The question of why the Holy Temple was destroyed and the Land left desolate was posed to the Sages and the prophets. None could explain until G-d Himself revealed that it was a result of having forsaken the Torah. The Talmud continues that the failure to listen to G-d’s voice and walk in the Torah’s ways refers to their failure to recite the blessings over the Torah.

Rabbeinu Yonah asks how this seemingly obvious fact – that the Torah was forsaken – could have eluded the Sages and prophets? To his question, we can add others. The Talmud in Yoma says that the First Temple was destroyed because of immorality, murder and idolatry. Why then, did Jeremiah mention only the failure to make a blessing over Torah study? Moreover, where did the Sages see in the verse itself that it refers to the failure to make a blessing rather than a total abandonment of the Torah?

Rabbeinu Yonah answers that in fact the generation learned Torah constantly and fulfilled the mitzvot. That is why the Sages did not recognize they had forsaken the Torah. But if so, how did they fall to such a level that they committed the three cardinal sins? Why didn’t their Torah learning protect them? To this G-d replied: their Torah learning was lacking, as seen from their neglect of the blessing over their learning.

One year I received an urgent call just before Yom Kippur from a woman in my congregation. Her husband had been told by his doctor that he was suffering from a condition that could prove life-threatening if he fasted. Nevertheless, he was determined to fast. I spoke to his doctor and consulted another observant doctor to confirm the diagnosis. There was no doubt that fasting would endanger his life.

I called the man in and explained to him that he must eat on Yom Kippur. He looked me straight in the eye and said, “Rabbi, you’re a young man and I’m about three times your age, well into my 70s. Since my bar mitzvah, I have not eaten on Yom Kippur, and I do not intend to start now.” I replied that I could not force him to eat on Yom Kippur, but that as soon as he left my office, I would instruct the gabbai never to give him another honor in our shul. When he asked why he deserved such treatment for being strict with respect to Yom Kippur, I told him we are prohibited from honoring idol worshipers.

“What idol worship am I guilty of?” he demanded to know. I explained, “The G-d of Israel has decreed that you must eat on Yom Kippur. If some other god has commanded you to fast, it is irrelevant to me if you call it Zeus, Kemosh or Yom Kippur – all idols are the same.”

G-d’s answer to Jeremiah revealed how people who studied and observed the Torah could fall to the depths of immorality, murder and idolatry. “They forsok My Torah” – not the Torah, but My Torah. They failed to hear G-d’s will expressed in the Torah; they failed to hear into My voice. And therefore they failed to walk in the ways of the Torah – they failed to make the Torah an all-encompassing guide.

All of this is symbolized by the failure to make a blessing prior to learning. The blessing begins,

אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו

The second blessing emphasizes that the purpose of the Torah is to make us ידְּעֵי שְׁמֶךָ – those who know and emulate G-d’s character traits in order to develop a complete Torah personality.

The purpose of the Land of Israel is to provide the most holy environment in which to observe the mitzvot so we can create a total Torah life for the Jewish people as a whole.

The third blessing emphasizes that G-d has chosen us from the nations of the world and given us the responsibility to become a nation of קהנים and a holy people. The blessing enjoins us not to merely hear the words, but to consider their implications.

And the third blessing emphasizes that G-d has chosen us from the nations of the world and given us the responsibility to become a nation of קהנים and a holy people. The blessing enjoins us not to merely hear the words, but to consider their implications.

The purpose of the Land of Israel is to provide the most conducive, holy environment in which to observe the mitzvot so we can create a total Torah life for the Jewish people as a whole. But when the Jewish people observe mitzvot perfunctorily, without the intention to live a complete Torah life, then the need for the Land is negated, and its physical destruction follows. That is the lesson G-d revealed to Jeremiah.

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