

בס"ד

Shluchim Sermons



Devarim

Putting Buildings People before

Hitler famously preserved the Jewish quarter of Prague to be a Museum about the Jewish race after their annihilation. Titus had similar ideas. But what was G-d's response?

Titus & Hitler: Kill the People, Preserve the Architecture

Good Shabbos!

Every year, millions of tourists visit the Jewish Quarter of Prague. It's one of the most popular tourist hotspots in all of Europe.

During the Second World War, most synagogues in Europe were burned and destroyed by the Nazis, as were all the Jewish ghettos and neighborhoods. But the Nazis didn't touch the Jewish Quarter of Prague. Why? Hitler planned to turn Prague into a museum of the Jewish race that "had existed" before the Holocaust. He wanted Prague to tell the story of the Jews, whom he was sure he was going to get rid of. So he issued the order to not touch the buildings of the Jewish Quarter.

Tomorrow is Tisha B'av, the day on which the Beis Hamikdash, the Holy Temple, was destroyed. One of the sources which describes the war between the Jews and the Romans is "The Wars of the Jews," written by Yosef Ben-Matisyahu, commonly known by his Roman name as Josephus Flavius.

Josephus was a Jew who was taken prisoner by the Romans, and in

today's terms, he liveblogged the Destruction of the Beis Hamikdash.

Many researchers argue that the accounts of Josephus cannot be believed. They say that he was under the control of the Roman Empire and almost certainly deviated from the factual truth to paint his masters as the good guys. By contrast, the Rebbe writes in a letter that "most secular scholars disparage him and most religious scholars praise him, etc."

Josephus wrote about Tisha B'Av, when the battle inside Jerusalem was already at its height. The evil general Titus convened his "war cabinet" for a meeting to decide what to do with the Temple. Should they destroy it or should they leave it intact? (Among his advisors was a Jew from Egypt whose father had donated the gold to overlay the gates of the Temple; his own son helped destroy Jerusalem...)

Some of the officers argued that the Jews would never capitulate so long as their Temple stood, so the Roman Empire needed to follow standard military operating procedure and execute a scorched-earth policy.

Some argued that destroying the Beis Hamikdash wouldn't be worthwhile. They made the case that if they destroyed it, the Romans would come out looking like the bad guys, but if they left it, they would seem like good and decent people whose interest was not in destroying the Beis Hamikdash but rather putting down a rebellion. They added that if the Jews used the Beis Hamikdash as a fortress to battle the Romans, then they would have no choice but to destroy it—and the fault would lie with the Jews who forced the Romans to do the dark deed.

Titus himself closed the meeting and said that he didn't want to punish the beautiful building because some people rebelled against him. Even if the Jews would fight from inside the Beis Hamikdash, he would absolutely not destroy the Beis Hamikdash; he argued that if he

destroyed it, the loss would be the Romans', but that if they left it standing, it would glorify his rule.

Ultimately, Josephus continues, Roman soldiers fighting in Jerusalem were attacked by Jewish soldiers, and out of anger, a Roman soldier threw a flare at the Beis Hamikdash that started a fire, and his friends were whipped up and in a firestorm of rage they proceeded to destroy the Temple. (In the writing of our Sages, there is no explicit reference to this account.)

Here we have it, that well before Hitler, Titus had the same idea of annihilating the Jewish Nation but preserving the beautiful buildings that they had built.

G-d: Preserve the People, Kill the Architecture

Ultimately, this method failed. The Jewish people have always survived, while the Holy Temple - and many other holy sites - didn't survive the millenniums of persecution.

And it's all the hand of G-d.

The Talmud (Kiddushin 31b) tells a beautiful story about Avimi, a young man who was very stringent in honoring his father, the famous Rabbi Avahu. His father once asked him to bring him a cup of water, but by the time he returned, his father had fallen asleep. Avimi was so careful with the mitzvah of honoring one's father that he didn't wake him up. Instead, he stood next to him with the cup in his hand, waiting until his father woke up.

As he stood there waiting, he had an epiphany. He had long been bothered by a certain question in his Torah learning, and now, in the merit of honoring his father, the answer came to him.

One chapter in the Book of Tehilim (79) contains a very sad description of the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash, but the very first

words of the chapter are “A song of Asaf.” Avimi always wondered why the chapter was described as a song. It would have been more fitting to be called a lamentation! What is there to sing about when you’re describing the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash?

As he stood in front of his father, the explanation suddenly occurred to him: Asaf sang a song – not because the Temple was destroyed, but because G-d had expressed His fury upon sticks and stones instead of on the people. We were no longer worthy of living in Israel with a Holy Temple, and instead of destroying the Jewish people, G-d chose to destroy the Temple.

In other words, Titus wanted to save the Beis Hamikdash and, G-d forbid, destroy the Jewish Nation—and therefore we thank G-d that he did the exact opposite: He destroyed the Beis Hamikdash and left the Jewish Nation alive.

Building Buildings vs. Building Souls

In this week’s Torah portion, Moshe recounts the sin of the Spies. Moshe adds: “G-d was also angry with me because of you, saying, ‘You, too, shall not go there’” (Devarim 1:37).

That is very surprising. Until this Torah portion, we knew that Moshe wouldn’t enter the Holy Land because he had hit the rock—but here, however, Moshe says that he would not be entering the Land “because of you,” because of the sin of the Spies. What is the connection between the sin of the Spies and Moshe not entering the Holy Land?

The Or Hachayim suggests the following explanation:

The night when the Spies returned with their negative report was the night of Tisha B’Av. As the Talmud (Taanis 29a) relates, G-d said, “You are crying for no reason today, but I will give you good reasons to cry for generations to come.” In other words, the story of the Spies was a

prelude to the destruction of Jerusalem.

Now, the Torah teaches that “the work of Moshe is eternal”—everything that Moshe Rabbeinu fashions lasts forever (and based on this principle, some people are still looking for the Ark of the Covenant). If Moshe would enter the Land and build the Beis Hamikdash, G-d knew that if a day would come when the Jews would sin and something would need to go, it wouldn't be the Temple; it would have to be, G-d forbid, the Jews. Therefore, G-d told Moshe to stay in the desert while the Jewish Nation entered the Holy Land with Yehoshua. When they would build the Holy Temple, it would be a Temple that could be destroyed in exchange for the Jewish Nation.

In the dilemma between choosing historical architecture over people, the choice is clear: the Jewish Nation happily gave up on the buildings for the good of the people.

There is an explicit law in Maimonides that every Jew is obligated to help in the building of the Beis Hamikdash, men and women alike. However, there is a group that is exempt from any Temple-building obligations—and actually forbidden from engaging in any such activity. These are schoolchildren studying Torah. They cannot be interrupted from their studies in any way, shape or form (Rambam, Hilchos Beis Habechirah 1:12). This teaches us that Torah study among Jewish children is more important than building the Beis Hamikdash itself.

In other words, students are far more important than buildings.

Instead of investing money in museums and beautiful buildings, invest your money in Jewish education.