

Parshat Vaetchanan 5777 Shabbat Nachamu

This Shabbat, the first following Tisha B'av, we read the first of the seven special haftarot of "Nechama", giving us comfort after our period of mourning. The haftarot tell of the coming of moshiach and rebuilding of the Beit Hamikdash which gives us hope that although we have suffered a great loss, there will be a time when the mourning comes to an end.

These are difficult concepts for us to feel. We struggle to really feel the pain of the loss of the Beit Hamikdash, let alone to need any comfort when the end of Tisha B'av signals for many of us the start of the summer holidays. Perhaps we can find something tangible to help us relate to these emotions.

Shimon Hatzadik tells us in the beginning of Pirkei Avot that the world stands on three principles "Torah, Avodah and Gemillut Chassadim." The commentaries point out that Shimon Hatzadik lived in the time of the second Beit Hamikdash and these were indeed the three overriding principles at that time. However with the loss of the Temple, there came a realisation that some of these principles would not be the same until the rebuilding.

It is clear to understand why, of the three principles set out by Shimon Hatzadik, Avodah was diluted. Whilst the Beit Hamikdash was in place, we served Hashem with Korbanot whilst afterwards our Avodah was limited to Tefila, which replaces the sacrifices until today.

However the possuk in Eichah that we read a few days ago tells us that in some way the Torah that we learn post destruction is also not the same Torah as before. In Eichah (2:9) we are told that there was no more teaching Torah. Clearly this does not mean that there is no Torah at all, chas veshalom, whilst we are in Galut, but that the Torah that we learn is not the same as it was whilst we had a Beit Hamikdash. Says the Vilna Gaon in his commentary on Avot, only these two pillars of Torah and Avodah were diluted after the destruction, but the third pillar, that of Gemilut Chassadim was not.

These three pillars represent the three different relationships that we have in the world. Torah represents the relationship with ourselves, how we conduct ourselves and the goals that we set out to achieve in our lives; Avodah represents how we relate to Hashem, subjugating ourselves to His service; and Gemilut Chassadim is how we relate to our fellow man, how we show kindness, empathy and friendship.

Although without a Beit Hamikdash we cannot attain the same spiritual heights ourselves in our own growth, and we are limited in the ways that we can serve Hashem, there is no change from the way we are able to relate to our fellow man. In Tehillim (89:3), Dovid Hamelech tells us "Olam Chessed Yibaneh" which usually translated means that the world is built on chessed, but can also represent the eternal nature of chessed. In fact Chazal tell us that Chessed was in existence before the Torah, that the act of Creation was in itself Hashem's ultimate act of kindness.

Rashi on the first possuk of this week's parsha says that the word Vaetchanan means that Moshe's tefilla was for a Matnat Chinam, a free gift without conditions. Moshe understood that Hashem owes us nothing and everything that we ask for is totally undeserved and therefore a "free gift" from Hashem.

Similarly our purest form of chessed is one where the recipient cannot repay the kindness, a chessed shel emet. This is not only kindness to a deceased person but also, for example, what parents do for us. Not only does their work involve an act of Creation, which as we said is the ultimate chessed, but the kindness which they show us as young children and then throughout our lives can never be sufficiently repaid.

Says the Vilna Gaon, a remez (hint) that Chessed was not diluted by the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash is within the paragraph that we say every day after the Amidah "Sheyibane Beit Hamikdash Bimhayra Beyameynu, Veten Chelkenu Betoratecha, Vesham Naavodche Beyirah" We ask Hashem to rebuild the Temple, so that we can have our full Avodah back, and also that we should have that last chelek of Torah that was taken away with the destruction. We don't however pray for the reinstatement of chessed, because that was never taken away from us. Acts of kindness have been in place since the start of Creation and remain today in the same pure form as when Hashem first brought the world into being.

What greater Nechama can we be given for the time of Aveilut from which we have just emerged to know that out of the ashes of the Beit Hamikdash, the item that came out undamaged was Chessed; as if we found one family photo after a terrible house fire. Throughout the coming weeks we can bring ourselves closer to Hashem by being kind and understanding to others, in exactly the same way that Hashem has allowed us to do since the time of Adam Harishon and which will continue through to the Third Beit Hamikdash, B'Ezrat Hashem. Have a wonderful summer.