

LESSON 9

HOW WOULD THEY SURVIVE?

I. What is the aim of this lesson?

The aim of this lesson is to explore different approaches toward Jewish survival after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple and the exile of the People from the Land.

II. Why is this lesson important?

Although the Jewish People have survived, and at times even thrived, outside the Land, their survival could not be taken for granted when they were first exiled from it. The tribes of Israel who were exiled in 722 BCE largely assimilated into the local culture and there was no way for the tribe of Judah to be absolutely certain that they would not suffer the same fate. The fact that the Jews in Babylonia came to terms with the loss of their national homeland and found ways to adapt to the new circumstances became one of the hallmarks of Jewish existence throughout the ages, and it was their unwillingness to relinquish the dream of an eventual return to the Land that served as an inspiration to future generations.

III. Texts, questions and central ideas of the lesson:

Background

In the latter half of the 8th century BCE the kingdom of Assyria became a world empire which changed the face of the ancient Near East. In addition to transforming conquered states into Assyrian provinces administered by Assyrian governors, the Assyrian kings developed a process of mass deportation and resettlement. Entire conquered populations were exiled from their land and resettled in other regions of the empire in the hope that they would assimilate among the local population and no longer pose a threat to the empire. After conquering Syria, the Assyrians headed southward. In 732, they conquered many cities in the northern Kingdom of Israel, exiled their populations, and after an unsuccessful uprising in 722 BCE, they conquered the capital city Samaria and exiled most of its population, which marked the end of the Kingdom. According to the Bible (II Kings 17:7-23), the destruction of the Kingdom of Israel and the exile of the northern tribes was God's punishment for their sins (see our previous lesson). While little is known about their fate after they were exiled, it appears that the fate of Israel.

ority assimilated into the surrounding population, thus sharing the fate of every ethnic community exiled by the Assyrians. They would later become known as the “lost tribes”

Unlike the Kingdom of Israel, The Kingdom of Judah in the south managed to survive the onslaught of the Assyrians. However, when the Judean king Hezekiah joined an anti-Assyrian coalition, the Assyrians invaded and destroyed many Judean cities and besieged Jerusalem. Nevertheless, for reasons that are not entirely clear, Jerusalem was spared. Toward the end of the 7th century BCE, the Assyrian empire began to decline which allowed for the renewed political independence and cultural self-assertion of Judah, particularly under the reign of Josiah in 640-609 BCE. Soon thereafter, however, the Babylonians were quickly becoming the dominant force in the region. In 597 BCE they invaded Judah, deported the Judean king Jehoiachin and his court along with the elite members of Judean society, and plundered the Temple and the king’s treasuries. Encouraged by Egyptian promises and faith in the invulnerability of Jerusalem and the Temple, the newly appointed king Zedekiah tried to defy Babylonia. This led the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar to order the burning of the Temple, the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of most of the remaining population of Judea to Babylonia, during the month of Av, 586 BCE. This marked the end of the Kingdom of Judah. Afterwards, only a few remained in the Land while others fled to Samaria, Edom, Moab, Ammon and Egypt. According to the Bible (II Kings 21:1-18 and 23:26-27), the destruction of the Kingdom of Judah and the Temple was brought about by God because of the sins of King Manasseh (690-642 BCE) and the evils committed by the People under his influence.

Thus, the People of Israel whose history and identity were largely defined by their 600 year presence in their homeland with the Temple as their religious center now had to find a way to survive outside of the Land and without the Temple. **The question was how? What could they do to avoid the fate of their brethren in the north?**

In the following texts we will study several different approaches to survival outside the Land.

Text 1- Psalms 137:1-6 – Sadness and Despair

What does this text tell us about Jewish survival after the destruction and the exile?

This text is a dramatic description of the sadness and despair of the recent exiles to Babylonia. “By the rivers of Babylon there we sat and wept as we thought of Zion.” The destruction and the devastation were so overwhelming that all they could do was grieve over their loss. The rivers of Babylon, which served as a symbol of fertility and bounty to others, meant nothing to them. Rather than see in the rivers a sign of hope for a brighter future, they only magnified the void and the emptiness in their hearts. To make matters even worse, their captors tried, but without success, to torment them by

forcing them to sing some of the beautiful Temple songs. The People simply could not allow themselves “to sing a song of the Lord on alien soil”. Deeply aware of their homelessness and their alienation from God they felt compelled to pledge: “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither; let my tongue stick to my palate if I cease to think of you, if I do not keep Jerusalem in memory even at my happiest hour.”

Thus, we see that the people described in this text could not imagine life in the future that did not involve intense mourning over the past. They might yet find a way to survive in exile, and life might indeed go on, but it would largely be an empty and melancholy existence; a life lived in the shadow of the past.

Text 2 - Jeremiah 44:1-19– The Rejection of God

What does Jeremiah tell the Jewish community in Egypt?

In this text the prophet Jeremiah addresses the people who had fled Judah to Egypt after the destruction (see the background section). In an effort to emphasize the gravity of their continued worship of foreign gods there, he reminds them that it was the sin of idolatry which led to the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem and their exile in the first place. He then implores them to learn their lesson from the past and not to repeat the same mistakes: “Why are you doing such great harm to yourselves... for you vex me by your deeds, making offering to other gods in the land of Egypt where you have come to sojourn... Have you forgotten the wicked acts of your forefathers, of the kings of Judah and their wives, and your own wicked acts and those of your wives, which were committed in the land of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem”?

How do they respond to this rebuke? Do they follow his advice?

The response recorded in this text is one of the most striking in all of biblical literature. Not only do they refuse to change their ways as one might have anticipated but they vow to continue worshiping the god that they have chosen – the Queen of Heaven (either an Assyrian-Babylonian or a Canaanite goddess). Why? Because, in their view, the entire premise upon which Jeremiah built his case was false. The destruction was not caused by their *worship* of a foreign goddess, as Jeremiah claimed; to the contrary! It was caused by their very *rejection* of that goddess: “For then we had plenty to eat, we were well-off, and suffered no misfortune. But ever since we stopped making offerings to the Queen of Heaven and pouring libations to her, we have lacked everything, and we have been consumed by the sword and by famine.”

The question if of course, how could they read history in this manner? Didn't they see that Jeremiah's perspective was borne out by history; that when they worshiped God things went well and when they did not disaster ensued?

Apparently, even in the minds of people at the time, history was not so clear cut. Although Manasseh introduced the worship of foreign gods and other abominations into the Temple (see II Kings 21:1-9) he enjoyed a long and relatively peaceful reign which ended in the hope of the imminent liberation from Assyrian rule. Conversely, the period of Josiah after him, which was marked by radical reforms in the cult and the destruction of all remnants of foreign worship, ended in intense conflict among the people, the growing oppression of the poor, political turmoil and the rise of the Babylonian empire resulting in the eventual destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. Thus, it was perfectly reasonable to suggest that it was their worship of a foreign goddess that generated their good fortune and success while it was their rejection of that goddess that led to their misfortune and trouble. Since that is how they viewed the past, they concluded that the best way to survive in the future was to ignore Jeremiah's warnings and revert back to their former worship.

In the following texts we will examine two additional approaches to survival.

Text 3 - Lamentations 5:1-22 – Grief and Prayer to God

Background

The Book of Lamentations describes the horrors and the atrocities of the long siege of Jerusalem as well as the grief and the mourning that followed the fall of the city and the destruction of the Temple (It is appropriately read on *Tishah B'av*, the day that commemorates the destruction.). While most of the book is an expression of grief over the horrors of the past, the section we have chosen also touches on the causes of the destruction and the prospects for the future.

Unlike the people in the previous text who attribute the destruction to the rejection of a foreign goddess in favor of the God of Israel, the people in this text assume that God brought about the destruction and the suffering as a punishment for their sins against Him (see verses 7, 16 and our previous lesson). **But if the People are sinners then what hope do they have for the future?**

The answer is found at the very end of the chapter (which also concludes the book). Since God "is enthroned forever" and His throne "endures through the ages" it cannot be that the destruction of His Temple marks the end of His kingdom on earth. And if God's rule continues to live on despite the destruction of His Temple, then perhaps he will find it in His heart to allow the People to live on and to reestablish their relationship with Him, despite their sins. Thus, the People turn to God in a desperate

appeal: "Take us back, O Lord, to Yourself, and let us come back; Renew our days as of old!" In other words, the key to their future survival lies with God. Since God has justifiably inflicted harsh punishment on them they appeal to Him because only He can change their fortunes. Only after He takes them back and welcomes them again under the Divine Presence can they "come back" and their days be renewed "as of old".

The following text offers yet a different approach to survival, one that would serve as a paradigm for Jews in the generations to come.

Text 4 - Jeremiah 29:1-14 – A Program for the Future

Although when Jeremiah wrote this letter in 594 BCE Jerusalem and the Temple had not yet been destroyed, he did not want the People who were exiled to Babylonia along with Jehoiachin (see background) to have illusions about the future. Jerusalem and the Temple, he insisted, will soon be destroyed, despite reports to the contrary. The key to their survival, therefore, is not in engaging in futile attempts aimed at preventing the inevitable nor is it in allowing themselves to be paralyzed by the prospect of life outside the Land. Rather it is in their ability to adapt to the new reality, to create their lives anew and make the best of the situation: "Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat their fruit. Take wives and beget sons... multiply there do not decrease. Seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you and pray to the Lord in its behalf for in its prosperity you shall prosper".

But does this mean that the People must resign themselves permanently to life in exile, that there is no hope for their return and the renewal "of our days as of old"? In the name of God, Jeremiah assures them "When seventy years of Babylonia are over... I will fulfill to you My promise of favor – to bring you back to this place". In other words, although Jeremiah tells the People to focus their attention on rebuilding their lives in Babylonia they can take comfort in the fact that the day will come when they will call upon God and "He will give heed to you... You will search for Me and you will find Me... and I will restore your fortunes and I will gather you from all the nations and from all the places to which I have banished you-declares the Lord-and I will bring you back to the place from which I have exiled you."

What is the difference between this approach and the previous approaches?

Unlike those who were overwhelmed by despair as they sat by the rivers of Babylon, unable and unwilling to forget Jerusalem and the glory of the past, unlike those who would wait in abeyance until the time that God will rescue them from their plight, and unlike those who refused to accept God's judgment, Jeremiah proposes a way of living in the present without losing sight of their glorious past

and without losing hope in their return and restoration in the future. He instructs them to live their lives in the present to the fullest, imperfect as it may be, while having faith in, and praying for, a better day. And he assures them that if they follow his advice the bright future can be found just around the corner.

Ironically, the Jews in Babylonia followed his advice all too well. By the time the opportunity arose in 538 BCE to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild the Temple, most of the people had already settled comfortably in Babylonia and only a fraction of the People were willing to uproot themselves and return to the Land.

IV. Suggested Lesson Plan

Step 1

It is recommended to begin with a series of questions that will help introduce the subject of this lesson. The following are a few examples: How did you feel when you were younger and your parents sent you to your room when you misbehaved? How did it affect your behavior afterwards? For those of you who have had to move to a different home or community, what were your initial reactions? Did you harbor any resentment against your parents? How were you able to adjust to the new circumstances? How would you feel if you were told that your synagogue would be destroyed and all its members would be forced to relocate to another community? How would you feel if your country were conquered by an invading force, your national symbols and homes destroyed and you, your family and entire community were forced to start all over in a new country? How would you feel if your country was the place your parent, grandparents and great grandparents lived for over 600 years?

Step 2

Summarize the historical background as outlined above. Then ask: How do you think the People might react to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple and their exile from the Land? How will they survive?

Mention that each of the 4 texts in this lesson represents a different approach to this critical question.

Step 3

Study and analyze text 1. How did the People described in this text expect to survive the destruction and the exile?

Step 4

Study and analyze text 2 guided by the questions in bold print. How do you feel about the theology of the Jews in Egypt?

Step 5

Study and analyze texts 3-4 guided by the questions in bold print.

Step 6

Summarize this lesson and then pose questions that relate to this lesson as well as to the course as a whole. The following are a few sample questions: What would it have been like if the Jews had not been exiled? Would you have wanted to be in the Land at the time? How do you feel about the promise regarding the Jews' eventual return to the Land? Is Israel the center of Jewish life today or are there a number of centers? What are the responsibilities of Diaspora Jews toward Israel? How does the existence of the State of Israel impact Jews in the Diaspora? What is your relationship with Israel? Has it changed at all as a result of this course?

V. Questions for Further Study

1. Read Jeremiah 32:1-15. What is the apparent contradiction between Jeremiah's actions in this text and his advice to the People in chapter 29 (text 4 above)? How can this be explained?
2. Read Leviticus 26:27-45 and Deuteronomy 30:1-5. What is the difference between these two texts in their perspective on the end of the exile?

VI. Literature for Further Reading

Baer, Y. (1977). *Galut*. Schocken Books. New York.

Baron, S. (1952). *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, Vol. I. Philadelphia: JPS, pp. 102-133.

Neusner, J. (1984). "The Jewish Condition after Galut" in *Diaspora; Exile and the Jewish Condition*. New York: Jason Aaronson, pp. 271-282.