

Thoughts on 17 Tammuz

By Rabbi Meir Schweiger

There are no holidays that are celebrated during the month of Tammuz. Instead, the month is known for its fast day, the 17th of Tammuz, which ushers in a period of mourning for the destruction of the Temple. This period is generally referred to as the "three weeks" or Bein HaMetzarim (lit. between the straits) because it culminates with the fast of the Ninth of Av (3 weeks later), which marks the destruction of the Temple.

According to the Mishna (Taanit 4:6), five calamities befell the Jewish people on the 17th of Tammuz: 1) Moses broke the two tablets of stone; 2) the daily offerings ceased to be brought in the Temple; 3) the walls of Jerusalem were breached (prior to the destruction of the Temple); 4) Apostomus burned a Torah scroll; and 5) an idol was erected in the Temple.

When we examine these tragedies, it seems to me that the common thread which they share is the idea of "breakdown in structure", which is reflected in three realms: 1) the sacred objects that testify to the covenantal relationship between G-d and the Jewish people, 2) the Temple, as the house of G-d and the domain for His service, 3) the city of Jerusalem, which bonds and unites the Jewish people - socially, politically, and religiously. Each incident ultimately mirrors an internal breach. When Moses breaks the tablets, he is responding to the construction and worship of the Golden Calf. He demonstrates very graphically to the people of Israel how they have shattered their relationship with G-d. In a similar vein, Apostomus' burning of the Torah occurs in a reality when Jews are assimilating and abandoning the Torah's precepts. An idol is erected in the Temple and the daily offerings cease to be brought because the Temple is no longer fulfilling its role - worship has become perfunctory and self-gratifying, idolatry is rampant, and there is no longer the sense of awe of the Divine Presence in His abode. The breach of the walls of Jerusalem reflects the

divisiveness of the people, the exploitation of the poor, murder, adultery, and the unbridled hatred that have become the dominant features of the society.

The month of Tammuz always falls in the heart of the summer, a time when the harvest is in full swing, a time when society is experiencing the full effect of its power and affluence. There seems to be a recurring theme throughout Jewish (and general) history of affluence that breeds decadence and, ultimately, becomes self-destructive. The fast of the 17th of Tammuz is a time for introspection and self-examination. We are not only recalling the events of the past, but are expected to be exploring our own realities. We need to ask ourselves today, just as in the past: 1) how important is Torah in our lives, both in terms of study and practice? 2) How do we relate to our Houses of Worship, and the services therein? Are they vehicles for an I-Thou encounter, for creating a "Holy space"? 3) Do we seek the unity of the Jewish people and work towards creating a more cohesive and just society, a people that can truly be a "light unto the nations"?

We have the capacity to mend the "breaches and create a much better reality; we have the ability to turn these days of fasting into days of rejoicing!