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GUEST DVAR TORAH

A Biblical 'Responsa' - To Fast or Not to Fast

We read in the book of Zecharia in Chapter 7:
In the fourth year of King Darius, on the fourth day of the ninth month, Kislev, the word of GOD came to Zechariah - when Bethel-Sharezer and Regem-Melech and his men sent to entreat the favor of GOD, [and] to address this inquiry to the priests of the House of GOD and to the prophets: "Shall I weep and practice abstinence in the fifth month, as I have been doing all these years?"

There is a clear question here of whether to continue the public fast days, such as the 9th of Av, in a time when the Temple in Jerusalem was rebuilt, as it was in the days of Zecharia (one of the last prophets).

There is seemingly no clear answer to this

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question.

In Zecharia Chapter 8 we read:

Thus said GOD: I have returned to Zion, and I will dwell in Jerusalem.

Jerusalem will be called the City of Faithfulness, and the Mount of GOD of Hosts the Holy Mount. Thus, said GOD of Hosts: There shall yet be elderly men and women in the squares of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of their great age. And the squares of the city shall be crowded with boys and girls playing in the squares.

There is the famous reference here to the time, as we are living in today, when Jerusalem will become a place of great activity, both for the old and young. This was particularly encouraging for the returnees to Jerusalem, who did not rebuild the city walls for many years, until Nechemiah arrived, approximately 70 years later. How did this speech answer the original question, if at all?

Later in this Chapter we have a *Pasuk* which we recognize from the Selichot for fast days:

כה־אָמַר ה' צְבָאוֹת צוֹם הַרְבִּיעִי וְצוֹם הַחֲמִישִׁי וְצוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי וְצוֹם הָעֶשְׂרִי יְהִי לְבֵית יְהוָה לְהוֹדָה לְשִׁשְׁוֹן לְשִׁמְחָה וְלִמְעֵדִים טוֹבִים וְהָאֵמֶת וְהַשְּׁלוֹם אֲהַבּוּ:

Thus said G-D of Hosts: The fast of the fourth month, the fast of the fifth month, the fast of the seventh month, and the fast of the tenth month shall become occasions for joy and gladness, happy festivals for the House of Judah; but you must love honesty and integrity.

Again, we can ask how does this *Pasuk* relate to the original question about the fast

days?

I recently heard a shiur from Professor Gabi Shitrit of Haifa University, who pointed out that all our fast days were originally meant to be days of happiness. As an example, the spies returned from their mission in Eretz Yisrael on the 9th of Av, which was meant to be a day of happiness at hearing their report on *Eretz Yisrael*. It became a day of tragedy due to the sin of the spies. Other fast days were similar, e.g. 17th of Tammuz, which was meant to be a day of *Matan Torah* when Moshe returned with the *Luchot* and because of the sin of the Golden Calf, it became a day of tragedy.

The theme in Sefer Zecharia is to show us that the fast days were all cases of missed opportunities, and this message is as relevant when the Temple was standing as it was when in a state of destruction. Along the same lines, Professor Shitrit quoted the *Hesped* given by Abba Even in 1966, at the levaya of Dr Yaakov Herzog, who was slated to become the Chief Rabbi of the UK, but died prematurely. *'We are recognizing a tragedy in that not only do we mourn the death of this great man, but we are also mourning what could have been, had he lived longer and achieved his full potential'*.

This is the answer which is alluded to in Sefer Zecharia and remains relevant even during the times of rebuilding of Jerusalem, when the streets will be teeming again with many inhabitants. We recognize that opportunities have been missed, from which we must learn.

Our continued existence here in Eretz Yisrael is a great example of such an approach. We have learned many of the great lessons of history, such as that famously expressed by Menachem Begin, that *'when they say*

they want to destroy us, they mean it'. With G-d's help may we continue to thrive here and take these lessons to heart. Our existence here is nothing short of miraculous and the prophet Zecharia tells us that Hashem wants us to recognize His great kindness throughout our history. It is certainly important to remember this on these special days of introspection, even if they become holidays, as we are promised in the very near future. Other commentators have expressed the case for continued mourning in terms of what these sad days represent, such as loss of religious autonomy because of the destruction of the Temple. However, even if the physical act of fasting becomes obsolete, the message of the fast day will always be relevant. We must always learn from missed opportunities, so as not to make the same mistake again. October 7th must never ever happen again.

May we see the full redemption happen speedily in our days - Amen. ■

Rabbi Ian Shaffer came on Aliya with his wife in 2022 after teaching in Stern College in Manhattan for 22 years. Originally from London, UK where he was Deputy Head of Judaic Studies at Immanuel College. He lives in Modiin and gives weekly shiurim in the OU Men's Kollel as well as a bi-weekly shiur in the community for men and women. He recently published his first Sefer on Shmuel Aleph & Bet – A Companion Volume.



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