



אליך נשובה To You We Will Return

הַשִּׁיבֵנוּ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְנִשְׁוֹבָה, חֲדָשׁ יָמֵינוּ כְּקֶדֶם.
*Return us to You, G-d, and we will return;
renew our days as of old.* (Eichah 5,21)

■ Identity and Connection

Tisha B'Av returns us to the weeping of the Israelites on that ill-fated day in the desert, after the Twelve Scouts' negative report convinced them that inheriting the Promised Land was a dubious proposition. This paved the way for a chain of tragic events that fell upon the Nation of Israel throughout the generations on that very date.

The ninth day of Av became, in the national Jewish consciousness, a symbol of utter pain and sadness at our sins and G-d's seeming abandonment of His people.

In fact, however, Hashem the G-d of Israel never abandoned them, neither did He forsake His inheritance. He was perpetually with us, and sharply felt our pain wherever we wandered in the Diaspora and Exile.

The utter depth of the bonds between the Creator of the World and His people Israel was expressed in the vision of the Burning Bush to Moshe Rabbeinu:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' רָאָה רָאִיתִי אֶת עֲנִי עַמִּי אֲשֶׁר בְּמִצְרַיִם
וְאֶת צַעֲקָתָם שָׁמַעְתִּי מִפְּנֵי נִגְשָׁיו כִּי יִדְעֵתִי אֶת מַכָּאֲבָיו.
*G-d said, "I have assuredly seen the affliction
of My people in Egypt,
and their cry from their oppressors I have heard,
for I know their pains."* (Sh'mot 3,7)

To “know” someone’s pain means to feel it deeply. Israel’s tribulations are G-d’s tribulations; He weeps secretly for His children’s suffering. In the intense words of the Prophet Yeshayahu:

בְּכָל צָרָתָם לוֹ צָרָה...

All their troubles are His troubles... (Isaiah 63,9)

The great Tanna R. Shimon bar Yochai summed it up most concisely:

Come and see how beloved is Israel to the Holy One, Blessed be He:
Wherever they were exiled, the Divine Presence was with them... and
even when they will be redeemed in the future, the Divine Presence
will be with them. (Megillah 29a)

It was the Prophet Shmuel who explained why:

כִּי לֹא יִטַּשׁ ה' אֶת עַמּוֹ בְּעִבּוּר שְׁמוֹ הַגָּדוֹל
כִּי הוֹאִיל ה' לַעֲשׂוֹת אֲתָכֶם לֹא לָעַם.

*G-d will not forsake His people for His great name's sake;
for G-d has sworn to make you a people for Him.* (Shmuel 1 12,22)

■ Do Not Fear, My Servant Yaakov

אִם יִהְיֶה נִדְחָךְ בְּקֵצָה הַשָּׁמַיִם מִשָּׁם יִקְבְּצֶךָ ה' אֱ-לֹהֶיךָ וּמִשָּׁם יִקְחֶךָ.

*Even if your exiles are at the end of the heavens,
from there Hashem your G-d will gather you,
and from there He will take you.* (D'varim 30,4)

This verse teaches us that as long as Jew is suffering anywhere on the globe, Hashem will not rest until He redeems him. This profound insight will help us interpret the following Talmudic passage - so incomprehensible on the straightforward level, but utterly profound when viewed more carefully:

R. Nachman asked R. Yitzchak, when they were sitting at a meal, to
share a Torah thought with him. R. Yitzchak said: “R. Yochanan said:
One must not talk during the meal, lest he choke and be endangered.”
(Taanit 5b)

R. Yitzchak knew that he was about to say a very novel thought that would surprise R. Nachman, and he feared to endanger him while they were eating. The Gemara then picks up the story after they finished their meal:

R. Yitzchak said to him: “R. Yochanan said: Yaakov Avinu did not die.”

R. Nachman responded: “Was it for naught that they eulogized him and embalmed him and buried him?!”

R. Yitzchak answered: “I derive this from a verse, which states: ‘*Do not fear, My servant Yaakov, says G-d, and do not fear, Israel - for I will save you from far, and your seed from the land of their captivity*’ (Yirmiyahu 30,10). The verse equates Yaakov and his descendants: Just as they are alive, so too, Yaakov is alive.”

R. Nachman’s question is certainly a strong one. Entire verses in Parashat Vay’chi describe in detail the elaborate funeral procession of Yaakov Avinu, as well as the physical process of embalming. How, after all this, can R. Yitzchak declare that Yaakov did not die?!

And what does R. Yitzchak answer to this – that he derived it from a verse! Can such exegesis change the reality?

Rashi’s commentary – “They thought he died, but he was really alive” – is not very understandable. We are led, therefore, to the following insight:

R. Yochanan did not intend to contradict reality, but rather to expound on the verse. He is quite aware that Yaakov most certainly died a physical death, but at the same time, there is also a verse that must be explained.

When Yaakov Avinu heard that his long-lost son Yosef was alive and ruling in Egypt, he decided to visit him there. He feared, however, that this would be the beginning of the fulfillment of the decree of the *Brit Bein HaBetarim*, in which Hashem told Avraham:

יָדַע תִּדַּע כִּי גֵר יִהְיֶה זֶרַעְךָ בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא לָהֶם וַעֲבָדוּם
וְעָנּוּ אֹתָם אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת שָׁנָה.

*You shall surely know that your seed will be strangers
in a land not theirs, and they will enslave them and oppress them
for four hundred years.* (B’reshit 15,13)

Yaakov also knew that the exile of Egypt would be the basis and core of all future Exiles and their accompanying terrible suffering and hardships. But Hashem now reassures him:

אַל תִּירָא מִרָדָה מִצְרַיִם כִּי לְגוֹי גָדוֹל אֲשִׁימָךְ שָׁם.
אֲנֹכִי אֵרֵד עִמָּךְ מִצְרַיִם וְאֲנֹכִי אֵעֲלֶךְ גַּם עֲלֶה ...

*Do not fear going down to Egypt,
for I will make you into a great nation there.
I will go down with you to Egypt,
and I will also bring you up...* (46,3-4)

Hashem will be with Yaakov forever, and will not abandon him. This brings us to the prophecy of Jeremiah that R. Yochanan felt the need to explain: *“I will save you [Yaakov] from far, and your seed from the land of their captivity.”* Peering deep into this verse, R. Yochanan sees Hashem’s continued commitment to Yaakov, from then and until the end of all the Exiles. Hashem is promising Yaakov once again: “As long as even one of your descendants finds himself in the captivity of the Exile, I will stand by My promise to extricate him, even thousands of years from now [*from far*].”

Thus, “Yaakov Avinu did not die” means that the Divine promise to him - *“Do not fear”* - never expires nor weakens, but rather survives forever, with Yaakov standing even now and insisting on its fulfillment.

This explanation also helps us understand the very perplexing continuation of this Gemara:

R. Yitzchak said, “Whoever merely says ‘Rachav, Rachav’ [referring to the woman who saved the two spies sent out by Yehoshua bin Nun], becomes immediately subject to an onset of issue [because she was so beautiful].”

R. Nahman said: “I said it, and it meant nothing to me.”

R. Yitzchak replied: “I was referring only to one who knows her and can recall her likeness.”

This strange exchange can be understood in terms of “Yaakov Avinu did not die.” R. Yitzchak was saying: “Look how different is the profound spiritual world of Yaakov Avinu, eternal and forever, from the crass physical world of Rachav, which leaves absolutely no impression past the immediate period in which she lived.”

■ The Sanctuary of G-d

All of the above gives rise to the following difficult question: If the bonds between G-d and Israel are so deep, how can the Beit Hamikdash, the site of the Divine Presence, have been destroyed? To where have disappeared the prophets, the very conduit of communication between Hashem and His nation?

The answer is found in a very strong prophetic rebuke by the Prophet Jeremiah:

אל תבטחו לכם אל דברי השקר לאמר היכל ה' היכל ה' המה.

*Do not place your trust in the words of deceit, saying:
The Temple of G-d, the Temple of G-d,
the Temple of G-d are they. (Yirmiyahu 7,4)*

הגנב רצח ונאף והשבע לשקר...
ובאתם ועמדתם לפני בבית הזה אשר נקרא שמי עליו
ואמרתם נצלנו, למען עשות את כל התועבת האלה?

*Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely...
and then come and stand before Me in this house,
upon which My name is called, and say, "We are saved,"
in order to commit all these abominations? (verses 9-10)*

The Beit HaMikdash had become an insurance policy allowing the people to feel they could freely commit all sorts of abominations, with no fear of retribution. They somehow thought that Hashem would never destroy His sanctuary, the site of His presence in the world.

The prophet continues:

המערות פרצים היה הבית הזה אשר נקרא שמי עליו בעיניכם...
*Has this house upon which My name is called,
become a cave of decadent men in your eyes? (verse 11)*

Israel's corrupt behavior turned the Holy Temple into one of the facilitators of the spiritual collapse. And what was to be the result?

ועשיתי לבית אשר נקרא שמי עליו אשר אתם בטחים בו...
כאשר עשיתי לשלום.

*I will do to the house upon which My name is called,
upon which you rely... as I did to Shilo. (verse 14)*

The Beit HaMikdash was designed to be a ladder for spiritual ascent – and certainly not, Heaven forbid, a means for sin. The people eschewed taking personal responsibility; they instead relied on the Holy Temple to live lives of wantonness and to further distance themselves from G-d and His ways of justness and holiness.

The destruction of the Holy Temple – both the First and the Second – will symbolize for all future generations that, in fact, their destiny is in their hands. The destruction will ultimately benefit the nation, helping them to understand that they must take responsibility for their own actions and improve their ways – and when this happens, G-d will rebuild His Temple.

The Sages of the Jerusalem Talmud stated:

If the Beit HaMikdash was not rebuilt during a given generation, it is as if it was destroyed in that generation. (Jerusalem Talmud, Yoma 1,1)

That is, if the Temple has not yet been rebuilt, it means that most of the nation has not yet taken responsibility for itself and its actions. In such a situation, a genuine fear exists that if the Temple is rebuilt, they will again rely on it and not improve their behavior.

■ The Prophet's Prayer

The passage in Jeremiah continues:

וְאַתָּה אֵל תִּתְפַּלֵּל בְּעַד הָעָם הַזֶּה וְאַל תִּשָּׂא בַעֲדָם רִנָּה וּתְפִלָּה
וְאַל תִּפְגַּע בִּי כִי אֵינֶנִּי שֹׁמֵעַ אֹתָךְ.

*And you - do not pray for this people,
and do not raise a cry or prayer,
and do not entreat Me, for I will not hear you.* (verse 16)

Is it not the prophet's job to pray? Why is Hashem prohibiting him from doing so?

The answer parallels our explanation regarding the Beit HaMikdash. It is not the prophet's prayer that is being rejected, but rather the result that it creates: the nation's reliance on the prophet's prayer, in place of personal responsibility and *teshuvah*.

The prophet fulfills a role for the nation that is similar to the Holy Temple. If the prophet is not permitted to pray, there is a chance that the nation will wake up and begin making the tough decisions.

Hashem continues to clarify His message to Yirmiyahu:

הֲאֵינֶנְךָ רֹאֶה מָה הֵמָּה עֹשִׂים בְּעָרֵי יְהוּדָה וּבְחוּצוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם?
*Do you not see what they are doing in the cities of Judah
and in the streets of Jerusalem?*

הַבָּנִים מְלַקְטִים עֵצִים וְהָאֲבוֹת מְבַעְרִים אֶת הָאֵשׁ ...
לַעֲשׂוֹת כֹּוָנִים לְמַלְכֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם ... לְמַעַן הַכְעִסְנִי.
*The sons are gathering wood, the fathers are kindling fire...
to make starshaped cakes for the queen of the heaven ...
in order to provoke Me.* (verses 17-18)

Hashem is telling him that while the prophet stands and prays, the nation is continuing to sin – because they are counting on his prayers!

The Mishna phrases this insight as follows:

One who says, “I will sin, and Yom Kippur will atone for me” – Yom Kippur will not atone for him. (Yoma 85b)

Here, too, when Yom Kippur serves to actually facilitate sin, it ceases to perform its normal function; it cannot atone for sin while at the same time enabling it. This is so that the sinner will decide to stop relying on Yom Kippur and choose to improve his ways.

This approach is well expressed in the following incident recounted in the Gemara:

In the neighborhood of R. Zera lived *biryonim*, lawless men. R. Zera showed them friendship, so that they would repent; the Rabbis were not pleased with his approach. When R. Zera passed away, the *biryonim* said, “Until now we had [R. Zera] to pray and implore Divine mercy for us; who will do so now?” They thereupon thought carefully in their hearts and repented. (Sanhedrin 37a)

This incident precisely manifests the process that we have been discussing. Only after their “crutch” – in this case, R. Zera – was no longer available, did the recognition penetrate to these sinners that they could count on no one other than themselves.

Some might understand from this story that the Rabbis were correct, in that all the while R. Zera was seeking to bring them close, the sinners did not repent. However, it would seem that his very befriending of them is exactly what formed a connection and relationship between them – leaving behind a vacuum after his passing. Had they not sensed his caring presence during his lifetime, they would not have sensed his absence when he died.

Let us conclude with one more Talmudic incident, involving a man named Elazar ben Dordeya who was known for his sinful and licentious behavior. One day he made the decision to repent and change his ways:

He thereupon went, sat between two hills and mountains, and exclaimed: O hills and mountains, plead for mercy for me!
They replied: How shall we pray for you? We are in need of mercy ourselves...

So he exclaimed: Heaven and earth, plead for mercy for me! They, too, replied: How shall we pray for you? We are in need of it ourselves...

He then exclaimed: Sun and moon, plead for mercy for me! But they also replied: How shall we pray for you? We need mercy ourselves...

Said he: The matter then depends upon me alone! He placed his head between his knees, and broke down in sobbing until his soul departed.

A *bat-kol* (Heavenly voice) was then heard proclaiming: 'Rabbi Elazar ben Dordeya is invited for the life of the World to Come!'

How true was Elazar ben Dordeya's conclusion: His fate was dependent only on him – and the same for us!

Hashem's door is always open to us, and His hand is extended to receive those who truly return to him. We must repent with total sincerity and take upon ourselves to improve our ways; this is the only path to a true rectification. We will then no longer require destructions and persecutions; Hashem will renew our days as of old, with the Beit HaMikdash standing strong and true in Yerushalayim.

As the Scroll of Destruction – Megillat Eichah, read on Tisha B'av – concludes:

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*Return us to You, G-d, and we will return;
renew our days as of old.* (Eichah 5,21)

