

THE FOUR FAST DAYS in Sefer Zecharya

Why do we fast on Tisha B'av? The primary answer, of course, is to remember the destruction of the Bet Ha'Mikdash and Yerushalayim.

Yet, according to the Navi Zecharya, not only Tisha B'av, but all four of the fast days (in which we remember Yerushalayim) will one day take on an added dimension.

In the following shiur, we study that prophecy of Zecharya (chapters 7-8), as it will help us appreciate an important aspect of Tisha b'Av which is especially relevant today, no less than it was over two thousand years ago.

INTRODUCTION: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Jewish custom to fast on the 'four fast days' [17 Tamuz, Tisha b'Av, Tzom Gedalyah, and Asara b'Tevet] - to remember the destruction of the Temple, is so ancient that it's original source is found in the Bible, in the prophecy of Zecharya.

Zecharya and his contemporary Chagai, were the two prophets who returned to Israel with the Babylonian Exile, and inspired the building of the Second Temple. Their time period, better known as "shivat tzion" - the return to Zion, begins with the famous decree of Cyrus (the first king of the Persian Empire) - allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple, after seventy years of exile (see Ezra 1:1-9).

Unfortunately, that first effort to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem (immediately upon their arrival) was thwarted by the complaints of the local population (see Ezra 3:1-4:5). It was only some twenty years after their original return, when permission to build was finally granted by Darius (the Great), in the second year of his reign.

In that very same year, both Chagai and Zecharya deliver their opening prophecies, encouraging the people that despite their rather pitiful predicament there was hope that this new Bet Ha'Mikdash [Temple] would one day be greater than the first one. [See Chagai chapters 1-2, Zecharya chapters 1-3.]

During this time period of **shivat tzion**, many thousands of Jews had indeed returned to Zion (see Ezra chapter 2), however many thousands more remained in Bavel [later to be known as the 'Jews of the Diaspora'].

THE BIG QUESTION

We begin our study with chapter seven of Sefer Zecharya, a prophecy delivered in the **fourth** year of Darius (i.e. two years after construction of the Mikdash began).

The chapter begins as a delegation of Jews from Bavel comes to Jerusalem to inquire in regard to a very important 'halachik question' concerning fasting:

"Ha'evkeh b'chodesh ha'chamishi - Shall we continue to weep in the fifth month (i.e. Tisha b'Av), do we abstain ourselves as we have been doing all these years?"

[See Zecharya 7:1-3.]

Their query is quite understandable. As apparent from their question, the custom in Bavel had been to fast every year in the fifth month, since time of destruction of the First Temple. Now, in the fourth year of Darius, as the construction of the new Temple is almost complete (it was finally completed in sixth year of Darius/ see Ezra 6:15), they are wondering whether it remains necessary to fast!

The delegation, sent from Bavel, approaches Zecharya to find the answer.

A BETTER QUESTION, & A BETTER ANSWER

For such a simple and logical question, we should expect a straightforward 'yes or no' answer. Instead, God fields this question with a complex prophetic answer, spanning two chapters of Sefer Zecharya. Let's follow God's response, noting how He answers the

people's question with His own question:

"[And God said to me:] Say to the people...When you fasted and lamented on the fifth and seventh months [i.e. Tisha b'Av and Tzum Gedalya] during the last seventy years, **have I been fasting?**! And when you eat and drink (not on a fast day), is it not **you** who decides to eat or drink?!" (7:4-6)

Note how God's rhetorical question implies that Am Yisrael should not be asking God [or His prophets] concerning the laws of the fast days. After all, the fast days are not God's commands, rather they are customs instituted by the people themselves in order to remember Yerushalayim. Just as the people decide when and what they eat, they too should decide if and when they should fast.

However, in case the people are truly interested in God's opinion in regard to the rebuilding of the Second Temple, Zecharya takes this opportunity to relay God's primary message -that deals with issues that are much more fundamental than fasting:

"Pay attention to the very same things which the earlier prophets [had warned your forefathers] when Jerusalem and its surrounding areas were populated and tranquil [i.e. during the good years of first Temple period]...

Execute **true justice**, deal loyally and compassionately with one another. Do not defraud a widow, orphan, stranger, or poor man, and do not plot evil against one another."(7:7-10)

God's answer is very powerful, for in it, He reads 'between the lines' of their original question. If the people are fasting on Tisha B'av, it is not only to remember **what** happened to Yerushalayim, but more important, it is to remember **why** the Temple was destroyed.

God takes this opportunity to remind Bnei Yisrael that the first Temple was destroyed because of their wayward behavior, for they did not follow the guidance of their prophets. To make sure the new Temple will be successful, the people must make sure not to repeat those same sins that caused the first one to be destroyed.

In a nutshell, God is not interested in people fasting; rather that they follow His laws properly, especially those of social justice, and not repeat the sins of their forefathers.

[See Yeshayahu 58:1-10 (not by chance the Haftara for Yom Kippur shacharit) where Yeshayahu delivers a very similar prophetic message in regard to the purpose of fast days!]

Implicit from prophecy of Zecharya is the reason why the first Bet ha'Mikdash was destroyed: God's anger was kindled primarily due to both a lack of social justice and a lack of fraternity within Am Yisrael (and not necessarily due to religious impiety).

[See for example Yirmiyahu 7:8-11, 7:21-23, 8:4-9, 9:1-8,22-23 (that's in the Haftara for Tisha B'av!)] A similar theme repeats itself throughout the Later Prophets.

The 'classic answer' that the first Bet Ha'Mikdash was destroyed due to the sins of idol worship, murder, and "arayot" etc. is based on the Gemara in Yoma 9b and the puskim in Melachim II chapter 21 in regard to God's original decision ["gzar din"] to destroy the First Temple due to the sins during the time period of Menashe. However, the people repented from those sins, especially during the time of Yoshiyahu. [See II Divrei Ha'yamim chapters 33-36.]

Nonetheless, God remained intent to bring upon the Temple's destruction - because the people did not perform total repentance, especially in relation to issues of social justice - as Yirmiyahu explains so many times (see 7:1-10, 22:1-5). Note also the story of Gedalya ben Achikam in Yirmiyahu chapters 40-43, in regard to "sinat achim" at that time.]

WHAT SHOULD HAVE BEEN THE QUESTION

Zecharya's prophecy implies that the primary reason for fasting on Tisha B'av should be to remember **why** Jerusalem was destroyed. In the prophet's eyes, it would be meaningless to fast simply to remember **what** happened. Instead, God is interested that we remember **why** those tragic events took place.

Should a group come to ask for prophetic guidance, Zecharya would rather hear questions in the like of: 'What should we do assure that God's redemption will be complete? What does God expect from us?'

Zecharya would rather the people become 'participants' in the process of redemption, rather than 'spectators'.

With this backdrop, we can better appreciate how Zecharya continues this prophecy. First, he reminds the people that even though God had punished their forefathers with Jerusalem's destruction for not listening (see 7:11-14), now they must recognize that a new opportunity has arisen:

"Thus says the Lord: I am very zealous for Zion... I have returned to Yerushalayim, for it will be called **Ir Ha'emet** - the city of **emet** - **truth**, and the mountain of God – **Har Ha'kodesh** - the mountain of holiness... (see 8:1-3)

Just as God had gone out of His way to punish Jerusalem, now He is going out of His way to help rebuild Jerusalem, but on the condition that it become a city of truth. God can only provide the people with the opportunity, but it is up to **people** to make Jerusalem a city of truth! [Note how this pasuk implies that God's return to Jerusalem is dependant upon Am Yisrael's ability to make Jerusalem a city of justice – a very important 'proviso'.]

A HINT FOR THE DIASPORA

Note, that up until this point, God has not answered the delegation itself. Instead, He has taken the opportunity to address the entire nation (see 7:5) regarding the ultimate goal of this redemption, i.e. that Jerusalem become a city characterized by social justice (see 8:1-3), and the hope that it will soon return to political and economic maturity as well (see 8:4-6).

This is followed by what appears to be a message as well for the Jews in the Diaspora:

"Thus says the Lord: I will rescue My people from lands of the east and from the lands of west, and I will bring them home to dwell in Jerusalem. They shall be My people, and I will be their God, [on the condition of] in **truth** and **righteousness** - **b'emet u'b'tzdaka**" (see 8:7-8)

It could be that Zecharya is 'hinting' here to the Diaspora that instead of worrying about whether or not to fast on Tisha B'Av, they should be considering their own return to Tzion, to help their brethren create a Jerusalem of **emet u'tzdaka**, [but this interpretation may be a bit too 'zionistic'].

This hope for the ingathering of all the Exile in Zecharya's prophecy continues with the hope for a better economy and future prosperity (see 8:9-13).

Finally, after repeating His claim that He is eager to help the redemption of His people (8:14-15), God summarizes His advice concerning how this redemption will be achieved:

"These are the things that you must do: Speak **truth** to one another, **emet u'mishpat shalom shiftu b'shareichem** - render true and perfect **justice** in your gates. And do not contrive evil against one another, and do not love perjury, for all these things I hate - declares the Lord" (8:16-17)

BACK TO THE ORIGINAL QUESTION

Now, after charging the people with His true hopes and expectations from this generation of **shivat tzion**, God finally answers the original question in regard to the future of Tisha B'Av and the other fast days for Jerusalem:

"Thus says the Lord: The fast of the fourth month (17th Tamuz), the fast of the fifth month (Tisha B'Av), the fast of the seventh month (Tzum Gedalya), and the fast of the tenth month (10th of Tevet), shall become for the House of Judah days of **joy** and **gladness** – **happy festivals** - [on the condition that] you must love and follow – **emet v'shalom** - truth and peace." (8:18-19)
[compare **emet v'shalom** with 7:9, 8:3 & 8:16]

God declares that should Am Yisrael fulfill their destiny and establish a nation characterized by justice & truth, there will no longer be any reason to fast. Instead, these fast days will become holidays. [See Further Iyun section for an explanation why they actually become holidays.].

THE MESSIANIC DREAM

Zecharya finishes his prophecy with an even higher aspiration

concerning the future of the Second Temple:

"Thus says the Lord: A time will still come when the inhabitants of many lands and great nations will come and gather in Yerushalayim to seek and find God's favor..."
(see 8:20-23)

Zecharya's concluding words echo the hope of Yeshayahu's famous prophecy concerning the ultimate goal for the nation of Israel. [See Isaiah 2:1-4 (& Micha 4:1-5), see also the parallel 'partial quote' at entrance to the United Nations Bldg.]

The reason for this conclusion is quite simple. Should Am Yisrael truly set up this ideal society of **emet v'shalom, tzedek u'mishpat**, then the Bet Ha'Mikdash can fulfill its ultimate purpose to become a beacon by which all nations can find the proper path to God. [See also Devarim 4:5-8 and I Melachim 8:41-43 & 10:1-9!]

ZECHARYA TODAY

Although Zecharya's prophecy to the founding fathers of "bayit sheni" (the Second Temple) was in response to a question raised some 2500 years ago, it is no less (and maybe even more) meaningful today, as we are in the midst of a redemption process whose direction is not clear.

If there is prophetic message for Tisha B'Av today, which can be agreed upon by every Jew, "chiloni" or "dati"; 'left wing', or 'right wing', Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform; in Israel or in the Diaspora - it is that of Zecharya chapters 7-8.

Furthermore, it is a prophecy that recognizes the realities of a 'less than perfect' redemption process, yet shows the first step in the path to achieve its highest goals.

Hopefully, this prophecy of Zecharya can help unite Am Yisrael today, and set us in the proper direction to make us worthy enough so that next year we can celebrate Tisha b'Av as a 'holiday'.

"tzom kal",
menachem

[Note: this topic continues with questions for the Haftara (below).]

FOR FURTHER IYUN

A. Regarding why the fast days will one day become holidays, Rav Yaakov Meidan, (in a shiur on 10 b'Tevet many years ago), suggested that each fast day actually contains a potential holiday:

* 17th of Tamuz

Had Bnei Yisrael not sinned at "chet ha'egel", then on the 17th of Tamuz, Bnei Yisrael would have received the **luchot** and the rest of the **Torah!** In potential, this could have been a holiday similar to **Simchat Torah**.

* 9th Av

Had Bnei Yisrael not sinned at "chet ha'meraglim", then on the day after the meraglim returned - the 9th of Av - Bnei Yisrael would have begun their conquest of Eretz Canaan. In potential, this could have been a holiday similar to Yom Atzmaut!

* Tzum Gedalya

From the account in Yirmiyahu chapter 41, it seems that Gedalya was assassinated on Rosh Ha'shana. We fast on 3 Tishrei because we can't fast on Yom Tov. Rosh Ha'shana already is a holiday, when we 'celebrate' God's Creation of the world.

* 10 Tevet

This one is bit more complicated, and requires an entire shiur to explain why. Iy'h, next year before 10 Tevet.

B. In our shiur on Megillat Esther, we mentioned how several passages in Megillat Esther may have based on the prophecies of Zecharya. With the above shiur as a background, it should be easier to appreciate those points in that shiur, especially in regard to the minhagim that Mordechi instituted to celebrate Purim.

For TISHA B'AV / HAFTARA – Questions for self study

The following questions focus on the Haftara that we read on Tisha B'av morning from Sefer Yirmiyahu 8:13-9:23.

'KNOWING' GOD

1. You are probably familiar with the concluding psukim of the Haftara for Tisha b'Av from Yirmiyahu 9:22-23:
"Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom
Let not the strong man glory in his strength
Let not the rich man glory in his wealth -
But - only in this should one glory: **Haskel v'ya'doah oti** - he should use his wisdom to **know** me!
For I the Lord act with **chessed, mishpat, and tzedaka** [kindness, justice, and charity (or equity)], for it is these traits that I desire - says the Lord.
(see 9:22-23)

Based on these psukim alone, what is the connection between **knowing** God and these three traits? Is God 'boasting' about His own traits? What is the difference between **haskel** and **ya'doah**?

b'hatzlacha,
menachem

2. Where is the first time that we find the Hebrew root [shoresh] of "yud.daled.ayin" in Chumash. [If (or when) you give up, try Breishit 2:10, 3:5-6 (note "haskel" as well) and especially 4:1.] How does each use of this verb relate to a relationship, and the intensity of that relationship? How would this background help explain why Yirmiyahu suggests that there is a mitzvah to **know** God (see 9:23)?

3. Review Breishit 18:17-24. Recall how this story relates to the birth of Yitzchak and the destruction of Sdom and Amora. Pay special attention to 18:19. What does the phrase "**ki yi'daativ l'maan...**" imply? How does this relate to the mention of **tzedaka** and **mishpat** later on in this pasuk?

[How does it relate to the word "**ayda'ah**" in 18:21?]

Does this pasuk discuss a 'relationship' between God and Avraham Avinu (and his offspring)? If so, what is the nature of that relationship?

In your opinion, how does this pasuk relate to Yirmiyahu 9:22-23? Does this pasuk in Yirmiyahu relate in any way to the prophecy of the destruction of a city? Does the pasuk in Breishit have anything to do with the destruction of a city? [Note Yirmiyahu 9:10/ 8:4-12, as well as 8:13-23.]

4. Review Yeshayahu chapter 1 (last week's Haftara). Note the use of the word "yadah" in 1:2-3. Does this chapter speak of destruction? Does this chapter compare Am Yisrael to Sdom and Amora? [Note 1:9-10.] Does this chapter speak of **tzedek & mishpat**? [Note 1:16-27!]

5. In what manner is Sdom 'antithetical' to Yerushalayim? Relate to the story of Avraham and Lot in Breishit chapter 13! Note as well Avraham's attitude towards the King of Sdom in chapter 14! See Yechezkel 16:46-50. According to these psukim, what was the primary sin of Sdom? How does this relate to the above questions?

6. Return now to the Haftara of Tisha B'av, and read 9:1-8. How does this relate to the above questions? How does this relate to Yirmiyahu's concluding statement in 9:22-23? Note especially 9:5 and the use of the word "**daat**"! Relate this to questions #1 and #2 above! Relate as well to Yirmiyahu 8:4-12.

7. To see how this theme continues in Yirmiyahu, see also 21:11, 22:1-5, 22:13-17 - especially 22:15-16 and its definition of what it means to 'know God'! See also 23:5-6, noting again the verb "haskel". See also 23:14-15, noting again Sdom & Amora.

8. Finally, note a very similar theme in the famous "mashal ha'kerem" of Yeshayahu in 5:1-10, note the citing of the lack of "tzedek & mishpat" as the reason for destruction. Based on our study of Sefer Breishit in regard to the reason **why** God chose Avraham Avinu to become His special nation, and based on Devarim 4:5-8 (in Parshat ha'shavua), why do you think that it is specifically this sin that leads to God's decision to destroy the Mikdash and send Am Yisrael into Exile?

9. In regard to 'knowing' God, see also Micha 6:8 (and 2:1-2). Then see Hoshea 6:1-6. Note "daat Hashem" and "chessed". [You can also try Amos 4:1-11, noting 4:1 and 4:11.] [Note also how God's anger with "korbanot" is prominent in all of the above prophecies, and how they all relate to "churban".]

10. With this background, review our shiur on Zecharya chapter 7 thru 8, noting how it reflects a similar theme (but on the 'redemption' side).