Mourning the Churban in a Rebuilt Jerusalem

The traditional text of Nachem, the additional prayer recited on Tisha B’Av afternoon at Mincha, describes Jerusalem as, “the city that is in sorrow, laid waste, and in ruin.” The more subtle language, Rav Goren felt, better expressed the new reality of a Jerusalem in Jewish hands.

Serving as Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel from 1973-1983, Rav Goren attempted to formally institute the changes he made to Nachem, but was unsuccessful. While his changes were minor, and closer to the original text as it appears in the Talmud Yerushalmi, they were controversial, with many leading authorities at the time opposing his move.

Rav Chaim David Halevi suggested more subtle changes, changing the text from present to past tense, replacing “the city that is in sorrow,” with “the city that was in sorrow,” and “she sits with her head covered,” with “she sat with her head covered” (Aseh Lecha Rav 1:14).

Rav Isser Yehuda Unterman opposed changes to the text of Nachem because the Old City of Jerusalem was full of synagogues in various states of destruction and disrepair, while at the same time full of churches and mosques (HaTzofeh, 8 Av 5729, p. 2).

Rav Ovadia Yosef opposed any changes to Nachem for two reasons: 1) Our prayers were composed by the Anshei Knsset HaGedola and we do not have the authority to make any changes to the text, and 2) the traditional text of Nachem is relevant even today, considering the physical and spiritual degradation of Jerusalem and the Temple Mount (Yechave Da’at 1:43).

Rav Joseph B. Soloviechik too felt that we have no authority to make changes to the text of Nachem, and the text, as is, is relevant even today. Rav Soloviechik explained that according to the Rambam, Jerusalem shares the sanctity of the Beit HaMikdash. If the Beit HaMikdash is not standing, surely Jerusalem can be described as being “laid waste, scorned and desolate” (See the Orthodox Union’s Mesorah 7, Elul, 5752, p. 19).

Some authorities, like Rav Zvi Yehudah Kook and Rav Shaul Yisraeli, opposed making public changes to Nachem in the repetition of the Amidah, but allowed for individuals to make changes in their own silent Amidah.

Rav Goren himself would eventually change his mind after the euphoria of those early post-Six Day-Wars days faded, and gave way to a stark reality. In November 1978, Rav Goren wrote that due to the “ethical, moral, and national decline” following the Yom Kippur War, and in light of plans for land concessions to the Palestinians, he is retracting his ruling in favor of the traditional nusach (Terumat HaGoren, pp. 327-329).

The debate over Nachem reflects the very real challenge we face today, mourning the Churban in a rebuilt Jerusalem. May we merit to mourn properly, and see the fulfilment of the promise of our Sages: “All who mourn for Jerusalem will merit to witness her in her joy” (Ta’anit 30b).

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