

Asarah b'teves: So what?

Today, on *Tishah b'av*, the Holy Temple, in Jerusalem, was destroyed.

Sounds impressive, right? But when I tell you that today, on *Asarah b'teves* Nevuchadnetzar laid siege to Jerusalem, it doesn't really grab you. While that was unquestionably a critical moment in Jewish history, being in a certain sense, the beginning of the end; why do we need a specific fast day to commemorate it?

The other fast days we understand:

Tishah b'av was the day the Temple was destroyed.

Tzom Gedalya was the end of our political control in Land of Israel.

Shivah-assar b'tamuz was the day that the walls of Jerusalem fell. The walls delineate where Jerusalem begins and ends. Without walls, there is no Jerusalem. For example, there is a *mitzvah* called *maaser sheini*, for a farmer to bring one tenth of his crops to Jerusalem to be eaten. Without walls, there is no Jerusalem in terms of *maaser sheini*.

Each fast day seems to correspond to an aspect of destruction, be it the Temple, Jerusalem, or our political control. *Asarah b'teves* doesn't seem to fit in.

What makes today even more remarkable is that according to the *Avudraham* (Laws of Fasts, p.254), *Asarah b'teves* even overrides *Shabbos*. According to our set calendar none of the four fast days can occur on *Shabbos*. However, the *Avudraham* maintains that if we had no set calendar, and these fast days were to occur on a *Shabbos*, they would all be pushed off to Sunday, except for *Asarah b'teves*. According to the *Avudraham*, even if today were *Shabbos*, we would still be fasting! It is an astonishing thing. Why should the nature of *Asarah b'teves* be such that it overrides *Shabbos*? It would seem to be the least important of all the fasts, it does not correspond to any form of destruction, and yet it is the most strict, in the sense that, according to one opinion, it even overrides *Shabbos*?!

What is *Asarah b'teves* all about?

¹The Talmud (Rosh HaShanah 31a) says that the Divine presence, the *Shechinah*, made ten travels before returning to her place, so to speak. We know that the *Shechinah* hovered above the lid of the ark, in the Holy of Holies. When the Jewish people sinned, the *Shechinah* began to depart, little by little.

First, she went from above the ark, from where she used to speak to Moshe Rabbeinu, and from where all the prophets focused to receive prophecy, to one of the cherubs that King Shlomo had made. From there, she went to the other cherub, making her way slowly, step by step, out of the Temple to the city; to Jerusalem. From Jerusalem, she went to the mountains, and to the desert. From the desert, she

1. I read this explanation in *Kedushas Shmuel*, by Rav Shmuel Yissachar Dov Toibinfeld.

returned to her place, leaving us with death, destruction and exile.

Rabbi Yochanan said, "The *Shechinah* waited for six months in the desert; maybe, just maybe, the Jewish people would do *teshuvah*."

The *Maharsha* comments that these six months correspond to the six month siege of Nevuchadnetzar on Jerusalem². The siege ended on the ninth of *Tamuz*, when the walls of the first Temple were breached. A violent battle ensued, culminating in the destruction of the Temple one month later.

According to the *Maharsha*, the day that the *Shechinah* left Jerusalem, was today, *Asarah b'teves*, when the siege began. As long as the *Shechinah* was present, a siege was impossible. Once the *Shechinah* departed, what remained was a weak, physical city lacking the Divine protection it once enjoyed. That is when the siege began.

In other words, while the physical destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple occurred later, the destruction, so to speak, of the sanctity of Jerusalem, was on *Asarah b'teves*. The essential destruction, the sanctity of Jerusalem and the Temple, was on *Asarah b'teves*.

This is how *Asarah b'teves* fits in with the other fast days. It also corresponds to an aspect of destruction, the essential aspect, *Kedushah*, sanctity. *Asarah b'teves* is the day that the *Shechinah* left Jerusalem and waited in the desert, hoping desperately that the Jews would repent, and bring her back.

2. This explanation of the *Maharsha* requires thought, because the verse explicitly states in Kings II (chap. 25) that the siege began on the tenth of *Teves* in the ninth year of Tzidkiyahu's reign and lasted until the eleventh year of his reign. The siege therefore lasted for one year and six months. Does the *Maharsha* mean that the six months mentioned in this passage of the Talmud correspond to these six months, but NOT that the siege lasted six months? It would come out then, that the *Shechinah* departed Jerusalem one year after the siege began. If so, the beginning of the siege would NOT correspond to the departing of the *Shechinah* as Rav Toibinfeld suggested based on this *Maharsha*. A great thank you to my friend Reb Yosef Mordechai for pointing this out. Your thoughts would be greatly appreciated: etanmoshe@yahoo.com.