

Tisha B'Av 5783

Why Did G-d Punish His People?

The ninth day of Av marks the ending of three weeks of atrocities committed against the Jewish people by Nebuchadnezzar and his armies. The Bible is most clear that it was G-d Himself Who used Babylon to punish Judah severely for her sins. What were the sins of Judah that caused G-d to place such a harsh punishment upon His people? When studying the book of Jeremiah, one learns that Judah engaged in idolatry and numerous other sins. Jeremiah prophesied for over forty years and despite his strong words and clear call for the people to repent, the people refused to heed his words. In fact, their idolatrous behavior included burning their children as an offering to Molech, a false god.

There is a good example of why G-d punished His people so harshly in the thirty-fourth chapter of Jeremiah. Jeremiah speaks to Zedekiah, the king of Judah in the midst of the war. This war was indeed avoidable, as Jeremiah had informed the people if they would go out before the Babylonian army and seek mercy from them, that G-d would spare the people and they would live. Such an action required the people to trust in the words of Jeremiah and they did not. Now in the midst of the war, Jeremiah speaks to Zedekiah regarding the armies of the world which had joined with Nebuchadnezzar, and that Judah would fall, including the Holy City of Jerusalem.

It was during this bleak time that Zedekiah led the people to enter into a covenant. This covenant was an attempt to bring G-d's favor back upon the people and cause Him to act in a mighty way to save Judah. It is this covenant, and the people's ultimate response to it, that revealed the true spiritual condition of the people and why G-d placed this harsh punishment upon them. This punishment included the destruction of the Temple and the city of Jerusalem, with all the death and suffering that went along with it and the seventy years of exile in Babylon.

The key passage in Jeremiah's prophecy begins with the words,

"The word which was to Jeremiah from the L-rd after King Zedekiah cuts (makes) a covenant with all the people who are in Jerusalem to proclaim to them liberty."

Jeremiah 34:8

The word "*liberty*" at the end of this verse relates to the liberty that describes the year of Jubilee (See Deuteronomy 25:10), when all Jewish slaves are set free. **Please note:** the commandment to release slaves and maidservants not only relates to the year of Jubilee, but Israel is commanded to do this at the end of the seventh year, **every seven years!** It would seem that the people of Judah had ignored this commandment and according to many of the commentators and the Biblical text itself (See verse 14),

it was Judah's failure to observe both the Shemitah year and the year of Jubilee that contributed to the seventy years that the people would spend in exile. It is clear that this covenant which was proclaimed related to the matter of Shemitah / Jubilee, as the passage continues and states,

"To send a man his slave and a man his maidservant, a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman free, not to enslave them, a Jewish man his (Jewish) brother." Jeremiah 34:9

When King Zedekiah proclaimed to do this, the people responded in obedience and set free their Jewish slaves. The Biblical text (See verse 10) emphasized the people's obedience by stating twice that all the people heard, i.e., obeyed (וַיִּשְׁמָעוּ). However, in the next verse one reads,

"And they returned afterwards and they caused to return the slaves and maidservants which they had sent free and they conquered them for slaves and maidservants." Jeremiah 34:11

Whereas in verse 10 the reader is told twice that all the people obeyed the commandment of King Zedekiah and entered into the covenant and sent free their slaves, in verse 11 it is stated twice (וַיִּשְׁבוּ, אַחֲרֵי-כֵן, וַיִּשְׁבוּ) that the people caused their slaves to return and once more enslaved them. When looking at the Hebrew vocabulary for the returning of the slaves again into slavery, it is the same word for repentance which is used. This means that instead of truly repenting and obeying the covenant in which they had entered, they "repented" from the right thing to do and turned once again to act in disobedience to the Law of Moses and did not practice the Shemitah or the Jubilee.

The message of the passage is clear. The people, even when doing the proper thing, will not continue in it consistently, but immediately אַחֲרֵי-כֵן (afterwards) return to their evil ways, defying the instructions of G-d. It was this failure to be committed to the covenant in which they had entered that manifested their true spiritual condition and revealed G-d's justification for punishing the people as He did. The reader learns that G-d was initially pleased with what the people did in sending their slaves free, but when they "repented" from this good deed in order to "return" to their sinful ways, G-d stated that this act profaned His Name.

G-d then reveals that such behavior will indeed have a severe punishment.

"Therefore, thus said the L-rd, you have not heard (obeyed) Me to proclaim liberty a man to his neighbor; behold I am proclaiming to you freedom declared the L-rd to the sword, to pestilence, and to famine, and I will place upon you terror of all the kingdoms of the world." Jeremiah 34:17

It is clear that it was G-d's intent to bring upon the people the **terror** (לְזַעֲנָה) **of all the kingdoms of the world**, in order to cause the people to truly repent. When studying the prophecy of Jeremiah, there are frequent Scriptural indicators which demonstrate a similarity between the spiritual condition of the people during the time of Jeremiah and what will be the spiritual condition of the people in the end times. Whereas, only a remnant actually were changed due to the **Babylonian Exile** and returned to Judah in faith, so too will there only be a remnant in the end times that will be truly changed by the time of Jacob's Trouble (See Jeremiah 30:7) and be saved. The emphasis of this passage is on the the fact that Jeremiah says,

וְנִתַּתִּי אֶתְכֶם לְזַעֲנָה (לְכָל מַמְלָכוֹת הָאָרֶץ).

"...I will place upon you the terror of all the kingdoms of the world." Jeremiah 34:17b

In actuality, although Nebuchadnezar had a large coalition of nations, he did not have all the kingdoms of the earth fighting with him against Judah. However, in the end times, this will indeed be the situation, as all the nations in the world will join with the antichrist to bring terror upon the Jewish people in an attempt to destroy both the nation of Israel and the Jewish people. In a similar manner, as after the Babylonian Exile, G-d forgave His people and brought them back to the Land of Judah (See Jeremiah 33:7-11), so too will He do so in the end times. In fact, the clear emphasis in Jeremiah's prophecy is that G-d will bring this about through Israel's Messiah! This is also what is taught in Jeremiah 33:12-26.

Therefore, as we mourn the events of the destruction of the **First** and **Second Temples** during Tisha B'Av and the **Babylonian** and **Roman Exiles**, let us also remember the promises of our Great G-d, Who through Messiah Yeshua will establish all His Kingdom promises. Amen