

Asarah B'Tevet

The Fast Day That Shouldn't Have Been

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Note: This year the fast of the Tenth (Asarah) of Tevet falls on Sunday, December 27, 2009. It is observed from dawn until dusk. No food or drink is to be consumed. If one is ill or feels they cannot fast one should consult one's local Orthodox Rabbi.

The fast day of Asarah B'Tevet commemorates the beginning of the siege of Biblical Jerusalem by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar. This is a day in history that left a scar on the collective soul of the Jewish people for centuries. Yet, as with most wounds, once relatively healed, they no longer bother us much. If we wish to be truthful, we will admit that here we are centuries later and the shock of Nebuchadnezzar's armies surrounding Jerusalem no longer arouses any emotional shock for us today as it did to those who lived at the time of these events.

Nonetheless, the Sages of the day ordained that Asarah B'Tevet be a fast throughout the generations. However, as the centuries have gone by so have the painful memories of the past been replaced by other more recent woes and more personal concerns. Today, most who observe the fast of the Asarah B'Tevet do so out of obligation, but rare and few are those who observe the fast still feeling the remorse of that time.



This lack of connection is indeed a shame. For although the historical message of the fast has been delegated to the history books and prayer siddurim, the psychological lessons to be learned why this day was ordained a fast for our generations still remain for us to embrace and internalize.

For you see, the same psychological, spiritual, social and political thoughtlessness that created the events that led to this day becoming a fast still exist amongst us and within us. The same mistakes of the past that led to tragedy are still being repeated by us today. Thus today we face the danger of creating new tragedies that maybe one future day also will be commemorated as a fast day for the generations.

A lesson taught by all peoples of wisdom is that the first step in avoiding tragedy is to recognize what causes it. To help us always remember this did our Sages ordain this day to be a fast. Let us now delve into why this day came to pass and what lessons we can learn from it to apply today, so as to avoid both future personal and national tragedies.

For years, actually for generations, if not centuries, G-d warned the Jewish people of one of the greatest of spiritual laws. As recorded in Pirkei Avot, this great law states: "L'fum Tza'arah Agrah" (in accordance to one's efforts, so will be one's rewards). The meaning of this should be simple to all. We ourselves create our own personal "heaven" or "hell" here on earth.

Our behavior and actions stretch forth from us like the tentacles of an octopus. From the moment of their performance they have long reaching and long lasting affects upon us and upon all they touch. Yes, our individual actions, however small and insignificant we may consider them to be can in reality be the cause (or causes) of tremendously big things the likes of which we have never imagined or desired.

We may wish to avoid responsibility for our actions by claiming that we never intended for negative or harmful result to come forth from the innocent thing that we did. We claim that "it is not our fault." Now, to be fair, there is some truth to this argument. No one can see all the inevitable results of one's behavior. However, this does not mean that all results of our behavior are invisible to us, or that we bear absolutely no responsibility whatsoever for what happens as a result of our actions.

Selfish and irresponsible souls wish to make this claim that, "I didn't do it, I didn't mean for that to happen, it's not my fault." The most base and immoral among us add insult to injury and add to the previous sentiment the saying, "it's not my problem, let someone else deal with it." It is this final attitude of denial and selfish disassociation that led to an entire generation in Biblical Israel becoming so politically and morally blind that they just could not see that they themselves were creating the scenario for their own destruction.

Granted, we are all obligated to provide for our own needs. Yet, **the pursuit of individual goals must be balanced within the context of the greater social good.** Without this sense of community welfare, any society simply becomes a collection of single individuals out to better their own interests even at the expense of others. We have a special word for this type of society. We call it a jungle, and the rule of the beasts dominates. The strong hunt the weak for the sake of strengthening themselves at the expense of others. Like wolves the strong will seek to hunt in packs to seek greater prey, for greater personal gain. Yet, unbeknown to the pack, there are always larger and greater packs of wolves and even greater and more ferocious type of beasts in the deep jungle. As it is in the jungle of animals, so it is within the jungle societies created by man.

The society in Biblical Israel stumbled and fell into the same social pitfalls of which we suffer from today. All the social and personal problems can be summed up and described simply: people stopped caring for one another. Instead of living like responsible moral adults, people became depraved and acted more like hungry animals, showing absolutely no regards for others. This lack of social cohesion does not go unnoticed by those who are also on the prowl.

For years, G-d sent prophets to His people. Their message was two-fold. Yes, they did predict and forewarn the coming of the Babylonians, but they also explained why the people were heading towards this horrible destiny. It wasn't that G-d was acting like some cosmic parent frustrated over the misbehavior of His child and therefore was going to spank His wanton people. Rather, G-d was going to allow nature to take its course. G-d foresaw the long term results of the people's individual and national behavior and sent prophets to warn them of what was to be the inevitable fruits of their actions.

We all know what happened. The prophets were ignored. More so, the prophets were rejected, some even murdered. The people arrogantly proclaimed their right to live as they choose and to act as they choose. G-d was far away from the affairs of their daily lives, they thought, so why should they bother with what He and His prophets think or had to say. They came to realize only too late that there are more important things in life than individual, personal desires and pursuits. But by this time, the Babylonian armies had surrounded Jerusalem and destruction was imminent.

Mind you, this destruction was brought about by the people themselves and their lack of foresight. G-d allowed both Israel and the Babylonians to follow the course of nature and did not hold back their hand by means of Divine intervention. But never let it be said that G-d sent the Babylonians

independent of the natural order, for this is not true. The sins of the people and their shortsighted and foolish, sinful behavior arouse the Babylonian animal to pounce on small and weak Israel.

G-d allows nature to take its course because both past and present we refuse to accept the Divine Hand of guidance upon us. L'fum Tza'arah Agrah. We brought our own destruction down upon our own heads. For this did our Sages ordain a fast day throughout the centuries; that we should remember and mourn our own stupidity.

So, now let us ask the valuable question. What have we learned from history?

The events of the past haunt us today and cry forth messages to us with ghostly clarity. These voices cry to us, "Heed well what you have learned! Change your course and behavior before it is too late!" Yet, as with all ghosts, these inner voices of conscience are rarely heard, and even when perceived are most often ignored. Many will proclaim that they do not believe in ghosts. Yet, these ghosts are more than the souls of the dead. These ghosts are the voices of the past, crying out to us today, begging us to learn from their mistakes, or face their own end will we!

The old saying always proves itself true, "those who do not learn from history are destined to repeat its mistakes." Yet, there is another old saying that is just as true. Our Sages said in Pirkei Avot, "Who is wise? The one who can foresee the results of one's actions."

As we fast this Asarah B'Tevet, let us remember the armies that surrounded Biblical Jerusalem bringing to the city the message of death. Let us learn the lesson that we must pay attention to our day-to-day behavior and how what we do affects ourselves and others, both today and in the future.

Let us do what we can today to avoid the coming of the "armies of Babylon" into our personal lives bringing to us personal devastation, all because we are too selfish to address our personal problems, lack of morality and proper behavior when we have the chance to do so.

Maybe a day without food and water might help us focus on those things more important in life than our personal desires and pursuits. May it be an easy fast for us all.