

The Meaning of the Fast of the Tenth of Tevet: Spreading Peace and Truth to All People

Rabbi Yisra'el Ari'el

based on the teachings of Harav Yitzchak Ginsburgh

This year, the fast of the 10th of Tevet begins
at daybreak Tuesday, the 19th of December and ends with nightfall.
Consult your local listings for exact times in your area.

So says the Almighty: The fasts of the fourth, fifth, seventh and tenth months will become joyful and glad occasions and happy festivals for Judah. Therefore, you shall love truth and peace. (Zachariah 8:19)

This verse from Zachariah foretells that the very dates that memorialize the downfall and destruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem are destined to become days of joy and happiness in the process of its rebuilding.

The Temple and the nations of the world

For us to be able to relate to these two processes—past destruction and future rebuilding—we need to see them in context of the goal of the Jewish people to guide humanity to love truth and peace by escorting the people of all nations into a sincere and enduring relationship with the Creator. In the language of the prophets, it is our duty to be a “light unto all nations” (Isaiah 49:6). It was with this purpose in mind that the Holy Temple was constructed in Jerusalem. The Temple in Jerusalem stood at the intersection of both our covenant and relationship with God and our relationship with the nations of the world. When he consecrated the Temple, King Solomon prayed before God, that not only would the Temple serve to substantiate His relationship with the Jewish people, but also that:

...The foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of Your Name—for men will hear of Your great Name and Your mighty hand and Your outstretched arm—when he comes and prays toward this Temple, then hear from heaven, Your dwelling place, and do whatever the foreigner asks of You, so that all the peoples of the earth may know Your Name and fear You, as do Your own people Israel, and may know that this house I have built bears Your Name. (1 Kings 8:41-3)

Thus, the process of the Temple's destruction (which in effect took many years) led not only to the tragic loss of our ability to make concrete our own relationship with the



GALEINAI PUBLICATION SOCIETY

2 Hausner St. • Jerusalem 96431 • tel.: 972.547.533770 • info@gpsociety.org

Almighty, it also hindered, perhaps even fatally crippled, our ability to affect other nations with our unique insight and commitment to truth and peace as revealed in the Torah. In this article, we would like to explore the meaning of the tenth of Tevet in light of our role as God's emissaries to the nations of the world.

The fast of the tenth

In the verse from Zachariah quoted above, the fast of the "tenth month" refers to the fast of the tenth of Tevet, the tenth month of the Jewish year, which memorializes the beginning of the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem 2430 years ago. The siege was the first stage of the war that ended with the destruction of the First Temple. Since then, the Jewish people have observed a fast on this date (see also 2 Kings 25:1 and Ezekiel 24:1-14).

A simple question that needs to be asked is: why did the prophets and subsequently the sages set a fast on this date? Why denote a preliminary step on the path to destruction? After all, the Temple was the heart of the ancient Jewish kingdom and the heart was not destroyed until *Tishah b'Av* (the 9th day of Av)—some 20 months later. Why does the commemoration of the destruction of the Temple on *Tishah b'Av* not suffice?

In order to answer this question we have to assume that indeed, the tenth of Tevet (and with it the seventeenth of Tamuz, the day on which the enemy made it through the fortified walls of Jerusalem) marks an event unto itself, which is related to, yet at the same time independent of, the final destruction of the Temple. To use a metaphor, we can say that the Temple, as it was destroyed 20 months later was like a bird killed some time after its wings had already been clipped. Though the Temple was still standing after the tenth of Tevet and the holy service continued, it was no longer a Temple that was capable of serving some of the most important goals for which it had been built in the first place. Its left wing was clipped on the tenth of Tevet, with the beginning of the siege on Jerusalem; its right wing was clipped on the seventeenth of Tamuz, when the enemy broke through the fortifications and entered the holy city. In Kabbalah, the left wing symbolizes awe of God, and thus the Temple's ability to serve as the focus of the universal human covenant with God (which is based upon awe), while the right wing symbolizes love of God, and thus the Temple's role as the focus of the Jewish people's covenant with God as His chosen, beloved people (whose union with God is likened to the union of bride and groom, as portrayed in the Song of Songs).

The fast days of Tevet

To further develop this idea, let us note that the tenth of Tevet is actually one of three consecutive fast days in the month of Tevet. Traditionally, only intensely devout individuals would fast on the other two days, which occur on the eighth and the ninth days of the month. A fast was established on the eighth day of Tevet in response to the

completion of the translation of the Torah into Greek (which led not to becoming a light unto the nations but rather to assimilation). In later generations, the fast of the ninth day of Tevet was identified as the *yahrzeit* (the day of passing) of both Ezra and Nechemiah, the two leaders of the Jewish return to the Land of Israel and the spiritual renaissance that followed the 70 year long Babylonian exile and succeeded in reconstructing the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. However, some are of the opinion that this date was set as a fast because of the birth of Jesus, several centuries later.

According to tradition (see *The Book of Our Heritage*), the first day of Tevet was also originally (before the victory of the Maccabees) a fast day, commemorating the deportation of the King Yehoyachin and the elite of the Jerusalem by the Babylonians about 9 years before the siege of the city that ended with the destruction of the Temple (see 2 Kings 24:8). Eventually the fast on the first of Tevet was superseded by the celebration of Chanukah.

To appreciate the meaning of all of these facts we may conjecture that “the fast of the tenth month,” the tenth of Tevet, culminates and includes all of the fast days that fall in the first ten days of the month, and that in the future, with the coming of the Mashiach, all of the days from the beginning until the tenth day of the month will become one great festival of joy. If our conjecture is indeed correct, we might ask: what will the nature of this festival be?

The future festival of the tenth month

There are two passages in the Talmud that at first glance seem to be unrelated, but when put together can provide us with a direction in answering this question. The first is a passage in the tractate of *Avodah Zarah* (8a). The *Mishnah* states that the festivals of the idol worshippers are three: Kalandes, Saturnura, and Carthesem. The Talmud then elaborates on this statement and explains that Kalandes (apparently this is an earlier version of the Roman Kalandes) is celebrated for 8 days before the winter solstice.

What is the reason for the Kalandes celebration? The sages recount that Adam, the first human being, saw that from the day he had sinned and eaten from the Tree of Knowledge, daylight hours were getting shorter. He feared that this was how God would punish him with death, as He had warned him; the world was growing darker and returning to the primordial chaos (described in Genesis 1:2). To repent, Adam fasted and prayed for 8 days. Once the winter solstice came and went, Adam saw that the days were getting longer and longer. He concluded that this was the normal state of affairs in nature, and he celebrated for 8 days. The next year he made both the 8 days before the winter solstice and the 8 days after it into a festival of joy. The idol worshippers who came after Adam retained the memory of this festival but turned it into an idolatrous celebration. The winter solstice occurs on the 21st or 22nd of December, which on the Jewish calendar wanders around the 1st of Tevet, from the second half of Kislev to the first half of Tevet (this year it will be on the 13th of Tevet).

A second passage (*Shabbat* 21b), which is perhaps more familiar, recounts that the academies of Hillel and Shammai disagreed on the order of lighting the Chanukah candles. According to Hillel, on the first day one should light one candle and on each day increment by one, until 8 candles are lit on the last day. But according to Shammai, on the first day one should light 8 candles and on each following day reduce the number of candles by one, until on the 8th day only one candle is lit. The *Halachah* was decided in accordance to Hillel's opinion. Nonetheless, it is well known that in the future, in the times of the Mashiach we will act in accordance with Shammai's opinion (*Mikdash Melech* on the *Zohar* I, 17b).

Chassidic masters explain with regard to all of the differences of opinion between Hillel and Shammai that acting in the future in accordance with Shammai's opinion will not contradict Hillel's view; in the future Hillel will agree with Shammai. How can we understand this with regard to the lighting of the Chanukah candles? How can you both increment and decrease the number of candles lit on each night? While in higher worlds two contradictory states may exist simultaneously, on our physical plane they cannot. Therefore we must propose another conjecture: We will light one candle on the first day and add candles each subsequent night (on the days that sunlight is decreasing, characterizing exile, the state of the present, when the law is in accordance with the school of Hillel) until we reach 8 candles, and then work our way back down to one candle (on the days that sunlight is increasing, characterizing redemption, the state of the future, when the law is in accordance with the school of Shammai), which would be lit on the tenth of Tevet. In addition, candles will be lit on all the fast days of the beginning of Tevet.

Because Kislev can have 29 or 30 days, in some years (like ours, 5768) there are 15 days between the 25th of Kislev, the first day of Chanukah and the 10th of Tevet, but on some years there are 16 days. Therefore in years that Kislev has 30 days, we would light 8 candles on the day after Chanukah, then 7, then 6, etc. until we light one candle on the evening of the 10th of Tevet.

Let's look at some of the mathematical significance of what we have just seen. During the 8 days of Chanukah we light 36 candles ($1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5 + 6 + 7 + 8 = 36$); 36 is also referred to the "triangle of 8." If Kislev has 29 days, then over the next seven days we would light an additional "triangle of 7" ($1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5 + 6 + 7 = 28$), or 28 candles. Altogether, we will light therefore 64, or 8 squared candles: $8^2 = 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5 + 6 + 7 + 8 + 7 + 6 + 5 + 4 + 3 + 2 + 1$. By doing so, we have expanded the triangle of 8 candles of Chanukah into 8 squared candles. In Kabbalah, square numbers (like 64) represent perfected inter-inclusion (*hitkalelut* in Hebrew). Therefore, by adding 7 more days, we have created a perfect state of inter-inclusion, the essential characteristic of a rectified reality. In years that Kislev has 30 days, we would light an additional 36 candles, giving us a total of 72 candles, thus forming the eighth diamond figure: $\diamond 8 = 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5 + 6 + 7 + 8 + 8 + 7 + 6 + 5 + 4 + 3 + 2 + 1 = 72$.

What we have seen produced from these two passages in the Talmud is thus a beautiful weave that connects Chanukah with the tenth of Tevet in one long festival that will possibly be the future festival of Tevet.

Eight days of light unto the nations

Let us return to the tenth of Tevet. As it stands today the tenth of Tevet represents the loss of our ability, as the Jewish people, to shine the light of the Torah and its true message of peace to the nations of the world. The tenth of Tevet serves as a collective memory for when we lost our ability to influence and enlighten other nations about the Creator and their covenant with Him.

To put this another way, let us say that from the tenth of Tevet until *Tishah b'Av* of the year that the Temple was destroyed, it could no longer serve as the focal point for the universal covenant between the Almighty and all of mankind, for nations were now laying siege to Jerusalem and were bent on destroying it. It was no longer the universal symbol of peace and truth for the entire world. For that period and since then, it remained solely as the focal point for the special covenant between the Jewish people and God. But, it could no longer serve as a source of inspiration and wisdom for guiding the Jewish people's relationship with the nations of the world. Following the tenth of Tevet, and the beginning of the siege on Jerusalem, we were no longer contenders for the heart of humanity, for the direction that the world as a whole could take. We were left alone with our own personal issues and could no longer see the bigger picture of *tikun olam* (rectifying the entire world).

This is why when we fast today on the tenth of Tevet we are also mourning the translation of the Torah into Greek, a translation that not only did not prove to be a conduit for bringing the Torah's message out to the world, but in fact turned out to be a setback because the Torah was henceforth seen as just another source of spiritual wisdom amid myriad similar sources (and thus gave rise to assimilation, to Hellenism). The life of Jesus proved to be an even greater setback than the Septuagint translation of the Torah, as his followers created the most disastrous attempt to reach out to the nations of the world in Jewish history thereby totally undermining the Torah's vision of our being a light unto the nations. The substitution of true salvation with false salvation led many Jews to abandon their Jewish roots altogether and adopt a false religion. The exile of the Judean elite, those individuals who were worldly and versed in the public rhetoric of the day, an exile that occurred on the first day of Tevet, also falls squarely within the category of events that led to the loss of our universal message and its total distortion in the hands of others.

Thus, we may surmise that the festival beginning on the eighth day of Chanukah and continuing for the next seven (or eight) days, will celebrate a Jewish reawakening to the task of *tikun olam*—a renewed bid for the heart of humanity. Just as the days grow longer and there is more natural sunlight, the ever-decreasing number of candles lit on

these 8 days will symbolize the smaller and smaller need for artificial man-made light indicating that the natural light of God's goodness is shining; it is God Himself who becomes our light. During the eight days of Chanukah we commemorate both the military and cultural victory of the Torah over paganism. During the 8 days of the festival of Tevet we will rejoice in the renewed influence of the Torah's message and in the fruits of our covenant with the Almighty as they are enjoyed by all of mankind. We will celebrate our renewed commitment to guiding the world, to acting as a light unto the nations through truth and peace.

From a message to the nations, to the Temple

How will the process of the rebuilding of the Temple occur? It may be that the Temple itself will be rebuilt and then its wings will spread to enliven both our national identity (the right wing, as above, that was clipped on the seventeenth of Tamuz) and our universal reach (the left wing that was clipped on the tenth of Tevet). But, it may be (and this is more likely the case) that our renewed interest in rectifying the world and in influencing mankind with the universal message that lies within the Torah will renew our interest in the Temple and compel us to strive to build it speedily in our time.

In any case, this analysis can help us focus our thoughts and feelings on this special fast day the tenth of Tevet. We are fasting and mourning the loss of our role as the spiritual and physical guides of humanity and praying and recommitting to finding the strength to restate the deep message that the Torah has for mankind.