



New Beginnings, Ancient Problems – Reflections on Rosh Chodesh Av

Parshios Matos-Masei

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

Rosh Chodesh, the beginning of a new Hebrew month brings with it promise, potential and joy. There is nothing more beautiful than a new beginning, an opportunity to start again, to rejuvenate and regenerate. But today, the beginning of this new month, the month of Av is different. As the Talmud states:

“Mi’shenichnas Av, Mi’maatin B’Simcha, (When the month of Av enters we diminish our joy).” (Mishna, Tractate Taanis 26a)

This *Rosh Chodesh* ushers in 9 days of mourning and sadness. We refrain from various activities including the consumption of meat and wine (except on Shabbos). Our hearts are filled with the pain of thousands of years of collective sorrow. The Mishna recounts the various events that make this month one of sadness and pain. The *mergalim* (spies) returned from the Land of Israel on the 9th of Av and delivered their disastrous report; the city of *Beitar*, the seat of the Bar Kochba rebellion was crushed by the Romans and its inhabitants slaughtered; and many other unfortunate and tragic events unfolded during this auspicious month. However, the central event on which we focus is the destruction of the Temple (*Bais HaMikdash*). Each and every year we face the same challenge. How do we mourn for something we have never known? We have existed without a *Bais HaMikdash* for over 2,000 years and although deep in our soul we know that something is missing, it is difficult for us to feel a true and real void. It is difficult to shed a tear for something for which we have no frame of reference. It is challenging for us to relate to that which we do not know. So how can we connect? How do we appreciate the loss of the Temple and make it relevant?

I want to share with you an idea which I have discussed many times in the past but has timely relevance during these important days. In *Pirkei Avos* (Ethics of our Fathers, Chapter 5 Mishnah 5), we are told about ten miracles that occurred in the Temple. The 8th miracle listed is, *“Omdim tzefufim, u’mishtachavim revachim, (the people stood crowded together, yet prostrated themselves in ample space).”* When our ancestors came to the Temple on the *Regalim* (*Pesach, Shavuos, and Succos*) and *Yom Kippur*, the *Bais HaMikdash* was packed from corner to corner. In fact, Jerusalem was teeming with people from the cities of Israel and beyond. The courtyard of the Temple was so crowded that people literally stood shoulder to shoulder. However, when they bowed in prayer there was room for everyone to have personal space. An amazing miracle, clearly in defiance of natural law. But why the need for such a miracle? What was the message?

Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak, 1040-1105) explains that when the people would bow in prayer each person would ask for his/her personal needs. If individuals were in earshot of one another, the supplicant would feel self-conscious about articulating his needs. Furthermore, on *Yom Kippur* when people would bow in order to confess their sins, if the penitent felt he could be overheard by his neighbor, he may be hesitant to confess. Therefore, to allow each person to have a personal dialogue with the Divine, God performed this miracle.

Rav Menachem Mendel of Kotzk (1787-1859) offers an additional insight. The Rebbe explains that this Mishna is not simply relaying a miraculous event, but is also conveying an important life lesson. **Omdim** (standing) – if a person always stands his ground and is never willing to yield to another, the result is, **Tzefufim** (crowded) – the world is very crowded and constricted, there is no room for the other. However, if a person is **Mishtachavim** (prostrating) and willing to yield to another, then **Revachim** (ample space), there is room for everyone. The secret to successful life relationships is knowing when to stand your ground and when to yield. There are things in life that we must fight for and there are many more things for which conflict is not the answer. There are times when we must be an **Omed** on certain issues and accept the negative repercussions, and there are times when we must be a **Mishtachaveh** and learn the art of yielding to the other for the sake of peace and harmony. We must learn the delicate balance of knowing when to use each of these powerful traits.

The *Bais HaMikdash* was the address for the entire Jewish community. There were not different temples for different *hashkafos* (religious philosophies), there were not different temples for different levels of observance. There was one *Bais HaMikdash* for the Jewish nation. There was one address where we had to learn how to come together in brotherly



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harmony and serve our God with one heart and one soul. There was one place where we were required to come and learn the art of bowing to one another, yielding to one another, respecting one another.

In *the Bais HaMikdash*, Jews of all stripes and colors would gather to worship together. We mourn the absence of this unifying place. ***We don't mourn the loss of a building, as buildings can always be rebuilt. We mourn the loss of an ideal.*** When the *Bais HaMikdash* stood, it was clear that the will of God was for us to unite. The *Bais HaMikdash*, through its mere existence reminded us that to remain a nation we can't argue over every single issue. There are issues that are so delicate and important that we must vociferously disagree and yes, draw our line in the sand. But I would venture to say that for many other issues, we must find the strength to yield. We mourn the unifying absence of our beloved *Bais HaMikdash*.

It is difficult to cry and mourn for that which we do not know. But if we can't cry – we must at least yearn. We must yearn for a time in which we can embrace our differences and coexist as a cohesive nation.

Truth be told, we must do more than yearn – we must do. We must learn to bow, learn to yield, learn to make the hard sacrifices in order to achieve true *shalom* with one another. Before getting into an argument with another, before saying something that may be hurtful, before doing something that may be “correct” but may not be “right” we should ask ourselves: is it really worth it? There are times in life when we may be truly in the right, but this doesn't mean a battle should be waged. It is difficult to strike the balance between being a principled and peaceful person. The *Bais HaMikdash* helped us to achieve this equilibrium, now we must do it on our own.

Today is Rosh Chodesh, but it is unlike all other monthly new beginnings. We feel a sadness, we feel a heaviness as we continue to mourn over what has been lost. But as we observe our mourning practices and reflect on our national and personal tragedies and set-backs, let us resolve to do our part in bringing *shalom* into our personal, communal and national lives. There are times to be rigid, but there are many more opportunities for understanding, compassion and flexibility. In the merit of bowing before one another, may we be privileged to bow together before God in a rebuilt Jerusalem – *bimheyra b'yameynu, amen*.