Beis HaMikdash, which served as both the location of the *Torah shebichsav* (written Torah) in the form of the Luchos, and the *Torah she'beal peh* (oral Torah) in the form of the Sanhedrin, who sat in the *Lishkas HaGazis*, which was partially in the *Kodesh* (a sanctified part of the Beis HaMikdash). When Jews did not recognize the beauty and splendor of Torah, the Beis HaMikdash, which housed this splendor, had to be taken from them.

Finally, the *Levush* understands the Gemara to mean that the Jewish people did not recite birchas HaTorah because they did not properly enjoy their study. *Levush* explains that their failure to enjoy Torah study rendered their learning not *lishma*. Interestingly, this comment dovetails with the famous introduction of the *Eglei Tal*. The *Eglei Tal* comes to disabuse a rampant misconception. Many believe that one who enjoys his learning is actually not learning *lishma*. They assume that a pure motive in Torah study can come about when one studies only because he is commanded to do so. Any other motive to study Torah makes that study less pure and thus not *lishma*. *Eglei Tal* argues that precisely the opposite is true. One who enjoys his Torah study and derives pleasure from that study is actually of purer motive and greater *lishma* than the individual who studies only out of a sense of commandment.

## Lapses in Torah Study

Why would the Gemara diverge from the simple meaning of the pasuk? The pasuk indicates that it was complete neglect of Torah study that caused the churban. Why would the Gemara pin the churban on the seemingly minor infraction of failure to recite a bracha, rather than the larger issue of not studying Torah at all?

*Beis HaLevi*, *Parashas Yisro*, in an interpretation that he himself considers innovative, reconciles the Gemara in *Nedarim* with the simple reading of the pasuk. He does this based on his interpretation of a Gemara in *Brachos*.

The Gemara in *Brachos* (35a) discusses the appropriate way for one to lead his life. Should an individual only study Torah or also engage in worldly pursuits to earn a living? Rabbi Yishmael maintains that the preferred approach is *hanheg bahem minhag derech erez* — to both study and work. However, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai maintains that during times when the Jewish people are properly performing Hashem's mandates, there will be no need to work. Parnassa will come on its own; one should spend all his time engaged in Torah study. *Beis HaLevi* understands (as does R. Chaim of Volozhin in *Nefesh HaChaim* Shaar 1 #8) that Rabbi Yishmael is not permitting an individual to refrain from Torah study for even a moment. Rather, Rabbi Yishmael maintains *hanheg bahem minhag derech erez*; one is obligated to study Torah even at the exact moment that he engages in worldly pursuits. According to *Beis HaLevi*, the cause of the churban was that the Jewish people did not engage in Torah study while they were involved in worldly pursuits. Their thoughts while at work were on

mundane matters rather than Torah. That is why they did not recite birchas HaTorah; that is why there was a churban.

The Jewish people did, in fact, study Torah, as the Gemara in *Nedarim* indicates. As is appropriate according to Rabbi Yishmael, they also engaged in worldly pursuits and earned a livelihood. The difficulty came about because they did not engage with Torah when they were working. During their working hours they were exclusively occupied with mundane thoughts of commerce. They did not appropriately think of the ways their professional pursuits impacted on Torah matters. They thought only of earning a living rather than of how the living they earned must be void of all elements of deception or theft. The pasuk that indicates their failure to study Torah altogether actually means that during their working hours, their minds were not also occupied with thoughts of how their commercial activities impacted on halacha.

Baalei HaTosafos are bothered about why a person recites the bracha on sukka multiple times a day, yet the birchas HaTorah that is recited in the morning carries them through the entire day. Why does one who sits down to study daf Yomi after a long day in the office not recite a new birchas HaTorah? The Baalei HaTosafos answer that one need not recite a new birchas HaTorah since the individual was always mindful of Torah. Even while at work the individual has Torah ideas constantly reverberating in his mind. Unlike sukka, where one has *heseich hadaas* (a lapse in awareness) when he leaves the sukka, an individual never has *heseich hadaas* from Torah. As such, were an individual to actually lose awareness

of Torah while at work, such a person would need to recite birchat HaTorah again.

According to *Beis HaLevi's* explanation, the cause of the churban was the *heseich hadaas* from Torah at the time that they were at work. This *heseich hadaas*, this momentary lapse of Torah awareness while at work, should have necessitated a new birchas HaTorah. The comment of the Gemara in *Nedarim* that the churban came about because the Jewish people failed to recite birchas HaTorah even though they learned, goes hand in hand with the simple meaning of *al azvam es Torasi*, that the Jewish people neglected Torah study altogether. They studied Torah while in the *beis midrash*. However, while at work, their minds lapsed. This lapse should have necessitated a new bracha. The churban resulted from this lapse.

## Conclusion

The lessons of neglecting Torah that emerge from our presentation are quite different from the conventional mussar schmooze about *bitul Torah*. I, for one, find these lessons far more powerful. The need to find pleasure, joy and happiness in learning cannot be underestimated. Joy is infectious. One who recites birchas HaTorah as a *birchas hanehenin* will certainly find success as a teacher of Torah. Additionally, we can argue that one who finds enjoyment in Torah will be able to maintain Torah focus even while involved in pursuing his livelihood. The goal is to recite a *birchas hanehenin* on Torah. To enjoy learning Torah so much that we remain mindful of Torah at all times, even while engaged in earning a livelihood, is a certain way to overcome the churban.