

## The Power of Disbelief: On Asarah be-Tevet

לעי"נ אמי מורתי פעשא בת יוסף ע"ה  
נלב"ע ט' טבת תשנ"א לפ"ק

As is well known, unique occasions were set aside to memorialize the Destruction of Jerusalem and the Bet HaMiqdash, by the Babylonians. Thus, after the return to Zion and the rebuilding of the Temple, the question was posed whether these remained in force. As the prophet Zekhariah recounts:[1]

And it came to pass in the fourth year of king Darius, that the word of the Lord came to Zekhariah on the fourth day of the ninth month, that is Kislev; When Bet-el-sarezzer, and Regem-melech and his men, had sent a message to beg the God's favour, and to speak to the priests of the house of the Lord of hosts, and to the prophets, saying: 'Should I weep in the fifth month, abstaining, as I have done these so many years?' Then the word of the Lord of hosts came to me, saying: 'Speak to all the people of the land, and to the priests, saying: When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and in the seventh month, for all these seventy years, did you fast for Me, even to Me?

According to Hazal, days of fasting and prayer had been established in the months of Tevet, Tammuz, Av and Tishre in memory of disasters that had befallen the Jewish People. [2]

As the Tosefta states:[3]

Rabbi expounded:[4] It states, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts: The fast of the fourth month, and the fast of the fifth, and the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth, shall be joy and gladness for the house of Judah, and cheerful seasons; therefore love truth and peace.' [5] 'The fast of the fourth month,' refers to to the Seventeenth of Tammuz, when the city was breached... The 'fast of the fifth' is Tisha B'Av, the day upon which the Bet ha-Miqdash was burned... The 'fast of the seventh' is the day upon which Gedalyah b. Ahikam was murdered by Yishmael b. Netanya.[6] This is to teach you that, before God, the death of the righteous is equal to the destruction of the Temple... The 'fast of the tenth' is the Tenth of Tevet, when the king of Babylon laid siege to Jerusalem.

In the context of the destruction of the Temple and the exile of the Jews from Eretz

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Yisrael, they are obvious common denominators to the first three of these fast days. To begin with, all of them commemorate tragic events that had immediate, and disastrous, consequences. The breaching of the Jerusalem city wall on the 17th of Tammuz marked the imminent, and inevitable, fall of the rest of the city.[7] On Tisha B'Av, both Temples were destroyed. On Tzom Gedaliah, 'Gedaliah, the son of Ahikam was slain, thus extinguishing the last remaining ember of Israel's independence and making her exile complete.'[8]

On the other hand, these three days of remembrance were fortunate enough to be integrated into larger frameworks. Shiva Asar be-Tammuz and Tisha be-Av belong (indeed, created) the rubric of the 'Three Weeks,'[9] while Tzom Gedaliah was subsumed into Aseret Yeme Teshuva[10] This heightened general awareness of their existence and significance.

The fate of Asarah be-Tevet was somewhat different. From a calendrical perspective, it was not attached to any other context, which might have strengthened public consciousness of its importance and meaning.[11] More importantly, *prima facie* the content of Asarah be-Tevet is markedly different from the other three days. After all, it marks neither the end of a process, nor an event that had immediate results. Asarah be-Tevet simply marks the beginning of the Babylonian siege on Jerusalem.[12] There is, therefore, room to ask: 'What was it about that event that made the exiles decide, evidently on their own, to establish a day of fasting and introspection in memory of the start of the siege?[13] What kind of trauma did the Jewish People undergo, when they heard that the siege of Jerusalem had started?

Yet, it is clear from the way in which Ezekiel describes the way in which he heard of the siege that the Jews they were truly stunned at the news.[14]

And the word of God came to me in the ninth year, in the tenth month, on the tenth day of the month, saying: 'Son of man, write for yourself the name of the day, even of this very same day; on this very day the king of Babylon hath laid siege to Jerusalem.[15]

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The shock that took hold of the prophet is evident in the message that he received. Three times God repeats the words 'this day,'[16] as if to emphasize that the magnitude of the development that befell Jerusalem on 'this very day.' The reader can sense how stunned and agitated he was, unable to absorb what God was, in fact, telling him. Indeed, it was for that reason that God repeated the words 'this day,' over and over. He needed to drive home to Ezekiel that this much feared event had, in fact, taken place.

Upon further reflection, however, this conclusion is difficult to maintain. How could Ezekiel not have known that Nebuchadnezzar was on his way to invade the Land of Israel, with the intention of laying waste to Jerusalem? He had so prophesied and it is likely that he, himself, witnessed the king's departure. Why was he so surprised?

It seems to me that the answer may be found in the regnant belief that Jerusalem and the Bet ha-Miqdash were invulnerable. This conviction is clearly expressed in Jeremiah's famous oration before the Temple gates (a speech for which he paid imprisonment):[17]

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord, saying: Stand in the gate of God's house, and proclaim there this word, and say: Hear God's word, all you of Judah, that enter into these gates to worship God. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and I will cause you to dwell in this place. Trust not in lying words, saying: These are 'God's Temple,' 'God's Temple,' 'God's Temple'... Behold, you put your trust in lies, that cannot profit.'[18]

Jeremiah is protesting against the widespread belief that Jerusalem and the Temple, by virtue of their very existence, were invulnerable to the Babylonian onslaught.[19] God, they maintained, would never let them subdue His country, destroy His house and exile His people- irrespective of their religious or moral conduct. It was just this illusion from which Jeremiah sought to disabuse them:

Nay, but if you thoroughly improve your ways and your deeds; if you thoroughly execute justice between a man and his neighbour; if you do not oppress the stranger, the orphan, and the widow, and don't shed innocent blood in this place, nor follow other gods to your own harm; then will I cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers, for ever and ever. Will ye steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, sacrifice to Baal, and walk after other gods whom you have not known, and come and stand before Me in this house, that bears My Name, and say: 'We are delivered,' so that you may do all of these abominations? Has this

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house, that bears My Name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I, even I, have seen it, says the Lord. Go now to My place which was in Shiloh, where I caused My name to dwell at first, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of My people Israel. And now, because ye have done all these things, says the Lord, and I consistently spoke to you, but you did not hear, and I called you, but you did not answer; therefore I will do to the house, that bears My Name, wherein you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your fathers, as I have done to Shiloh. And I will cast you out of My sight, as I have cast out all your brethren, the entire seed of Ephraim.[20]

Here, I would suggest, is the source of Ezekiel's incredulous reaction to God's message.

Obviously, he knew what was about to occur. He had himself foreseen it and prophesied about it. When that prophecy of retribution began to be realized, however, he found it nigh on impossible to absorb the news. Hence, HaQadosh Barukh, hu was forced to emphatically stress that the worst case scenario was unfolding. No wonder, then, that the rest of the people were totally caught off guard and traumatized by the very idea of Jerusalem coming under siege.[21] The central lesson of Asarah be-Tevet, the vulnerability of Jerusalem as a direct result of the corrupt behaviour of the people, led them to include the day upon which the siege commenced among the days of fasting, mourning and remembrance that were established in the wake of the destruction of the Bet ha-Miqdash.[22]

In light of the above, the Rambam's words acquire special urgency:[23]

There are days which are observed by all Israel as fasts because tragic events happened on them, the object being to stir hearts and open the way to repentance, and to remind us of our own evil deeds, and of our fathers' deeds which were like ours, as a consequence of which these tragic afflictions came upon them and upon us. For as we remember these things we ought to repent and do good, in accordance with the Scriptural verse, 'And they shall confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers.'[24]

[1] Zekh. 7, 1-5.

[2] Cf. Y. Tabory, *Mo'ade Yisrael be-Tequmat ha-Mishnah ve-ha-Talmud*, Jerusalem

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2000, 350ff.

[3] Tosefta, Sotah 6, 1. Cf. S. Lieberman, Tosefta ke-Feshuta: Sotah-Qiddushin, 675 l. 190-191. Cf. Rosh HaShanah 18b.

[4] Some sources read: 'Rabbi Aqiba.' Cf. Tosefta ke-Feshuta, ibid. l. 187-189.

[5] Zekh. 8, 19.

[6] Cf. II Kings 25, 25-26 and Jer. 41, 1-18.

[7] According to Jeremiah (39, 2), the Babylonians actually broke through the walls (within the area of the present-day Jewish Quarter, near the so-called 'Broad Wall') on the ninth of the month. It was the Romans who breached the 'Third Wall' of Jerusalem on the Seventeenth (cf. Josephus, Wars, Book VI ch. 2). Regarding the ways that the disparity have been resolved, see Yerushalmi, Ta'anit 4, 5 (fol. 68c); Ritva, Rosh Hashanah 18b s.v. girsat ha-sefarim and Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim sec. 549 par. 2.

[8] Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Ta'anyiot 5, 2 [= I. Twersky, A Maimonides Reader, New York: Behrman House 1972, 116]. Notice that the Rambam provides a different reason for the fast than that in the Tosefta. Regarding this characteristic in the Mishneh Torah, generally, see I. Twersky, Introduction to the Code of Maimonides (Mishneh Torah), New Haven: Yale University Press 1980, 428-430.

[9] See D. Sperber, Minhage Yisrael, I, Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 138-153.

[10] See Y. D. Gilat, 'Ta'anit be-Shabbat,' Peraqim be-Hishtalshelut HaHalakha, Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press 1992, 217ff and S. Spiegel, 'Le-Parshat ha-Pulmos shel Pirqoi ben Baboi,' Sefer ha-Yovel le-Zvi Wolfson, ed. S. Lieberman, Jerusalem 1965, 243-274.

[11] Partial proof of the weaker standing enjoyed by Asarah be-Tevet may be found in the fact that the late chief rabbi of Israel, ha-Ga'on R. Yitzhaq Isaac Ha-Levi Herzog, zatzal, sought to have Asarah be-Tevet chosen as both Yom ha-Qaddish ha-klali and Yom Ha-Shoah, in part, in order to strengthen public awareness and observance of the fast day. Of course, his broader objective was to integrate memorial observances for the victims of the Shoah into the broader framework of normative Jewish tradition, instead of creating a new memorial day. This, as is well known, was also the position of Maran the Rov, zatzal. The difference was, of course, that the Rov thought that Tisha B'Av was the more appropriate day for such

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an occasion. Cf. Harere Qedem, ed. M. Shurqin, Jerusalem 2004, 310 s.v. ve-khi and A. Besdin, Reflections of the Rav: Lessons in Jewish thought/ Adapted from Lectures of Joseph B. Soloveitchik, New Jersey: KTAV 1993, 68-69. [The Rav was especially emphatic on this point. I, myself, heard him expatiate on it on many occasions.]

[12] The siege itself lasted eighteen months.

[13] God's initial response, 'did you fast for Me, even to Me,' makes it sound as if the fast days started as a popular initiative that later receive Divine sanction.

[14] Cf. Tosefta, *ibid.* halakha 11.

[15] Ezek. 24, 1-2.

[16] In Hebrew, the formulation is even more emphatic. 'Ha-Yom' means 'Today,' as well as 'this day.'

[17] Jer. 37.

[18] Jer. 7, 1-4 and 8.

[19] No doubt, this belief was inspired inter alia by the rescue of Jerusalem from the Assyrians in the days of Hezekiah (II Kings 19).

[20] Jer. *ibid.* 5-15.

[21] A similar response, *mutatis mutandis*, marked the response of leading thinkers to the sack of Rome in 410 CE. Cf. Augustine, *Civitas Dei*, Book I ch. 1 and Jerome, *Epistolae* no. cxvii.

[22] Interestingly, as opposed to some opinions regarding Shivah Asar be-Tammuz, no effort was made to 'adjust' the date of the fast to the onset of the siege of Jerusalem by Titus. One can speculate that this is due to the fact that while the walls of the city were always breached in Tammuz, the Roman siege started around Pesah time (Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, Book 5 ch. 3). In the former case, all that was required was a change in the day of the observance, in the same month of which the prophet had spoken ('fast of the fifth month'). A shift of the fast day from Tevet to Nissan, however, would be in violation both of the *taqqanat ha-nevi'im* and the prohibition against fasting in Nissan. On the other hand, the lesson of Asarah be-

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Tevet once learned, might have been indelibly linked with that day in particular.  
[23] Hil. Ta'anivot 5, 1 [= Twersky, Maimonides Reader, ibid.]  
[24] Lev. 26, 40.

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