



*A Historical Background
of Asara B'Teves*

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טבת תשפ"ב

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The initial stage in the destruction of the first Bais Hamikdash came on the tenth day of Teves. That was the day when Nevuchadnetzar's troops brought Yerushalayim under siege. With no ability for anyone to enter or exit the city, no food or other supplies could be brought in from the outside. Although they managed to survive with what they had for two and a half years, all the while defending themselves against the entry of the Babylonian troops in to the city, they eventually ran out of food. Finally, there was a hunger, and the Jewish defenders of the city had no strength to ward off an attack. The army of Bavel broke into the city, the Jewish soldiers all fled at night, and a few weeks later the Bais Hamikdash and the city of Yerushalayim were burnt. This is a brief summary of the destruction of the first Bais Hamikdash and our city.

Sometimes, we become so focussed on the last period of the *churban* that we fail to remember that the actual story started hundreds of years before. Let's go back to the real beginning and realize how and why the *churban* actually came. To do this justice would necessitate summarizing the entire book of Melachim, which is of course not possible. However, at least let's get at least a superficial glance at the events of the centuries which brought about this destruction.

Shlomo Hamelech

Shlomo Hamelech was designated to be the heir to the throne of Dovid Hamelech in a prophecy from Hashem. He was called Yedidya by the Novi, which means the beloved one of Hashem. Even after he sinned, he was still very great. According to one opinion of Chazal, Shlomo wrote all three of his seforim with Ruach Hakodesh when he was already an old man. Nevertheless, there is no getting around the fact that Shlomo's mistakes began a decline which eventually led indirectly to the *churban*, some four hundred years later.

When Shlomo became king, he had a prophecy from Hashem, and was told to make a request. He asked for wisdom to judge the people, and Hashem granted his request, giving him more wisdom than any other human being ever had or will have. Nevertheless, even the wisest of men is liable to err.

Shlomo had a very innovative idea. He would make alliances with foreign kings by marrying their daughters. Rambam tells us clearly that, of course, he converted them first. Undoubtedly he hoped that through this method he could influence other countries to cease worshipping *avoda zara*. You can be sure that the *chachomim* of the era were not in favor of this plan. However, Shlomo relied on his own judgement, because he viewed himself as having *s'micha* from Hashem Himself. Indeed, he was smarter than them all,

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and was not willing to accept their advice. Had his Rebbi still been alive, he would have expressed his disfavor. Shlomo would have been compelled to obey, but his Rebbi had just recently died. Interestingly, the plan did not backfire until Shlomo became old and was no longer capable of supervising his wives. Then they reverted to their previous worship of *avoda zara* right in their palaces. The Tanach states that he worshipped idols in his old age, but Chazal tell us that this is not meant literally. Since he didn't protest against the idolatry of his wives, he is considered guilty of *avoda zara* himself.

The Novi castigates Shlomo

Achiya Hashiloni, (Eliyahu Hanovi's Rebbi) told Shlomo that as a punishment, ten of the twelve tribes of Yisroel would be taken away from him and given to someone else. However, since Dovid had a promise that Shlomo would rule over all Israel, this would only take place after his death. The story is related in the book of Melachim that when Shlomo's son, Rechavam, was being coronated in Sh'chem, a delegation led by Yeravam ben Nevat came to ask for a reduction in taxes. He foolishly rebuffed them, and they seceded from the nation, to form their own country. Although Rechavam intended to do battle with them to bring them back, a novi came and told him not to go to war, as this was a decree from Hashem. Now there were two Jewish states, the kingdom of Yehuda to the South and the kingdom of Yisroel to the North.

The ten tribes

Right from the start, Yeravam corrupted the ten tribes with *avoda zara*. His ulterior motive was his fear that if his ten tribes would go to the Bais Hamikdash for *yamim tovim*, they would restore their allegiance to the king of Yehuda. He therefore established two golden calves, one at the Northern border of his kingdom, and one on his Southern border. Somehow, he convinced the people that this was acceptable, as well as some other reforms which he instituted. The kingdom of Yisroel lasted for two hundred forty years. Eventually they were exiled by Sancheriv, king of Ashur. We do not know where these ten tribes, who constitute five sixths of our people, are today.

Although the worship at the shrines of the two calves was widespread, it is important to note that this was not actually pagan worship. The calves were made, as so many of the other forms of *avoda zara*, as an underling of Hashem. The people did not think that the calves were in and of themselves a god. Nevertheless, such worship is also included in the prohibition against *avoda zara*.

There were many prophets in the Northern kingdom of Yisroel. Not only that, but there were even many special yeshivos of *bnei hanevi'im*, to train talmidim who wanted to

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receive prophecy. However, the masses were not receptive to the message of the prophets, because they were living a life style of indulgence, and especially drunkenness. The “drunkards of Efrayim” are belittled in the prophecies of Yeshaya. When people are intoxicated with their pleasures, the message of the prophets falls on deaf ears.

Originally, the two nations were supposed to be separated from each other for only thirty six years, corresponding to the years that Shlomo Hamelech had been married to Bas-Pharaoh. At that time, the king of Eretz Yehuda was one of the best kings, Asa Hamelech. He was attacked by an alliance of Aram and the kingdom of Yisroel. Had he gone to war with them, he would have been able to rid his land of the constant threat from Aram, would have defeated the ten tribes, and the two countries would have been reunited. But he missed his chance. He lost his nerve, and sent a massive bribe to the king of Aram to break his alliance with the kingdom of Yisroel. He was castigated by a novi, and the opportunity went lost and never returned.

Hashem is your shadow by your right hand

Hashem was very angry with Shlomo Hamelech and Am Yisroel, from the day that Shlomo married the daughter of Pharaoh. Chazal tell us something quite amazing about this: “Rav Yehuda said in the name of Shmuel, ‘On the day that Shlomo married the daughter of Pharaoh, the angel Gavriel came down and stuck a reed in in the Mediterranean Sea. Soot gathered around it (which eventually became an extension of the mainland), and upon it was built the metropolis of Rome.’” The Gemora quotes further that, “On the day that Yeravam set up his two golden calves, the first human habitat was put on this extension of the mainland.”

The above quotation is quite surprising. Shlomo Hamelech built the first Bais Hamikdash. It was destroyed by Bavel. The second Bais Hamikdash is the one that was destroyed by the Romans, about nine hundred years after the marriage of Shlomo to Bas Pharaoh. What is the connection of Rome to Shlomo?

There lies herein a very important concept, fundamental to understanding our history. *Everything we do has a ripple effect.* The ripple effect of what Shlomo did lasted, not only till the churban of the first Bais Hamikdash, but even down until the destruction of the second. First, the ten tribes separated from the nation and went wayward. Then the idolatry and licentious life style filtered back into the land of Yehuda. After quite some time, Heaven decreed that their measure of sin was full, so Yehuda (and Binyamin) were sent in exile to Bavel. The seventy year period of exile had a further weakening effect on the nation, which got worse and worse, even after the return to Eretz Yisroel and the building of the second Bais Hamikdash.

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Imagine, please, an arrangement of a thousand dominoes. Pushing the first will cause the second to fall, and each subsequent one will knock down the next. This will continue until all thousand have fallen. So it is with our actions as well. The effect of whatever we do will continue on and on.

When we stand in the sun, we have a shadow. When we move our hand up, the shadow moves up. When we move the hand down, the shadow follows along. Hashem is likened to the “shadow of our right hand”. Whatever we do, (whether negative or positive), will bring about a corresponding Heavenly response. When Shlomo pushed “the first domino,” which would eventually push down many more and lead to the destruction of the second Bais Hamikdash by the hands of Rome, Hashem prepared for that by sending the angel Gavriel to make the very first preparation for that finale. As things got progressively worse, through Yaravam’s idols, the next step was taken by Heaven as well, that the future site of Rome now had human habitation .

There is, however, a great difference between the analogy of the dominoes and the reality of life. Once the first domino is pushed, the process has begun, and can’t be halted. But humans have free will, and at any time can make a turnabout to impede the negative process through teshuva and appropriate corrections. Then the Heavenly shadow can turn in another direction as well. To our great chagrin, the reversal did not happen then, with very destructive results.

Listen to the Nevi'im!

During all four hundred years of the first Bais Hamikdash, the seventy years of galus Bavel, and into the early years of the second Bais Hamikdash, Hashem sent prophets to rebuke the Jewish people for their sins. They came day in and day out, but very few paid them any attention. Being “a stiff necked people,” as is the Am Yisroel, can be a fault or a positive quality. When we are determined to be loyal to Hashem, we do not buckle under, no matter what the consequences. That is how we have survived as a nation, throughout the travails of a long and bitter galus, until today. However, when we get it in our minds to desert the path of righteousness, it is often futile to talk to us and appeal to our conscience and common sense. The masses adamantly rejected the message of the Nevi'im, insulted them, belittled them, and told them that they are not interested in what they have to say. Some nevi'im were actually beaten and spat upon. Yeshaya said, “I gave my back to blows and my cheeks to slaps. I did not hide my face from insults and spit.” Yirmiyahu was imprisoned, tried in court as a false prophet, thrown into quicksand, and called a madman.

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I have already written in an essay entitled, "A Historical background of Purim," that the decree of Haman came because the people simply didn't respond to the prophets. "The removal of the ring (from Achashverosh's finger to Haman's finger) was greater than all forty eight prophets and seven prophetesses who had given prophecy to Yisroel. None of them were able to bring them back to the good path, but the removal of the ring brought them back to the good path."

The Kings of Yehuda

The descendants of Dovid Hamelech sat on the throne of Yehuda down till the destruction of the first Bais Hamikdash and *galus Bavel*. Some were genuinely great tzadikim, but about half were very wicked.

Especially towards the end, there were a number of kings who deliberately corrupted the people. Achaz locked up the Bais Hamikdash and closed the shuls and study houses. When his son Chizkiyahu inherited the throne, he had to undo all the harm and corruption that his father had wrought. But when he too passed away, his son Menashe was the greatest corrupter ever. He forced the people to worship idols and murdered the prophets. He even murdered his own grandfather, Yeshaya Hanovi. When eventually his grandson Yoshiyahu became king, it took tremendous effort and a very long time to undo even the external residue of Menashe's influence. Internally, however, the harm had been done, and no sooner did Yoshiyahu die, the next generation of kings reverted to the evil ways of their predecessors, and the situation was ripe for the Heavenly wrath to fall upon Eretz Yehuda.

Zecharya Hanovi

The reign of each king constituted an era worthy of study, but in this short essay that is not possible. However, there is one particular story that I feel I must share. From it, we can get a feel of the attitude of resistance to change during the four hundred year period we have been discussing.

Less than halfway through the first Bais Hamikdash era, this is what occurred: The righteous king, Yehoshafat, made the catastrophic mistake of allowing his son Yehoram to marry Asalya, daughter of Achav, the evil king of Yisroel. When Yehoram, and subsequently their son Achazya died, Asalya usurped the throne of Yehuda. This wicked woman's reign was the only time that Eretz Yehuda ever had a queen. In order to assure that there be no competition for the throne, she murdered all the descendants of Dovid Hamelech in the royal nursery. Only one was saved by Yehoyada, the Kohen Gadol, and his wife. They hid the one-year-old child, Yehoash, in the attic above the Kodesh

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Hakadashim for six years. No one but a select few were aware that there was a deserving heir to the throne still alive. At the end of the six years, they revealed Yehoash to the public, organized a rebellion, and installed Yehoash as king of Yehuda.

As long as his Rebbi was alive, Yehoash was righteous. However, when Yehoyada died, the government officials of Yehuda came to him and began to worship him as a godly being. After all, hadn't he been in the Kodesh Hakadashim for six years. He was gratified by the gesture, and happily accepted their homage. The son of Yehoyada was Zecharya, the new Kohen Gadol. He was also the king's own son in law, and a Novi. He rebuked them in the courtyard of the Bais Hamikdash on Yom Kipur. Yehoash had his henchmen kill Zecharya in cold blood, right there in public. As he was dying, he said, "Hashem will look, and seek (revenge for my blood).

An unbelievable miracle occurred. No matter how hard they tried, they could not cleanse the floor of the Azara (courtyard) from Zecharya's blood. The blood continued bubbling for the next two hundred years, when the Bais Hamikdash was destroyed. This was a public sign of Heavenly disfavor. Jews came to the Bais Hamikdash three times a year. They stood in the Azara, and had to step over the stain of blood, which they could see was bubbling in Hashem's response to that heinous crime. One would have thought that such a phenomenon would initiate a tremendous wave of teshuva. Alas, it was not to be.

In conclusion

Such was the state of the Jewish people leading up to the destruction of Yerushalayim. We certainly have not done justice to these four centuries of history in these few short paragraphs. However, there are many lessons to be learned from this narrative, and when we fast on Asara B'Teves, it would be very worthwhile to bear them in mind.

Nothing escapes the scrutiny of Heaven. When we are deserving, the reward will ultimately come, whether in this world or the next. But when we are negligent, it will eventually catch up with us, just as the misdeeds of the generations of the Bais Hamikdash caught up to them. The prophets brought us the d'var Hashem. Although we have no living prophets, their message lives on in the Tanach, the words of Chazal and later seforim. Let us hope that we will live up to Hashem's standard for us, and the long-awaited Geulah will come very soon. Amen!

The Ani Maamin Foundation

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