



PROBING

BY RABBI NACHMAN (NEIL) WINKLER
Faculty, OU Israel Center

THE PROPHETS

According to Josephus, there were 1.1 million Jews living in Yerushalayim in the year 66 CE, before the Romans destroyed Bayit Sheni four years later.

According to most historians the population of Jews in Yerushalayim shriveled down to about 70,000 after the Roman siege and exile.

In the Middle Ages, as Jews were banished from the Holy City, no more than 200 Jewish families lived there in any one year.

In the early Ottoman period the Jewish population rose to 2,000 and Jerusalem was described as such:

“By the beginning of the 19th century, Jerusalem was little more than a small provincial town in the western marches of the Ottoman Empire. The 19th century city occupied roughly the same area as the Roman colony of Aelia Capitolina built in AD 132 over the ruins of the Jewish city.

The census of 1849 gives the first modern count of the population. Limited to male Ottoman subjects, it enumerated 3,074 Muslims, 1,972 Christians and 895 Sephardim Jews. Added to that number was the growing number of Jews, from Eastern Europe, who had come as pilgrims and had settled in the city. According to the estimate given by the chief rabbis of the two communities, there were a total of 2,660 Sephardim Jews and 2,000

Ashkenazim in the city.”

But by the 1850s, Jews numbered over 8,000 and constituted the majority of the population. That number grew to 33,000 by 1921 and to 195,000 by 1967.

The population of Yerushalayim today approaches one million people, 600,000 of them are Jews.

I apologize for the somewhat dry list of figures and statistics that open this week's PtP (Probing the Prophets) but I do so because that was the first thing that came into my mind upon reading this week's haftarah. The selection, from perek 54 of Sefer Yishayahu, is the shortest of the sheva d'n'chemta-the seven haftarot of consolation-with every pasuk expressing Hashem's reassurance that His promises of a glorious future awaiting the nation, promises that the prophet Yishayahu had delivered to the people, would indeed be realized.

G-d begins His words by telling Israel to rejoice, referring to the suffering nation as an “akara”, a barren woman, for, He promises, that she would have a greater amount of children, i.e., of population, than those cities that had not been “barren”, the very cities whose population outnumbers her now. And, in order to reinforce His message to the people, the message of dramatic growth and expansion, Hashem tells them to “widen their tents” and to “extend the

curtains of their dwellings”, impressing them with the fact that there would be no room for all those who will enter the Holy City!! This change in status will affect her stature in the eyes of the other nations as well. Nevermore would she be considered shamed or disgraced as one rejected by Hashem but would be seen as one graced by G-d’s presence-for He will never again remove His kindness and mercies from His chosen nation.

Look again at the earlier statistics. See how empty and “barren” Yerushalayim was as she experienced almost two millennia bereft of her children.

These words of comfort and consolation would have very little impact on a mourning nation who had lost their faith. But the promises of G-d and the words of Yishayahu were directed at a holy nation who kept their faith-in Hashem and His prophets-throughout their painful history.

So what say we now?

Today, these promises ring true as we look around our Holy Land and see how we are “widening our tents” and “extending the curtains of our dwellings”, how the rapid pace of construction still struggles to keep up with the growing population and how new communities are being built in places where there were none-even in the time of Yishayahu! And no longer can Jerusalem be described as a “provincial town” or a “Roman colony.”

So put down your Torah Tidbits while the haftarah is chanted. Listen to the words of the haftarah; digest its message.

Hashem is speaking to us today.

And He is saying: “See-I told you so!” ■

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