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Building Jerusalem: In Those Days at This Time

Today is an auspicious day on the Jewish calendar. It is the 16th day of Adar, the anniversary of a very important event in Jewish history. According to *Megilat Ta'anit*, an ancient list of important dates and historical commemorations, most of which have long been forgotten, we are told that on the 16th of Adar, Nehemiah oversaw the construction of walls around the city of Yerushalayim.

Nehemiah was a bureaucrat in the palace of the Persian king, in “*Shushan HaBirab*” perhaps a generation following the episodes we commemorated on Purim.

דְּבַרֵי נְחֵמְיָה בְּרֹחַכְלֵיהּ וַיְהִי בְּחֹדֶשׁ כִּסְלוֹ [כַּפְּסִלִין] שְׁנַת עֶשְׂרִים וְאַנִי הָיִיתִי בְּשׁוֹשַׁן הַבִּירָה:

Once more we are back in Sushan and we anticipate another story of palace intrigue and danger. Instead, we hear a report from Yerushalayim. Remember, Cyrus, the great Persian king, once he had conquered Babylonia, granted permission to his Jewish subjects to return to *Eretz Yisrael* and to Yerushalayim but only a small percentage had taken advantage of his decree; most preferred to stay in Persia. At the opening of his book, Nehemiah receives a report from Yerushalayim that concerned him greatly:

וַיֹּאמְרוּ לִי הַנְּשֹׂאִים אֲשֶׁר־נִשְׂאָרוּ מִן־הַשְּׂבִי שֵׁם בְּמִדְיָהּ בְּרָעָה גְדֹלָה וּבְחַרְפָּהּ וְחוֹמֹתַי יְרוּשָׁלַם מִפְּרֻצָּת וּשְׁעָרֶיהָ נִצְתוּ בְּאֵשׁ:

Things are not good:

“Jerusalem’s wall is full of breaches, and its gates have been destroyed by fire.”

Nehemiah weeps when he receives this news.

וַיְהִי כִשְׁמַעִי אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה יִשְׁבַּתִּי וְאַבְכָּהּ וְאֶתְאַבְּלָה יָמִים וְאֵהִי צֹם וּמִתְפַּלֵּל לִפְנֵי אֱ־לֹהֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם:

“When I heard that, I sat and wept, and was in mourning for days, fasting and praying to the God of Heaven.”

Imagine growing up in Shushan in the aftermath of Mordechai and Esther. Perhaps Mordechai, was a mentor to Nehemiah when he entered public service. Nehemiah may have had childhood memories of fasting in solidarity with Queen Esther and of fighting for his life on the 13th of Adar. Perhaps he was too young to remember directly but he grew up celebrating Purim when it was still numbered, (like the Super Bowl, Purim XXXVII), “Fortieth Annual Shushan Purim Commemoration.” Nehemiah knows that mourning, fasting and prayer are appropriate responses to Jewish calamities.

Some time later, Nehemiah is in the presence of the king, serving him wine, and, Nehemiah, imitating Esther (someone he may have met in person), he takes advantage of the king’s good mood and generosity of spirit to make a request on behalf of the Jews:

וַיְהִי בְּחֹדֶשׁ נִסָּן שְׁנַת עֶשְׂרִים לְאַרְתַּחְשֶׁסְתָּא הַמֶּלֶךְ יָיו לִפְנֵי וְאִשָּׁא אֶת־הַיָּיִן וְאַתְנָה לְמֶלֶךְ וְלֹא־הָיִיתִי רָע לִפְנֵי: וַיֹּאמֶר לִי הַמֶּלֶךְ מְדוּעַ פָּנֶיךָ רָעִים וְאַתָּה אֵינְךָ חוֹלָה אִי־זֶה כִּי־אָם רָע לָב וְאִירָא הַרְבֵּה מְאֹד: וְאָמַר לְמֶלֶךְ הַמֶּלֶךְ לְעוֹלָם יַחֲיֶה מְדוּעַ לֹא־יָרְעוּ פְּנֵי אֲשֶׁר הָעִיר בֵּית־קְבָרוֹת אֲבֹתַי חֲרָבָה וּשְׁעָרֶיהָ אֲכָלוּ בְּאֵשׁ:

In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, wine was set before him; I took the wine and gave it to the king—I had never been out of sorts in his presence. The king said to me, “How is it that

you look bad, though you are not ill? It must be bad thoughts.” I was very frightened, but I answered the king, “May the king live forever! How should I not look bad when the city of the graveyard of my ancestors lies in ruins, and its gates have been consumed by fire?”

Nehemiah requests and receives a leave of absence from his responsibilities at court and is sent as an emissary of the king to travel to Yerushalayim where he joins with Ezra in rehabilitating the city and renewing Jewish life.

Nehemiah is a successor of Mordechai, serving in *Shushan HaBirah*, but he is animated and activated by the state of Yerushalayim and he uses his influence, not to secure Jewish life in Persia, but to give Jews in Yerushalayim the ability to defend themselves behind the defenses of a walled city.

Today is also Shabbat of *Parashat Ki Tissa*, the day when we contemplate the golden calf and our propensity to create idols, by endowing temporal, physical, conditional things with ultimate value. Rabbi Meir Simcha Kohen of Dvinsk, in his commentary to the Torah, *Meshech Chokhmah* provides a creative and very convincing explanation of Moshe's dramatic response to the golden calf. Sometimes an interpretation is so good that one can say, “this is a good interpretation...and it's also true.” I think that way about this particular passage in *Meshech Chokhmah* and it deserves to be read “inside” at greater length and in full detail. At some point we should do that together, but for now we will study his words “outside.”

Meshech Chokhmah explains that there is no such thing as intrinsic holiness. *Eretz Yisrael* and *Yerushalayim* have no intrinsic holiness. Moshe himself has no intrinsic holiness, the Torah was not from Moshe, he was merely the intermediary to transmit the Torah to the Jewish people. When he saw that the people had made a golden calf to replace Moshe he understood that if he were to have given the tablets to the Jewish People at that time, they would have turned the tablets themselves into an idol.

Sometimes I tell my children that there is a difference between a consequence and a punishment. Moshe didn't shatter the tablets as a punishment, but as a prophylactic consequence of his recognition that we did not have the spiritual maturity to understand that God is the source of sanctity, the Torah is the source of value, and sanctity is created by mitzvot and not something that inheres in anything or in any place.

Moshe had a special role, but his role did not endow Moshe with any inherent sanctity that made him worthy of becoming an object of worship; he was merely a faithful transmitter of God's Word. *Kohanim* have special sanctity, but that sanctity is expressed in the mitzvot only they can perform. *Eretz Yisrael* does have sanctity and that is expressed in the mitzvot of *terumot* and *maa'srot*, agricultural tithing, which only take place in *Eretz Yisrael*. *Yerushalayim* does have sanctity, *ma'aser sheni* can only be eaten inside of *Yerushalayim*, but that sanctity is not intrinsic and essential, it is created by and expressed by the *mitzvot*.

This insight of Rav Meir Simcha of Dvinsk needs to moderate our celebration of Nehemiah's activism on behalf of Yerushalayim. He was indeed correct that Yerushalayim needs walls and that those walls can provide unique protection and security for the Jewish people. But we need to remember that there is no value, not even celebration of Yerushalayim that can exist without a connection to Torah and Mitzvot.

This is what Yeshayau understood when he describes the future restoration of the Jewish kingdom in Zion:

וְאֲשִׁיבָה שְׂפָטֶיךָ כְּבָרָאשְׁנָה וְיַעֲצִיךָ כְּבִתְחִלָּה אַחֲרֵי־כֵן יִקְרָא לְךָ עִיר הַצְּדָק קְרִיָה נְאֻמְנָה: צִיּוֹן בְּמִשְׁפָּט
תִּפְדָּה וְשָׁבִיהָ בְּצִדְקָה:

“And I shall return your judges as before and your advisors as had been the case originally” and then, after we are ruled and guided by an honest Jewish government, “you shall be called a city of righteousness and a faithful city.”

He continues: “Zion shall be redeemed with justice and those who return with righteous behavior.”

This is what David meant when he asks, in Psalm 24, (which we recite four times a week in our *tefilot*):

מִי־יַעֲלֶה בְּהַר ה' וּמִי־יָקוּם בַּמְקוֹם קֹדֶשׁ:

He answers:

נָקִי כַפַּיִם וּבֶרֶךְ־לֵבָב אֲשֶׁר | לֹא־נִשָּׂא לִשְׁוֹא נַפְשִׁי וְלֹא נִשְׁבַּע לְמַרְמָה:

“He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not taken a false oath by My life or sworn deceitfully.”

Our presence, King David explains, in *Yerushalayim* and our ability to ascend God’s holy mountain is the direct outcome of our behavior. Walls aren’t enough.

Esther, our heroine from earlier this week, understood too the transformative redemptive power of justice. Rabbi Alex Ozar, a young rabbi who is also a doctoral student at Yale, recently contrasted Haman’s method to sway Ahashverosh with Esther’s methods. Haman shares deceitful lies about Jews, and then offers a bribe to Ahashverosh for the right to organize a state sponsored massacre of every Jewish person in the kingdom. Haman is thoroughly cynical in his approach to Ahashverosh and in the way that he deploys his won access to the king in pursuit of his hateful goals.

People who are deceitful liars think that everyone else is also dishonest. Haman has to resort to a bribe to sway Ahashverosh because Haman doesn’t understand that anyone could ever do something for sincere reasons out of a belief that it is the right way to act.

In contrast, Esther shares her own sympathy with the suffering of innocents and invites Ahashverosh to share her compassionate worldview.

כִּי אֵיכָכָה אוֹכַל וְרְאִיתִי בְרָעָה אֲשֶׁר־יִמָּצָא אֶת־עַמִּי וְאֵיכָכָה אוֹכַל וְרְאִיתִי בְּאָבְדוֹן מוֹלַדְתִּי:

“For how can I bear to see the disaster which will befall my people! And how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred!”

She cannot be silent when she knows innocent people will be harmed and by sharing that with the king, she speaks to his better angels and earns his alliance in defense of the innocent victims of his own prior policies.

Tomorrow morning I’m heading to the AIPAC conference in DC (as an aside, I will not be at minyan on Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday). I feel a great deal of clarity about the message that I hope my presence there will convey because of my growing fear for the safety of Israel. Reports, just in the last weeks, of Iranian military bases in Syria, placed in cooperation with Russia and with the explicit goal of confronting Israel, should concern all of us, and should concern the government of the United States too.

But, I’m also planning on skipping some of the big speeches by the powerful and prominent politicians because those speeches can get repetitive and boring, and I worry that they will focus on trivialities. The pro-Israel movement cannot be distracted by embassy moves when Russia has given the green light to Iranian expansion into Syria and the American government is absent and silent. And those of us in the Jewish community who love Israel and pray for Israel and visit Israel and even move to Israel when we can, have to remember that the only source of ultimate value is God. We suffered greatly for building the original golden calf. We cannot afford to make another.