On Tisha B’Av, we commemorate the destruction of the Beit HaMikdash by reading firsthand accounts of that terrible day, along with other calamities that befell the Jewish people throughout the generations.

Despite the First Beit Hamikdash having been destroyed over 2,600 years ago, and the Second almost 2,000 years ago, signs of the destruction still remain in Jerusalem today – physical pieces of history that stand witness to our tremendous loss.

When Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E, it was not enough for him to burn just the Temple. His army, led by Nevuzardan, lit the whole city ablaze. In Ir David (the City of David), in what has become known as “Area G,” you can see a layer of ash from the fire that burnt down the royal administration building near the top of the city. In one section of the area, appropriately called the “Burnt Room,” the house collapsed inward after being set on fire. Beneath the rubble is a pile of charred debris almost one meter high.

In these ruins, as well as elsewhere in Ir David, archaeologists found nearly 1,500 clay idol figurines dating to the period of Yehuda’s settlement in the city. In every single excavated building in Ir David, archaeologists have found signs of idol worship. These finds echo Yirmiyahu’s repeated attempts to rally the people and pull them away from avodah zarah. “For according to the number of your cities are your gods, O Yehuda” (Yirmiyahu 11:13). As Chazal tell us in Menachot 13:22, “Why was the First Temple in Jerusalem destroyed? Because of idolatry, sexual immorality and bloodshed.”

The ruins of Jerusalem do not just tell the story of the destruction of the first Beit HaMikdash. Slightly north of Ir David is the remainder of a market built just prior to the Roman destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70 CE.

At the corner of the southern and western walls, visitors to the Davidsson Center can see what is left of the market street, including multiple stalls, as well as Robinson’s Arch, a large archway that supported one of the staircases leading up to the Temple Mount plaza. Large piles of hewn stone, once part of administrative buildings on Har HaBayit, lie in the street. Having been toppled by the Romans, these rocks destroyed the market street below, turning a once-bustling district into a desolate ruin. Similar to the Burnt Room in Ir David, some of the rocks are marked with black soot from the fire that destroyed the Beit HaMikdash.

This devastation can also be seen in the private homes uncovered in what is today called the Herodian Quarter Museum and the Burnt House.

However, Jerusalem does not only bear witness to the destruction and exile of the Jews; it also holds the key to their future. Everywhere one looks, one can see the fulfillment of positive prophecies alongside the testimony of destruction.

Batei Machaseh Square is a great example. In the square is the base of a column the Romans transported from Har HaBayit after ransacking the Temple. Across from the column is a quote from Zecharia HaNavi, graffitied by a defender of Jerusalem in 1948, as he was being led out of the city by the Jordanians. Made permanent after the reunification of Jerusalem in 1967, the quote reads, “So said the L-rd of hosts: There shall yet old men and old women sit in the streets of Jerusalem, every man with his staff in his hand for every age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in the street” (Zecharia 8:4-5).

In the shadow of these two reminders of our past and future, you can see children playing, along with visitors young and old.

While the city is filled with scars from our painful past, it is up to us to uncover the beauty of our bright future. May we be zoche to see the coming of Mashiach and the building of the Third Beit HaMikdash, speedily in our days.

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