In Tanach, we do not find fasting as an expression of sorrow, but rather as preparation and sanctification to receive G-d’s revelation. We see examples of this when Moshe received the Torah, Eliyahu stood at Mount Chorev, the purification process on Yom Kippur. Fasting is also an integral part of praying and beseeching G-d – as seen with Shaul in his war against the Philistines and David who fasted and prayed before his infant son passed away.

In light of this understanding of fasting, how are we to interpret the meaning of the fast days commemorating the destruction of the Temple?

The Four Fasts in Tanach

Firstly, it does not mention anywhere in Tanach that the four fasts were instituted because of the destruction. Rather, only Zechariah mentions them, and only in terms of fasts that will become festivals:

“So said the L-rd of Hosts: The fast of the fourth (month – Tammuz), the fast of the fifth (month – Av), the fast of the seventh (month – Tishrei), and the fast of the tenth (month – Tevet), shall be for the house of Judah for joy and happiness, and for happy festivals – you shall love truth and peace.” (Zechariah 8:19)

Simply put, it would seem that the fast days over the destruction of the Temple express mourning, both in that we follow all the customs of mourning on those days (at least on Tisha B’Av); and because Zechariah prophesied that in the future final redemption, these fast days will become days of rejoicing. We understand this to mean that when the sorrow and pain end, there will be no more need for fasts.

Surprisingly though, we find that even when the Second Temple stood, the people continued to fast on Tisha B’Av for the destruction of the First Temple. Indeed, they even turned to the prophets and Kohanim questioning this (while they were building the Temple):

“And it came to pass in the fourth year of King Darius, the word of G-d came to Zechariah on the fourth day of the ninth month, in Kislev. And Saretzer and Regem Melech and his men sent a message to Beit El to pray before G-d; and to ask the Kohanim of the Temple of G-d, the L-rd of Hosts, and the prophets, saying, ‘Shall I weep in the fifth month, abstaining from all pleasure, as I have done these many years?’” (Zechariah 7:1-3)

The prophet’s response was that the fast and its laws are not the main point, but rather a reminder to the people to fix their ways. The prophet made it clear that we are not fasting over the pain of the destruction itself, but for the reasons that caused the destruction.

Therefore, the Rambam writes (Ta’aniot 5:1):

“There are days when the entire Jewish people fast because of the calamities that occurred to them then, to arouse their hearts and awaken within them the paths of repentance. This will serve as a reminder of our wicked conduct and that of our ancestors – which resembles our present conduct – which brought upon them and upon us all of these calamities. By reminding ourselves of these matters, we will repent and improve, as it states in Vayikra 26:40: And they will confess their sins and the sins of their ancestors.”

The essence is the crying and repentance, which will cause us to be better people.

Fasting for the Present

If so, we learn that the fasts are not because of pain over the past, but for what is happening right now, and as a reminder for the future.

Firstly, when there are difficulties in our present circumstances, such as war, pandemic, drought or other harsh decrees, these all join together as a continuation of the destruction of the Temple. This is why we also say many things in the Kinot for Tisha B’Av that have no connection to the destruction of the Temple, but are calamities that befell Am Yisrael throughout the exile, such as the Crusades of 1096,
the burning of the Talmud, the Holocaust, etc.

Secondly, the fast reminds us that even when things are going well, even when the Temple stands, we still need to behave properly, so that things will not take a turn for the worse – G-d forbid.

Presently, to our great sorrow, our Temple lies in ruins. And yet there are many things we have merited to see: we have returned to our Land after 2,000 years of exile, we have a State, and we have seen how the prestige of the Torah has been uplifted. Nevertheless, there are still many things lacking – in terms of our sovereign rule over all of our Land and most importantly, in terms of G-d’s presence and feeling His rule in our midst.

We are in a time of rebuilding, but now more than ever it is crucial for us to fast over the destruction of the Temple! We continue to fast on Tisha B’Av and to cry over all the things we lack – we cry that our Temple lies in ruins; we cry that G-d’s Shechina remains in exile. Through the tears, we also remember all the things we have merited, Baruch Hashem, and this gives our tears additional significance. Are we really behaving in the appropriate way to be worthy of everything we have been given? Additionally, we remind ourselves that if we have merited so much, if we have merited to see the beginning of the Redemption, we have the power to reach even greater heights. We must demand more of ourselves and strive for improvement, so we may merit to see the full Redemption, with G-d’s help.

The Four Fasts Shall Be for Joy And Happiness

As we have seen, the prophet Zechariah tells us that in the future, the fast days will become days of rejoicing. Wouldn’t it have been enough for them to have been nullified? Why do they have to be turned into holidays?

In Megillat Eicha (1:15) it states: “The L-rd has trampled all my mighty men in my midst. He summoned a set time (ишע עפאל) against me to crush my young men...” From here the Shulchan Aruch (559:4) learns that Tisha B’Av is called a מצויה (holiday), and thus we do not recite Tachanun.

The Maharal explains that the word מהותה מצויה comes from the word מהותה – to come together. That is to say, Am Yisrael joins with G-d:

“The festivals teach us about the connection and bond that Am Yisrael has with G-d, and therefore they are called וְהִתְוַעֲדוּת, as it is written: ‘I will arrange My meetings [ס慣] with you there, and I will speak with you from atop the ark cover from between the two cherubim that are upon the Ark of the Testimony.’ This is the language of coming together and connection.” (Ohr Chadash, introduction beginning with “Rav Ashi”)

Thus, while Tisha B’Av may be a day of sorrow and pain, it also has the element of connecting to G-d. We cry and we are sad, but at the same time we feel a closeness to G-d – who loves us and is with us throughout history, even in our darkest hours. This comforts us, and so we do not say Tachanun.

A day of crying and fasting is not simply about mourning. It is a special communication with G-d through tears. One does not nullify such communication. One enhances it. When the pain will one day be nullified, we will be able to connect with Him through joy. Until then, we must connect to Him through weeping.

This may be why these fast days were not mentioned directly in Tanach as days of mourning, but rather its opposite – as days that will become joyous holidays. The essence of these fast days is not the past but the future. The destruction clarifies the reasons that brought it about and what we need to change and fix. This correction then leads us toward the future Temple, with G-d’s help. The main point of the fast is to turn these days into happiness and rejoicing.

We Believe!

Am Yisrael and the entire world is going through a very rough time. Hundreds of thousands of people have died from Corona, millions are still sick with it, many people have been hurt financially, and the future is uncertain. This reality brings us to prayer, introspection, and longing for better times, when all of these difficulties will turn the world into a better place: more ethical, spiritual, trustworthy, friendly and pure.

Through all the hardships, we remember we are living in the midst of the process of Redemption. We have had the merit to see the rebirth of the State of Israel, and to witness G-d’s abundant kindnesses every day. May we merit, with His help, to continue to fix and improve, to uplift and be uplifted, to pray from our hearts, and to see the final Redemption, speedily in our days!

Rabbi Yosef Zvi Rimon is Head of Mizrachi’s Shalhevet Educational Advisory Board and Chairman of Sulamot
Rabbanit Rabbanit Sharon Rimon teaches Tanach and is Content Editor for the HaTanakh website