

The Three Weeks

Thursday is the 17th of Tammuz, traditionally observed as a day of fasting to mark a number of tragedies in Jewish history which all occurred on that single day. The Talmud says that it was on this day that Moses broke the tablets of the Ten Commandments because the people worshipped the Golden Calf. And it was on this day that the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem in 586 BCE became so oppressive that the daily sacrifices in the First Temple were abolished. And it was on the 17th of Tammuz that the Romans breached the defensive walls that protected Jerusalem in the year 70 CE, which led directly to the destruction of the Second Temple three weeks later on *Tisha B'Av* (the 9th of Av).

In Hebrew, this period of three weeks is known as “*bein hametzarim*,” literally “within the straits” or “within the narrow places.” In *Eichah*, the Book of Lamentations that is read on *Tisha B'Av*, we find the passage:

Judah has gone into exile because of affliction and because of great servitude. She dwelt among the nations, she found no rest; all her pursuers overtook her within the straits (hametzarim). (Lamentations 1:3)

It is a reflection of our loss, our exile, and our oppression during times of calamity and as vulnerable refugees. The two fast days (17th of Tammuz and *Tisha B'Av*) also are times of restrictions of diet and frivolity that are usually associated with times of mourning. Indeed, these three weeks are likened to days of mourning.

It is certainly natural for us to question the relevance of observing fast days that commemorate ancient calamities. But the importance of these days goes far beyond the mere observance of a fast or ritual. To illustrate, let me share with you a beloved story from the lore of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav (1772-1810). Some years after Nachman's death, a student who followed his teaching was so overwhelmed by hunger that he ate on the Fast of Tammuz. He was overcome with guilt and shame because he had dedicated himself to be especially observant of Jewish laws and customs. He prayed and reflected on his weakness, not knowing if he could forgive himself. Desperate, he took a random book off of his shelf to see if he could find some answer. There is an old practice called "*Sheilat Ha-Sefer*" by which you find wisdom by closing your eyes, thumbing through the pages of a book and then seeing if it mystically has some answer for whatever is troubling you. Well, out of the book fell a piece of paper that was written by Rabbi Nachman. This is what it said:

It was very hard for me to descend to you, my precious student, to tell you that I enjoyed greatly from your service. And to you I say, my fire will burn until the coming of the Messiah — be strong and courageous in your service. — Na Nach Nachma Nachman Me'Uman. And with this I shall tell you a secret: Full and heaped up from line to line, and with strong devotional service you will understand it. And the sign is: They will say you are not fasting on the 17th of Tammuz.

The student, Rabbi Yisroel Ber Odesser, believed the letter to be a message of consolation directly from Rebbe Nachman's spirit to himself here on earth. Today, throughout Israel you will see on banners and on bumper stickers *Na Nach Nachma Nachman Me'Uman*.

Whether or not you believe the story, the point is that even from the straits of despair and woe we can find words of hope and redemption. Our ancestors, were wracked with grief from the destruction of the Temples and the subsequent exile from Israel. They were beset with guilt from their spiritual and social failures that led to exile and loss. But they reflected and learned, they taught and prepared generation after generation to find the strength and inspiration to carry them through the unforeseen challenges of

the future. They taught us never to quit. They taught us to be nimble and clever and creative because the times and changing circumstances will require every ounce of our talents in order to survive.

On this day, some will fast, most will not. What matters is that we think and reflect on the courage and tenacity of our ancestors and the proud stock from which we come. The Fast Days remind us that our wealth is not in the richness of our food and possessions. Rather, our greatest blessings are in our family and faith. And when our strength wanes and doubt clouds the mind, we need only to look for the wisdom of our ancestors to guide us and to lift us in order to reaffirm the goodness of God's gift of life.

B'vrakhah

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