

A Knock on the Roof

Category: Balak, Bamidbar

Sometimes, things seem to be going wrong. But the lesson from the 17th of Tammuz is that life can always turn around at the last second. It's all up to you.

A Question in South Padre

Before the holidays of 1989, my brother-in-law, Rabbi Yosef Levertov of Austin, Texas, reached out to me and asked me to lead a Yom Kippur service in South Padre Island in the Gulf of Texas.

South Padre Island is a very popular resort destination, and there was a small Jewish community living on the island all year round. They were mostly Israelis, running clothing stores and various businesses, and Rabbi Levertov was their address for all things Jewish. When they asked him to arrange High Holiday services for them, he reached out to his brother Noteh and myself.

We took a Torah, Talleisim and Machzors from New York and flew down to Austin, and on the day before Yom Kippur, we flew to the island. The plane landed at a tiny airport that looked more like a bus station, and we were greeted by a warm fellow named Rafi. He was the guy responsible for anything Jewish on the island; all the Israelis gathered in his home and that is where we led the prayers.

We held the Kol Nidrei Services on Yom Kippur evening, and many people — not having any other plans — remained afterwards to talk. It didn't take long for one of the Israelis to 'attack' me with a 'very original' charge: rabbis make things up and claim them to be authentic Judaism.

I was a bit surprised to hear the accusation and I asked him what, specifically, he was referring to. He was holding a Tanach and asked me why we fast on the 17th of Tammuz. I responded that the 17th of Tammuz marked the day the walls of Jerusalem were breached.

"That's a lie!" he said. "The Book of Jeremiah says that it took place on the 9th of Tammuz!"

He was excited to show me his knowledge and he began to read from the book:

“In Zedekiah’s ninth year, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came with his entire army and besieged Jerusalem...and on the ninth day of the fourth month the city walls were breached” (*Jeremiah 39:1-2*).

I asked him for the Tanach; I wanted to see it for myself. The book had no commentaries and he had read the text correctly, but there was a comment at the bottom that made note of the problem — and explained why it was not actually a contradiction.

When I told him the answer, he just said, “You people always have answers...” He wasn’t convinced. His friends yelled at him that he was a heretic and that he needed more faith in his life, but I must say that this ‘heretic’ had asked the best question during that evening’s discussion.

The Babylonian Talmud’s Answer

His question is actually found in the Talmud, and the Talmud answers that the two dates are about two different stories. Before the destruction of the *first* Temple, the city was breached on the ninth of Tammuz, and before the destruction of the *second* Temple, five hundred years later, the city was breached on the seventeenth (*Taanis 28a*).

Both Temples were destroyed on the same exact day, the ninth of Av (which is approaching in several weeks) and both destructions were preceded by a siege on the city of Jerusalem. But when the Babylonians besieged Jerusalem as described in Jeremiah, they breached the walls on the ninth, and when the Romans besieged Jerusalem in the year 70 of the common era, they broke through on the 17th — as described in the Mishnah.

But that leaves us with a question: why do we fast on the seventeenth and not on the ninth?

According to the Code of Jewish Law (*Orach Chaim 549:2*), we fast on the seventeenth because it commemorates the destruction that is closer to us. Another reason is that the second Temple’s destruction was more absolute. The Babylonians destroyed the roof of the first Temple, but they left the walls

standing. The Romans, on the other hand, destroyed the entire Temple; they plowed through the entire area and nothing remained at all (the Western Wall was an outer wall of the Temple Mount, not an actual part of the Temple complex).

The Jerusalem Talmud's Answer

But interestingly, the Jerusalem Talmud suggests a different explanation: "It is a miscalculation," it says simply (*Taanis 4:5*).

The common understanding of this statement is that the date in Jeremiah is incorrect. The walls were actually breached on the seventeenth, but in the chaos and confusion, they thought it took place on the ninth.

In those days, people didn't have pocket calendars, and they didn't have Google to remind them when the various Jewish holidays fell out. The calendar was set by monthly moon sightings, and it was usually the rabbi who knew when the new month began. There is nothing surprising about such a mistake.

In fact, Jeremiah knew that the date was mistaken. However, he recorded it as they remembered it — as a sign of G-d's affinity with the suffering of the Jewish people (*Korban Ha'edah*).

Is It Really an Argument?

This seems to leave us with an argument about the destruction of the First Temple. According to the Babylonian Talmud, the city of Jerusalem was breached by the Babylonians on the ninth of Tammuz, while the Jerusalem Talmud maintains that it actually took place on the seventeenth.

This poses a problem, as the Rebbe points out. There cannot argue about facts. When did it happen? On the ninth or the seventeenth? Is it possible that one of them is wrong? Is it possible that we forgot the date of one of the most terrible occurrences in Jewish history? How does this argument make sense?

The Rebbe answers that both dates are, in fact, correct. The Babylonians managed to break a small opening in the wall on the 9th of Tammuz and soldiers were able to file in. But it took another eight days before the walls were brought

down, allowing large legions of soldiers to enter and make a decisive victory.

We fast on the seventeenth, the Rebbe explains, because there was hope for Jerusalem until that date. It was still possible to overpower the soldiers as long as they were only trickling into the city. But by the 17th of Tammuz, that was no longer a possibility; the city had fallen, and there was no way back.

Transform It To Good

Why did G-d orchestrate the events in such a fashion?

The Rebbe gives a fascinating answer:

When G-d begins a punishment or consequence, he always leaves room for change and repentance.

For example: When G-d brought down the Great Flood, the Torah first describes it as a rainfall and only later calls it a flood. Rashi makes note of the difference and explains the G-d was waiting to see whether the people would repent. If the people would return to G-d, He would transform the flood into a rainfall of blessing. Only when they chose not to, did He allow it to become the Great Flood that it was (Noach 7:12).

The IDF has a procedure called "*hakesh bagag*, knocking on the roof." Before they bomb a building in Gaza, they send a small rocket on to the roof to warn civilians to evacuate the building. They wait for the people to leave, and then they demolish the building and all the terrorist infrastructure inside.

G-d did the very same thing: He first brought down a rainfall with the hope that they would repent immediately, but when they didn't, He allowed it to become a flood.

This is not only true about punishments. G-d leaves room for change in positive things as well. For example, if someone has five or six sons and desperately wants a daughter, the Talmud says that you have the ability to pray to change the gender of your child during the first forty days of pregnancy; only afterwards is the gender is set in stone and the prayer is pointless (*Brachot 60a*).

In the story of Jerusalem, it's quite an amazing thought: The Jews "miscalculated"

by assuming that all was lost when the Babylonians made a small breach in the wall. In truth, even as G-d decrees that Jerusalem be breached and the Temple be destroyed, and even as the enemy was breaking through the walls of the city, G-d looked down like a loving father and gave us another chance. Maybe, after all, we would learn to live in peace with each other and Jerusalem would be saved from destruction.

This is true in our own, everyday lives. We all know that parents always give their children another chance; we need to remember that G-d does so as well.

Sometimes it might seem that a flood is approaching; remember that G-d gives us the power to transform it into a rainfall of blessing.