Two Temples, Two Goals

The Gemara (Yoma 9b) says the First Temple was destroyed because of idol worship, illicit relations, and bloodshed. The Second Temple – when the people did study Torah, keep the commandments and do good deeds – was destroyed because of baseless hatred.

The Maharal of Prague is puzzled by the lack of proportion between the transgressions in both cases. One must not transgress a Torah prohibition unless one’s life is in danger. Nevertheless, there are three exceptions (in certain cases), in which even if one’s life is in danger, he is obliged to die rather than transgress these prohibitions – idol worship, illicit relations and murder. Despite the great importance of all the commandments between man and his fellow man, baseless hatred is not even strictly defined as a Torah prohibition.

The Maharal explains the disparity by saying there is a difference between the two Batei Mikdash. The first Beit HaMikdash was built as a direct continuation of the Mishkan, the Tabernacle. The purpose of this structure was to make us feel close to G-d. The Almighty does not need a home. He commanded us to build a Mishkan and a Mikdash for our benefit.

After the people came out of Egypt, they asked, “Is the L-rd present among us or not?” (Shemot 17:7). Then G-d tells them, ‘I will give you a place where you will feel the inspiration of the Shechina, and you will never ask such a question again’ (Kitri, article 3). The Beit HaMikdash is designed for humans, to help them ascend the path of holiness.

However, when the building no longer served as a source of spiritual inspiration for the people – and they degenerated into the three cardinal sins – there was no reason to leave it standing.

The Second Temple was built with a completely different purpose. Ezra knew, as did the people, that their spiritual level was not as it once was. A few prophets still remained but the people were beginning to disperse among the nations. Inter-marriage was rife and there was real concern for the physical existence of the Jewish people, let alone their spiritual survival.

Therefore, the second Beit HaMikdash was not on the same spiritual level as the first. Not only because it lacked five basic elements – like the Ark of the Covenant, for example – but because this House did not merit the same level of inspiration from the Shechina.

Nevertheless, the nation was happy, because the goal of stopping national splintering had been achieved. Everyone would gather in one place where they would unite as one people, with one spiritual purpose. They would try to perhaps restore the spiritual level of the former Temple. One spiritual center common to those in Zion and to their exiled brethren in Babylon.

However, writes the Maharal, when this Temple too no longer fulfilled its purpose, i.e. when hatred and disunity infected the people to the extent that great Sages sat still and did not protest the demeaning of a Jew (the famous story of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza) – and when this became a common occurrence, there was no justification to leave G-d’s Home, the symbol of baseless love and unity, intact. Thus the Temple was destroyed because it was necessary to shock the people again, so they would understand the evil of their actions, and begin to gather the fragments to rebuild themselves and their physical and spiritual unity.

Hence the destruction of both Batei Mikdash, though indeed for disproportionate reasons, served precisely the same purpose, as was needed at those two particular points in our history.

Now, in our times, the rebuilding work has begun: “Thus says the L-rd G-d: I am taking the Children of Israel from among the nations to which they have gone, and will gather them from every quarter, and bring them to their own Land. I will make them one nation in the Land... They shall never again defile themselves with their idols and their detestable things, or with any of their sins... They shall be my people and I will be their G-d...”

I will make a covenant of peace with them, an everlasting covenant with them... and will set my Sanctuary among them for evermore. My dwelling-place shall be with them and I will be their G-d, and they shall be My people. Then the nations shall know that I the L-rd sanctify Israel, when My Sanctuary is among them for evermore” (Yechezkel 37: 21-28).

May we see this fulfilled speedily in our days.

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