The Extraordinarily Sad Story of the 10th of Tebet

THE WARNINGS OF JEREMIAS

The fast of the 10th of Tebet reminds us of the siege to Yerushalayim (Jerusalem), the first step that led to the destruction of our Temple, the Bet haMiqdash.

At the beginning of the 6th century BCE, and for several years, the prophet Yirmiyahu warned the people about their corruption: practicing idolatry, desecrating Shabbat, and abandoning the Tora. Yirmiyahu warned the Jews that if they would not change and improve their behavior, *"the Bet haMiqdash would be destroyed"* by the King of Babylon, Nebukhadnetsar.

When Yirmiyahu announced this in the Bet haMiqdash, the corrupt religious and political leaders got furious since, indirectly, Yirmiyahu was challenging their power and authority. They did not care much about anything else. Thus, far from hearing the prophet's voice, the Jewish priests and leaders try to execute him. Cynically, they accused him of "blasphemy". How dare a man that calls himself a prophet imply that HaShem, our Almighty God, would allow His House to be destroyed?

Miraculously Yirmiyahu was saved. And the political leaders, knowing that the army of Nebukhadnetsar was approaching, persuaded the people that their solid military alliance with Egypt, the second superpower in those times, would save them from the Babylonians. Thus, instead of trusting in HaShem and doing Teshuba (repentance), as Jeremiah was begging them to do, they placed their trust in the corrupt leaders, priests and false prophets.

On the 10th of Tebet of 589 BCE, Nebukhadnetsar began to

besiege Yerushalayim with his powerful army. The situation was dire because the lack of food, the first natural consequence of the siege, was aggravated by a tremendous drought. The desperate people inside the walled city ate dry grass infested with worms, which brought plagues and fatal diseases.

THE PEOPLE WOKE UP

At that moment of despair, King Tsidquiyahu and the Jewish leaders finally, miraculously, woke up from denial and decided to do something about it. Remembering the words of Jeremiah, the Jewish leaders met at the Bet haMiqdash and proposed a renewed covenant with God. They said: *"We are going to free our slaves, and You, please, free us from the army of Babylon."* The slaves they were referring to were Jewish slaves: poor individuals who had become indentured servants to the wealthy landlords of Yerushalayim because they could not pay their debts. Now they and their children were repaying their debts through slavery. According to the Tora, regardless of whether the debt was or was not paid in full, the Hebrew slaves must be released in the seventh year. But these slave-owners did not care to comply with this Mitsva. And to avoid losing the money that was "owed to them", they enslaved the poor permanently, as other nations did with their slaves. But now, finally, they had reconsidered and repented their wrong actions. And now they declared their slaves free. They prayed to HaShem that for the merit of doing so, He would also deliver them from Nebukhadnetsar's army.

AND THE MIRACLE HAPPENED!!!

And miraculously, the Babylonian army left. Yirmiyahu gives us his testimony of this great miracle: he wrote in chapter 37, Pasuq 5. *"And Pharaoh's army departed from Egypt [to Jerusalem], and when the Babylonians, who were besieging Jerusalem, heard that [the Egyptian army was coming], they*

lifted the siege of Jerusalem [and went to fight against the Egyptians]. Yerushalayim celebrated one of its happiest days! The great miracle had finally happened! The enemy army "disappeared", and the "pessimistic" prophecies of Yirmiyahu had not been fulfilled. Yerushalayim was safe again!

A STUBBORN NATION

What took place next is discouraging and hard to believe, and we should consider this tragic episode as the main reason for the fast of the Asara beTebet.

When the enslavers saw that the army of Nebukhadnetsar left Jerusalem, **they took their slaves back**, betraying the covenant they had made with HaShem just a few days before. I imagine they must have said to themselves: "Oh! Now that the enemy has left, we don't need God's help anymore". As if they were completely ignoring God's intervention and thinking that the enemy left them on their own.

THE OPPOSITE OF TESHUBA

This terrible "mistake" of our ancestors is narrated in Jeremiah, chapter 34, and is presented as the straw that broke the camel's back, and precipitated the destruction of Jerusalem.

The prophet says in the name of God: 34:15 *"[a short time ago], you repented, and you did the right thing in My sight: each of you proclaimed freedom to your enslaved brothers, and you even made a covenant with Me, in the house that bears My name [the Bet haMiqdash]*. 34:16 *"But now, you have "repented" [=broke your word with Me!] and you have profaned My Name: each one of you has recaptured the … men and women who were liberated … and forced them to become slaves again.* 34:17 *"Therefore, says HaShem: You have betrayed Me, you have not granted freedom to your brothers, and now the sword, the plagues, and the famine will be free [to pursue you and reach you] again…*

Meanwhile, the battle in the Negeb between the Egyptian army and the Babylonian army was still undecided. But in the end, the Egyptians were defeated. And Nebukhadnetsar returned to Yerushalayim with his army and surrounded the city for the second time. Hunger, plagues, and death seized Yerushalayim again. After months of futile resistance, the Babylonian army broke the walls, killed, exiled, or enslaved the survivors, and destroyed the city and the Temple.

*In times of despair, our ancestors repented for their wrongdoing. But as soon as trouble ended, as soon as the Babylonians disappeared, **"they regretted their repentance**" and betrayed not only the words of the Tora but also the recent covenant they had made with God.*

And this is why we fast on the 10th of Tebet.

Who Needs To Fast?

√ Minors: boys under 13 years old and girls under 12 years old are entirely exempt from this fast.
√ Pregnant women are exempt from this fast.
√ In many Sephardic communities, the tradition is that after giving birth, women are exempted from fasting for the next 24 months, even when they are no longer breastfeeding their baby. In other Sephardic and Ashkenazi communities, the nursing mother is only excused from fasting mothers for 24 months while she is breastfeeding her baby. Consult with the rabbi of your community regarding the tradition to follow.
√ A person who feels unwell, for example, with flu symptoms or fever, or a person with a chronic illness, such as diabetes, should not fast. Elders should check with their doctors to determine if fasting will affect their health. In this case, they are exempt from fasting.