Why does the Churban HaBayit play such a central role in Judaism? If one examines the words of the Rambam when he explains the underlying reason for engaging in fasts, one is immediately struck by how critical the loss of the Beit HaMikdash is to all our ta’aniot. While Yom Kippur and Ta’anit Esther are obviously in their own categories, all the other fasts are linked to this event. Clearly the destruction of G-d’s home is calamitous, but considering our history is replete with many other tragedies, why does it play such an outsized role?

Before answering this question, let us raise a few interesting queries and see if indeed one principle can address all our concerns. The Gemara in Bava Batra (60b) describes the Jewish people’s response after the churban and it is powerfully evocative of the sentiments expressed by some survivors after the Holocaust. They did not wish to eat or drink, and there was an incredible sense of despondency at what had been lost. Once again, a deeper explanation is required; why did the loss of the Mikdash elicit such a poignant reaction?

When the Talmud Bavli examines the sins that led to the destruction of the Bayit Rishon, two very different rationales are offered. In Yoma (9b), the Gemara describes how Am Yisrael engaged in the most heinous of sins (such as murder) while in Nedarim (81a) we are told the churban was brought about by the nation’s failure to say Birkat HaTorah before engaging in Torah study. Which one is correct and how can the latter offense be the cause of the Mikdash being destroyed?

The Rambam, in his commentary on the Mishna (on Masechet Rosh Hashanah), makes a bold statement regarding the observance of Tisha B’Av during the time of the second Beit HaMikdash. He asserts that even though they were performing the avodah in the Mikdash, the people still fasted on the ninth of Av. This is puzzling. If the fast is due to the Churban HaBayit, how can it be observed while the second Beit HaMikdash is functioning?

Finally, we may pose one last fundamental question and ask – why is there a need for a Mikdash at all? Does G-d really need a home, does not the Mishna in Pirkei Avot (3:2) state that the Shechina is present when two people study Torah together?

Perhaps the solution to all our problems is as follows: there is a vast difference in letting G-d into our lives and our entering into His Home. It is true we have the capacity to bring the Divine presence into our midst even by learning Torah with a chavruta, but the fullness of that relationship can only be expressed when G-d is totally revealed, and that occurred when we had the privilege of the Mikdash.

During the period of the first Beit HaMikdash, one could offer a korban and receive a direct response. Miracles could be witnessed daily. This enabled an incredibly unique relationship with our Creator and as such, its loss was devastating. That is why the people reacted with a profound sense of despondency; they accurately recognized that this bond was not easily duplicated and that their connection to G-d had been severed.

When the second Beit HaMikdash was built, there was some consolation but the gaps in the relationship remained. There was no Aron or Urim VeTumim (to name just two discrepancies) and so the people still observed Tisha B’Av for that which had been lost and not been restored. They still had ample reason to mourn.

Finally, we may now explain the enigmatic passage in Nedarim that attributes the churban to the failure to say Birka HaTorah. They had become complacent. They took the relationship they had with HaKadosh Baruch Hu for granted and therefore did not heed the admonitions of the great prophets. Eventually, they behaved badly, but their initial downfall was a lack of appreciation for the direct connection they enjoyed.

We live in an era in which we are privileged to reside in our homeland once again – in Medinat Yisrael. We are fortunate that Yerushalayim is ours and that the Kotel is in our hands. However, it is only when the Third Beit HaMikdash is built that our relationship with G-d will truly be complete.