

What Brought Jerusalem's Downfall?

Category: Devarim,Devarim

Was it really the Romans who destroyed the Temple?

The True Story

This week in Israel, a new animated movie was released, called “*agadat churban*— legend of destruction,” created by the same directors as Ushpizin.

The movie is made up of over fifteen hundred drawings by professional artists who depicted the events in Jerusalem prior to the destruction, accompanied by voices of actors. It tells the story of the Jewish revolt against the Roman Empire which ultimately led to the destruction of the Temple in the year 70.

The storyline is that the revolt degenerated into a civil war between the Jews themselves, which ultimately handed the Romans a victory.

In the years leading to the destruction, there were numerous Jewish groups which didn't get along with each other.

There were the priests, the kohanim, who were members of Jerusalem's elite class, living in the rich neighborhoods of the city.

Many of them had close connections with the Romans, who had ruled Jerusalem and the entire country for quite a while. Roman influence was everywhere. The Roman governor would even select the High Priest—giving the job to the highest bidder or the most well-connected individual (usually the two went hand in hand), instead of appointing the worthiest individual.

This group supported the Roman occupation and cooperated with it. They were mainly Sadducees, Jews who had left traditional Jewish observance and created new interpretations of the Torah.

There was another group called the Zealots, a violent group that emerged from the difficult conditions of the Roman occupation which was very heavy-handed on

Jews and Judaism. The leader of the Zealots was Aba Sikra, also known as Ben Batiach, the nephew of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai, the spiritual leader of the Jewish people at the time.

Between them all was another group, the Pharisees (Perushim). These were the traditional Jews, the majority of the rank-and-file, who continued to maintain Jewish life as they had received it at Mount Sinai.

The revolt was provoked by the exceptional cruelty of Florus, the final Roman governor (procurator) of Judea. He tried to raid the treasures of the Temple, he brought foreign soldiers into the city who wantonly pillaged and murdered, and he provoked a terrible anger among the populace.

Jerusalem's Zealots were divided into many subgroups. Instead of joining forces against the common enemy, they fought each other for control of the city. It turned into a full-fledged civil war, where Jews were killing each other even within the Holy Temple.

When the Roman legions came to Judea to quell the rebellion, they approached from the north, first putting an end to the rebellion across the Galilee and laying waste to city after city. Jerusalem was their final destination.

When they arrived at Jerusalem, they didn't rush to attack. Vespasian, the general (and later the emperor) said that attacking the city immediately would cause the feuding Jewish factions to join forces. He preferred to wait until the Jews decreased their own numbers through their own infighting. "When your enemies are killing each other on their own, you should just sit back and watch," he told his soldiers. The Jews weren't busy building fortifications or producing weaponry; they were weakening their own lines with a devastating civil war. (The Jewish Wars 4, pg. 359).

He wasn't wrong. In Jerusalem it was really everyone against everyone. In the Zealots' quest to force the moderates to join the rebellion, they burned the storage houses of grain which had enough to sustain Jerusalem for 21 years! A famine quickly set in, and when the Romans entered, they found a starved and weary city. Victory fell into their lap.

How to Fix It

The point of the film was to demonstrate how divisions between the Jews themselves were the cause of their downfall.

People who saw the film said that they felt a sense of relief when they saw the Holy Temple be destroyed. The infighting and strife among the Jews was so bad that it was relieving to know that with nothing to fight over, the fighting would finally subside.

The destruction of the Temple was a tremendous shock for the Jewish people. Jewish life revolved around the Temple; Judaism, they felt, couldn't survive without it. Indeed, fifty-two years later, the Bar Kochba revolt arose with the hope of rebuilding it. It also ended in destruction and devastation, on the same day on the calendar—Tisha B'av.

Finally, the realization began to sink in: the destruction of the Temple wasn't a technical matter. It wasn't merely that the Romans were stronger than us. They realized that the problem was much deeper. The infighting and the civil war - that is what had brought them down. Instead of mounting revolt after revolt, they needed to focus inward, on healing the rifts in the Jewish community. Indeed, our Sages taught, the Temple was destroyed because of senseless hatred.

Today, there are groups of Israeli Jews who are busy preparing to rebuild the Temple. They have ready-made architectural plans which are ready to be submitted to the building commission, they prepare the various vessels and they attempt to recreate the ketores, the special incense which was offered on the altar.

But the problem isn't just a technical one. The reason we don't have a Temple is not because the Waqf controls the Temple Mount. Let's imagine that we would succeed in convincing the Arab world to allow us to build the Temple, and we would actually build it. What would happen then? It doesn't take a prophet to foresee the results. Before long, conflict and infighting would spread once again, and again bring us to the point where we lose the Temple.

Over the past two-thousand-years, Jews have understood that the path to rebuilding the Temple passes through our personal journey of self-improvement.

As the Rebbe said countless times, the way to fix the problem of senseless hatred is through senseless love. Love another Jew, even one who doesn't deserve your love. He might not be nice to you, and he might even fight you. Nonetheless, make it your business to help him. When the Jewish people will be united, we will have the opportunity to build the eternal Temple.

This week, we begin to read the book of Devarim. In a few weeks, the book speaks about bringing sacrifices specifically in the Temple. The verse says, "כי לא באתם, עד עתה אל המנוחה ואל הנחלה," For you have not come until now, to rest and to inheritance..." (12:9).

Rashi cites the words "*el hamenucha v'el hanachalah*, to rest and inheritance," and explains that *menucha* refers to Shiloh and *nachala* refers to Jerusalem.

This explanation doesn't seem to fit the verse from a literal perspective. Both expressions seem to be speaking of the same place—the place which G-d will choose when the Jewish people settle and inherit the land. Indeed, there is an opinion in the Talmud that both expressions are referring to Jerusalem. (zevachim 119:1). Why does Rashi explain it differently?

Perhaps we can suggest the following explanation:

Shilo was a place of "rest." The people of Israel lived peacefully with each other; they didn't fight between themselves—definitely not in or around Shilo itself. The Temple in Jerusalem, on the other hand, was "*nachalah*." It was the final inheritance, the final place where the Temple would reside, but it was not a place of *menucha*. It was not a place of peace, not during the first Temple and not during the second.

(Based on 15 Av 5736, Sichos Kodosh vol. 2 pg. 585)

Last week's haftorah opens with the verse in Isaiah, "So says G-d, the heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footrest. What is the home you can build for me? Where is the place of my rest?"

The Rebbe explained that there could be a house for G-d but it's not a place of rest - there is infighting and the shechina can not find rest. Where can we build the Temple? In a place of rest, of *menucha*, where Jews learn to get along with one another. That is G-d's home.