

What Happens to a Society in Times of Trouble?

Five things befell our ancestors on the seventeenth of Tammuz and five on the ninth of Av. The seventeenth of Tammuz the Tablets were broken and the eternal light went out, and the city was breached, blasphemers burned the Torah and placed an idol in the sanctuary. On the Ninth of Av it was decreed against our ancestors that they would not go into the Land, and the Temple was destroyed the first time and the second time, and Betar was taken, and the city was ploughed. When Av enters rejoicing is lessened.

“Fourth Letter” by Moses Hess, from his book Rome and Jerusalem (1862):

My pious grandfather was one of those revered scholars who, though not using the Torah as a means of subsistence, yet possessed the title and knowledge of a rabbi. Every evening, at the close of his business day, he spent several hours in studying the Talmud and its commentaries. But in the “Nine Days” [of mourning leading up to the commemoration of the destruction of the Second Temple on Tisha B’Av] this study was interrupted, and instead he read with his grandchildren the stories and legends concerning the exile of the Jews from Jerusalem. The tears fell upon the snow-white beard of the stem old man as he read those stories, and we children, too, would cry and sob. I remember, especially, one particular passage which impressed us both deeply. It runs as follows:

“When the children of Israel were led into captivity by the soldiers of Nebuchadnezzar, their road lay past the grave of our Mother Rachel. As they approached the grave, a bitter wailing was heard. It was the voice of Rachel, weeping at the fate of her unhappy children.”

- Do these stories make us want to cry?
- Does the crying of adults make us feel this way?
- What are the adults crying about?

Meir Tzvi Grossman, “Al HaMoadim”, 50 Conversations on the Bible and Rabbinic Literature

“A time of trouble unto Jacob” (Jeremiah 30:7) Yet it is not said “Disaster” rather “trouble” and trouble means something different from Disaster. Disaster denotes a tragic and saddening event, a one-off. But a time of trouble signifies a period of suffering that may often last a long time. It is natural that such a period will arouse responses among those suffering, that are different from those that might arise from a disaster, and also after a disaster the public awakens and checks its causes and discusses how opportunities to avoid it might have been missed. It is even possible, that one may search for calming ways to move past the sadness, the grief, the depression, that result from the disaster. But “trouble” – will be met with different responses. In addition to checking what causes led to the trouble, there will appear – as long as the trouble continues – protest movements, calls to rebellion will be heard, and schools of thought will develop that wonder and doubt. At the same time a process will emerge of scrutinizing deeds and checking ways to escape from the trouble. It is possible that at this hard time many will be caught up in an atmosphere of despair, destructiveness, and depression, and they will begin to accommodate themselves to live in troubled times. An acceptance of the new situation will gradually take its central place.

- How do we as human beings deal with “Times of Trouble”?
- How do we respond in the eyes of Grossman?
- During contemporary troubled time, communal prayers or communal gatherings in support of protests and demonstration of solidarity are often organized. Why? Does this resonate with you?

In many places in the Jewish tradition moral and religious reasons are given for the destruction of the Temple and the Exile.

Tractate Shabbat 119b

Abaye said: Jerusalem was destroyed only because the Sabbath was desecrated therein, as it is said...

R. Abbahu said: Jerusalem was destroyed only because the reading of the shema morning and evening was neglected...

R. Hamnuna said: Jerusalem was destroyed only because they neglected [the education of] school children...

'Ulla said: Jerusalem was destroyed only because they [its inhabitants] were not ashamed of each other...

R. Isaac said: Jerusalem was destroyed only because the small and the great were made equal...

R. Amram son of R. Simeon b. Abba said in R. Simeon b. Abba's name in R. Hanina's name: Jerusalem was destroyed only because they did not rebuke each other...

Rab Judah said: Jerusalem was destroyed only because scholars were despised therein...

Tractate Gittin 56a:

He then sent against them Vespasian the Caesar who came and besieged Jerusalem for three years. There were in it three men of great wealth, Nakdimon b. Gorion, Ben Kalba Shabua' and Ben Zizith Hakeseth. Nakdimon b. Gorion ... One of these said to the people of Jerusalem, I will keep them in wheat and barley. A second said, I will keep them in wine, oil and salt. The third said, I will keep them in wood... These men were in a position to keep the city for twenty-one years... The Rabbis said to them: Let us go out and make peace with them [the Romans]. They would not let them, but on the contrary said, Let us go out and fight them. The Rabbis said: You will not succeed. They then rose up and burnt the stores of wheat and barley so that a famine ensued.

- Who is the enemy?
- What is the dynamic between internal conflicts and external conflicts?

A Prayer for Peace by R. Nachman of Breslav

May it be Your will, Adonai our God and God of our ancestors,
that You abolish all wars and bloodshed from this world
and extend a great and wonderful peace in the world.

Nations shall not lift up the sword against one another,
neither shall they learn to make war any more.

May all the inhabitants of this universe
acknowledge the one great truth;
that we have not come into this world
for friction and dissension,
nor enmity and jealousy and vexation and bloodshed.

We have come into the world solely
that we might know You,
eternally blessed One.

And therefore have mercy upon us
that through us
the written word will become a reality.

"And I will grant peace in the land,
and you shall lie down untroubled by anyone;
I will give the land respite from vicious beasts
and no sword shall cross your land." (Lev. 26:6)

"But let justice well up like water,
righteousness like an unfailing stream." (Amos.5:24)

"For the land shall be filled with devotion to Adonai
as water covers the sea." (Is. 11:9)