

## Light Unto the Nations: Chanukah, the Tenth of Tevet and the Judaism of the Future<sup>1</sup>

### Part 2

#### Universal Clipping of Wings

The fast of the Tenth of Tevet commemorates the beginning of the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem, which led to the destruction of the First Temple. This day is the first – in terms of the event that it commemorates – of four fast days that denote the stages of the destruction of the First Temple, as follows:

- **10 Tevet:** Beginning of the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem
- **17 Tamuz:** The walls of Jerusalem are breached two and a half years later
- **9 Av (*Tisha Ba'v*):** The destruction of the Temple itself; many years later, the Romans destroyed the Second Temple on the very same date.
- **3 Tishrei: (the Fast of Gedalyah).** The murder of Gedalyah ben Achikam, who was the governor of the survivors who remained in the land of Israel after the exile to Babylon. His murder symbolized the completion of the destruction and the beginning of the exile.

Of these four fast days, *Tisha Ba'v* is the most painful, for that is the day of the actual destruction. We can ask, however, what is so significant about the first 3 stages—the beginning of the siege, the breach of the walls that preceded the destruction and the murder of the Jewish governor, Gedalyah ben Achikam? Why did they warrant a unique fast day for themselves? While the Ninth of Av has much stricter laws than the other three fasts, the question remains. Is it not enough to memorialize the destruction itself? Why are the intermediary losses in the war and a single murder that took place after the end of the war worthy of entering our collective memory at all?

Here is a thought-provoking way to understand the continuum of the four fast days. We can think of the Temple as being built of four concentric circles, one inside the other, together reflecting Jewish life in its whole state. Each of the four stages of the destruction, as outlined above, shattered another, more internal circle of this structure—the Temple. As each of the four circles is intrinsic to the Temple, when it shatters, it constitutes a fundamental step in the Temple's destruction.

The two events that preceded the destruction of the Temple—the siege on Jerusalem commemorated on the tenth of Tevet and the breaching of the walls commemorated on the 17<sup>th</sup> of Tamuz—can be seen as the clipping of the Temple's two wings. We can

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<sup>1</sup> Part 2 of a 3-part series excerpted and translated from Rabbi Ginsburgh's Hebrew book, *Hanerot Hallalu*.

picture the Temple as standing in place while spreading two wings outward: its **national wing** covers Jerusalem, in which it dwells and its universal wing extending and covering the entire world. When the Babylonians laid siege to Jerusalem and isolated it from the world (on the Tenth of Tevet), they clipped the Temple's universal wing, thereby confining Judaism to the national circle. When they breached the walls and conquered the city (17 of Tammuz) they clipped the Temple's national wing, leaving only the religious circle—the Temple itself—intact. When the Temple was destroyed (Ninth, or Tisha B'Av) it was as if the bird, whose wings had previously been clipped, was finally murdered. (In the language the sages used to describe the actual destruction, 'It is a burnt house that you [Nebuchadnezzar] burned'). The last breath of life of the Temple, which remained suspended in the air like a ghost after its destruction, was the remnant of the Jews in the land of Israel. This poor population was the last ray of hope to keep the flame of Judaism alive in the land of Israel. When the Babylonian appointed governor of these survivors, Gedalyah ben Achikam was murdered and the population scattered, it was the final death blow to the Temple bird. Now let us focus on the Tenth of Tevet, the Temple's universal wing. As opposed to the commonly held wisdom that the Temple was strictly a national symbol, from the day of its establishment it was actually designated to be a spiritual center to unite all of humanity. In the words of the prophet, "For My house will be called a house of prayer for all the nations."<sup>2</sup> This was not only a future vision heralded by the prophets; it was declared in the dedication prayer offered by King Solomon on the Temple's inauguration day:

Moreover, concerning the stranger that is not of Your people Israel, when he shall come out of a far country for Your Name's sake, or when they shall hear of Your great Name, and of Your mighty hand, and of Your outstretched arm, when he shall come to pray through this house; may You hear in heaven Your dwelling-place, and do according to all that the stranger calls unto You; so that all the peoples of the earth may know Your Name, to fear You, as do Your people Israel, and that they may know that Your Name is cast upon this house that I have built.<sup>3</sup>

The Temple did not consummately fulfill this destiny described by Solomon. But from the very start, its eyes were set on that goal. It had a universal horizon to which it wished to spread its wings. This universal horizon of the Torah, which strives for the unification of all humanity around serving God, is expressed in the visions of the prophets in a number of places. Among those expressions, perhaps the most famous is the prophecy of Isaiah, which also relates to the Temple:

And it shall come to pass in the end of days, that the mountain of God's house shall be established as the top of the mountains and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many peoples shall go and say:

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 56:7.

<sup>3</sup> Kings I 8:41-43.

“Come and let us go up to the mountain of God, to the house of the God of Jacob; and He will teach us of His ways, and we will walk in His paths.” For out of Zion Torah shall emerge, and the word of God from Jerusalem. And He shall judge between the nations and shall decide for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks; a nation shall not lift up its sword against another nation, nor shall they learn to make war any longer.<sup>4</sup>

These verses remind us that as much as the Torah seems to be preoccupied with Israel alone, its broader reach is directed at perfecting the entire world: It begins with the creation of Adam, the father of all humanity, and finishes with the worldwide redemption of humanity. The task of the people of Israel is to pave the way for the gathering of all the nations around the service of God. We can say that the relationship between Israel and the nations of the world is like the relation between the *kohanim*, the priestly class among the people of Israel, and the rest of the nation. Just as the *kohanim* received the special task of serving in the Temple for the sake of the entire nation, so Israel in general is designated to serve all of humanity and to unite it around the Temple. This is why the Jewish Nation is called “a kingdom of priests” above and beyond being described as “a holy people.”<sup>5</sup>

Now we can understand the significance of the Tenth of Tevet with more clarity. The siege on Jerusalem symbolizes the Temple’s universal horizon. The siege stopped, as it were, the longed-for spread of Judaism toward the universal circle, forcing it to remain, at least for now, limited to its own private affairs. This limitation was expressed by the sages with the saying that, “From the day that the Temple was destroyed, the Holy blessed One has only the four cubits of Jewish law in His world.”<sup>6</sup> The fast of the Tenth of Tevet is the day of mourning the suspension of Judaism’s universal vision, of the loss of its ability to illuminate the world and of its contraction to a state in which it illuminates itself, alone.

#### Failed Attempts at Universalism

This explanation connects in a very interesting manner to two additional events that are associated with the Tenth of Tevet:

The first event is the Torah’s translation into Greek, known as the Septuagint.<sup>7</sup> The completion of this translation took place on the 8<sup>th</sup> day of Tevet, but in the sources it says that the event darkened the world for three days<sup>8</sup>—precisely until the Tenth of Tevet. Indeed, the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> of Tevet are defined as “fasts of tzaddikim”, and in previous eras, special people would fast all three days in a row.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 2:2-4

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 19:6.

<sup>6</sup> *Berachot* 8a.

<sup>7</sup> *Megillah* 9a-b.

<sup>8</sup> *Megillat Ta’anit*, the chapter of the fast days.

<sup>9</sup> *The Book of our Heritage*, Eliyahu Kitov, p. 210 in the Hebrew edition.

The second event identified close to the Tenth of Tevet is the birth of Yehoshua the Nazarene. There is a Jewish tradition that identifies his birth with the 9<sup>th</sup> day of Tevet (and even claims that the persecution of the Jews in his name is one of the reasons for setting the fast on this day).<sup>10</sup>

What is the common denominator of these two events? We can easily see that both express **failed attempts to make Judaism universal**. The Septuagint made the Bible accessible to every intelligent person in the Greek empire. However, it was a neutered translation that removed the unique pointedness of the Torah, making it look like a book of philosophy and nothing more—“Jewish philosophy” bereft of any exceptionality or glory. Indeed, the Septuagint led to a blurring of the gaps between Judaism and Greek culture, between Hellenism and assimilation. Ultimately, it led to the persecution of those Jews who clung to their religion.

The Nazarene religion is an even more extreme case. Its earliest followers did not identify themselves as the followers of a separate religion from Judaism, but rather, as a reformed, or newer version of Judaism (they called themselves, “the real Israel”), whose gates were open to all of humanity. But, as they developed their identity, they came to completely nullify the Torah’s commandments and the Oral Torah, adopting an ascetic, anti-corporeal approach. With time, the Nazarene religion appended a mixture of pagan practice. This completed its rebellion against Judaism and it became a different, independent religion that ultimately persecuted its mother—Judaism.

The burgeoning of the two vast enterprises that grew out of these attempts—the spreading of the Greek bible and the flourishing of the Nazarene religion—was carried by the great interest of the nations of the world in Judaism. The nations wanted to understand Judaism and perhaps even to convert and join it. But the Jews did not have the wisdom to take advantage of this wave and to harness it to disseminating faith in God and His Torah. The vacuum that Judaism left open was filled by others in a manner that was less forgiving and even destructive to Judaism.

The fact that these two attempts took place adjacent to the Tenth of Tevet strengthens the idea that the inner meaning of this day is repentance for our failure to spread the light of Torah to the nations of the world.

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<sup>10</sup> New addendums to *Megillat Ta’anit*, the chapter of the fast days.