



Parsha Devarim
Isaiah 1:1-27
August 2, 2014 / 6 Av 5774

The implications of the destruction of the first and second Temple and their link to the Ninth of Av are reinforced by Isaiah's message. I suspect most of you, dear reader, think about the destruction of the first Temple in 586 B.C.E. when you think about the 9th of Av, but what about the second and how does our tradition attempt to explain it?

Let's examine the events leading up to the ninth of Av in Roman times and consider its implications.

On the seventeenth of Tammuz (June/July) the daily offering in the Temple was suspended. On the ninth of Av, most likely the tenth (July/August) the Romans broke into the Temple set fire to the Sanctuary and slaughtered everyone in sight. Joshua of Gischala and his followers escaped across the central valley to the Upper City, where they withstood further assault until the eighth of Elul (August/Sept) when the city finally fell. Titus ordered the leveling of the entire city and Temple, leaving the three towers of Herod's citadel, and a few levels of the walls standing as a tribute to the Roman victory. Titus commemorated this victory by constructing the Arch of Titus in Rome. If you have the opportunity to visit Rome look on the inside of the arch and you will find a relief of Roman soldiers carrying off the Temple objects.

Following the destruction of Jerusalem, Lucilius Bassus, the governor of Judah, subdued Herodium and Machaerus, the two of the three remaining Jewish fortresses and the final fortress, Masada, fell in the spring of 73.

The Talmud suggests several explanations for the destruction of the Temple, most of them are a result of the unethical conduct of individuals and of our religious leadership.

What's wrong with our clergy! Why are we continuously assuming that ritual devotion can transform people into spiritual guides!. The text clearly wants us to believe that hereditary figures who are commanded to adhere to ritual behavior should be devoted to God and the prophets consistently challenge this attitude. Moral and ethical behavior should trump devotion to ritual behaviors. But our behaviors haven't changed. We still expect religious leaders to be religious leaders.

This week's haftarah is the third of three special haftarot leading up to the 9th of Av. It begins with a strong reminder that our religious leadership and the manner they worship has become

corrupted and as a result our people, our nation has strayed and destruction and desolation will follow. The haftarah was most likely selected to be read immediately before the ninth of Av because of line twenty-one which begins with the word, aichah, which is the first word of the book of Lamentations.

I remember once asking a class of rabbinical students, what they would consider to be a perfect congregation. One of the students immediately responded and said, "A perfect congregation for me would be one where everyone is shomer Shabbat and shomer kashrut." I think this student erroneously believed that the purpose of Judaism and its rituals, was to make people better Jews. Some of us, (I'd like to think most of us), believe the purpose of Judaism is to make better human beings.

Aichah! (alas) She got it wrong. Alas, was that because of the way she/they were taught? Perhaps you dear readers, are thinking that I believe Judaism and Masorti Judaism is anti-ritual. Please don't. Not the case but our prophets were critical of those who overly relied on ritual activity. They and the rabbis who followed them believed in ritual observance but not as an end in itself. Observance for them was a vehicle to re-enforce ethical behavior.

Aichah (alas) we must be missing something if we continuously need to be reminded to treat others with dignity and to feed the hungry and take care of the stranger. We can correct that.

This week's Haftarah commentary is reprinted from one originally written for the Unraveller on July 17, 2010 by Rabbi Charles Simon, Executive Director of the FJMC and author of "Understanding the Haftarah. An Everyperson's Guide".