YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The 17th of Tammuz**

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In memory of Rabbi Moshe ben Avraham Shraga Furst *z”l*,
*Niftar* 17 Tammuz 5771.

Dedicated by his family.

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**From the Historical Fast to our Present Troubles**

**Based on a sicha by Harav Baruch Gigi**

Summarized by Shmuel Fuchs

Translated by David Strauss

**Two Types of Fasts**

The Rambam in *Hilkhot Ta’aniyot* teaches us that there are two types of fasts. The first is observed “in the event of any difficulty that arises,” and its purpose is to achieve “a manifestation of Divine mercy”:

It is a positive Torah commandment to cry out and to sound trumpets in the event of any difficulty that arises which affects the community, as it is stated: "[When you go out to war... against] an enemy who attacks you and you sound the trumpets." [This commandment is not restricted to such a limited scope; rather] the intent is: Whenever you are distressed by difficulties – e.g., famine, plague, locusts, or the like – cry out [to God] because of them and sound the trumpets… In addition, it is a Rabbinic ordinance to fast *whenever there is a difficulty that affects the community* *until there is a manifestation of Divine mercy*. (*Hilkhot Ta’aniyot* 1:1, 4)

The second type is observed at fixed times, and its purpose is to inspire us to “repent and improve our conduct”:

There are days when the entire Jewish people fast *because of the calamities that occurred to them then*, to arouse [their] hearts and initiate [them in] the paths of repentance. This will serve as a reminder of our wicked conduct and that of our ancestors, which resembles our present conduct and therefore brought these calamities upon them and upon us. *By reminding ourselves of these matters, we will repent and improve [our conduct],* as it is stated: "And they will confess their sin and the sin of their ancestors." (*Hilkhot Ta’aniyot* 1:4)

This year, the fast of the 17th of Tammuz meets both criteria: We must commemorate the events that happened to our forefathers on that date, and at the same time, we must cry out because of the great trouble in which we find ourselves at this time. This is true at all times, but all the more so when we are facing a global crisis.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Is there an intrinsic connection between these two types of fasts? On the face of it, they seem very different in nature: the gist of the one is crying out and praying, whereas the essence of the other is sorrow and mourning.

However, upon closer examination, there does seem to be a connection between the two types of fasts. Our Sages commanded us not to engage in excessive grieving over the destruction of the Temple,[[2]](#footnote-2) and the Rambam emphasizes that even the historical fasts focus on repentance – which means that even when we fast because of troubles that occurred to our forefathers, the goal is to contemplate the past in order to affect the future, and to correct the sinful conduct that led to the troubles in the first place. In this light, we can understand that the essence of both types of fasting is crying out and repenting, alongside feelings of sorrow and pain, and all this in anticipation of repair and building.

On this day of fasting, we will unite our historical memory with a contemporary cry for the troubles of the present in general, and especially for the corona pandemic. We will strive to repair the reality that brought these troubles upon us, as the Sages said: “Any generation in which the Temple is not built, it is as if it had been destroyed in their times” (see *Yerushalmi*, *Yoma* 1:1). As long as there is no repair, there is reason for continued destruction, and if we do not merit the rebuilding of the Temple, it means that we have not done enough for it to be rebuilt; therefore, it is as if had been destroyed in our own days.

We must cry out about our contemporary troubles. We must look inward, with all the modesty and restraint required of us at this time, in which all the nullity of man has been revealed: man who thought he had gained control of the world is controlled by a tiny virus. This is similar to what was said about the wicked Titus, who viewed himself as omnipotent: “God said to him: ‘I have a tiny creature in My world called a gnat…’ A gnat came and entered his nose, and it knocked against his brain for seven years” (*Gittin* 56b).

On this day, we must try to unite the two different cries together: the cry for repair and the rebuilding of the Temple and the kingdom, and the cry for the removal of the pandemic and the restoration of the health of our people and the world.

**The Cancellation of the Daily Offering, and Detachment from God**

At this point, let us turn back to two of the events that took place on the 17th of Tammuz: the cancellation of the daily offering and the breach of the city.

On the face of it, the cancellation of the daily offering seems like a relatively marginal event. It does not seem like a tragedy on the level of the uniquely difficult and painful events of the breaking of the tablets, the burning of the Torah, and the placing of an idol in the Sanctuary, as it involves “only” the passive cancellation of a positive commandment. However, it turns out that the cancellation of the daily offering was in fact an event of deep meaning, and perhaps even relates to a fundamental and essential root of the people's connection to the Temple, and thus to God. How so?

` We were commanded in two places to offer the daily offering: in *Parashat Tetzaveh* (*Shemot* 29:38-42) and in *Parashat Pinchas* (*Bamidbar* 28:1-8). The commandment in *Parashat Tetzaveh* clearly indicates that the daily offering gives expression to the constant connection between the people of Israel and God through the resting of the *Shekhina*:

It shall be a continual burnt-offering throughout your generations at the door of the tent of meeting before the Lord, *where I will meet with you, to speak there to you… And I will dwell among the children of Israel,* and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God, that brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, *that I may dwell among them.* I am the Lord their God. (*Shemot* 29:42, 45-46)

When the sacrifice is offered, the *Shekhina* rests there, and when it is cancelled, the *Shekhina* departs and laments: “Woe to the father who had to banish his children, and woe to the children who had to be banished from the table of their father” (*Berakhot* 3a).

In the twilight period of the Temple, there was a disregard for the connection between God and Israel. The people relied on the very existence of the Temple as a guarantee of their safety, along with investing all their wealth and fortune in pursuit of personal pleasures. The prophets constantly rebuked them for the mistreatment of the poor and wretched, the incest, and the bloodshed that had become rampant in those days, and it is clear that the loss of continuous contact with God did not bother the people. The cancellation of the daily offering, therefore, expressed the rift and disconnect between the people and God.

**Return to the Consciousness of Dependence on God**

This type of disconnect is a natural consequence of our global lifestyle. In this lifestyle, each person is focused on himself and his pleasures (those that are permitted and those that are not), and he thinks that he is in control of everything and that nothing will prevent him from acquiring what he wants. This person has completely forgotten his Maker and doesn’t “know before whom he stands” (see *Avot* 2:14), whether this finds expression blatantly or more subtly.

While this false sense of control and lack of dependence on God is problematic in itself, the more essential problem is that in the absence of a feeling of dependence on God, a cognitive disconnect is also created, and the connection to God is severed.

The sense of being in control and the failure to understand man’s dependence on God has grown stronger during the second wave of the corona pandemic. After control of the disease seemed to have been achieved by the end of the first wave, suddenly the virus raised its head again and we experienced another outbreak. The community at large has difficulty accepting such powerlessness, preferring to think that there is no pandemic and no danger, and therefore continues to scoff at the guidelines.

What drives this behavior is quite clear: It stems from confidence in the power of the human mind. We, however, who spend our days in the *beit midrash*, who pray three times a day and turn to God “as the eyes of servants to the hand of their master” (*Tehillim* 123:2), must wake up to reality and adopt a more modest view of man's place in the world. We must remember that the world has a Leader, and that man’s capabilities are limited.

We must remember “what is man, that You are mindful of him? And the son of man, that You think of him?” (*Tehillim* 8:5). If we wish to restore the daily offering, or at least repair the detachment to which its absence attests, we must look at man and his role in a more modest way: “Cease you from man, in whose nostrils is a breath; for how little is he to be accounted” (*Yeshayahu* 2:22).

The development of a true sense of dependence on God depends on our daily prayers that establish our connection to God and the feeling that we stand before Him – He who “all the beings… came into existence only from the truth of His existence” (Rambam, *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 1:1).

**The Breach of the City, and Division Among the People**

The breach of the city in the days of the Second Temple is more connected to matters of interpersonal relationships. The breach (which represents “the beginning of the end”) stemmed to a great extent from internal struggles between the defenders of the city and the rebels, which even included the burning of storehouses that were filled with food.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Hatred, discord, and unwillingness to listen to one another, or even to imagine that there is a hint of logic and truth in the opposing opinion, are well known in our generation as well, especially during the last year.[[4]](#footnote-4) Severe disagreements between different factions of the people, and even the unity government that we hoped would help – after three exhausting election campaigns – have not been helpful at all. It is evident how the government has been operating under the shadow of the usual political intrigues. Is this not the reason for the public's distrust of its leaders?

The troubles that the people of Israel are experiencing today, together with the rest of the world, in the struggle against the corona pandemic are critical for a sense of solidarity and national mutual responsibility. Without the partnership and willingness of all people alike, it will not be possible to stop the chains of infection. An individual can protect himself, but if the guidelines are not also kept by his neighbors and his fellow citizens, we have not achieved anything. If in one yeshiva the guidelines are followed and in another yeshiva they are not, the Torah that belongs to all of us will be in danger – together with all of society.

*Responsibility to Others*

 Thus, in addition to the dimension of dependence that this disease has taught us, it also wishes to tell us that we are all one unit and one people. We must all be careful to protect ourselves and others, our neighbors and brothers and sisters everywhere.

As Rav Kook wrote, the repair of the destruction that stemmed from “baseless hate” is “baseless love.” But the truth is that there is no such thing as “baseless love,” because there is always a reason to love one’s fellow, and we must always be responsible for each other. Being responsible for others is a constant demand that is made of us, but now even more so. We are all in one ship, and showing concern – both for ourselves and for others – is the order of the hour.

Perhaps this is also what the pandemic has come to teach us: to highlight the difficulties of individualism in western society, and the problematic nature of excessive focus on the individual and his rights. We live in God’s world, and therefore we do not have rights, but are instead laden with obligations. Especially during this period, we must restrict our freedoms for the common good.

**Conclusion**

 These are the things that we must correct at this time: Restoring our connection to God and the sense of dependence upon Him, on one level, and together with that, raising the feelings of unity and solidarity of our entire people, in order to stop the “breach of the people” and its division. May we live before God as the nation of God in the land of God. May we merit to have fulfilled in us the words of King David: “Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness, You who set me free when I was in distress; be gracious to me, and hear my prayer” (*Tehillim* 4:2).

[This *sicha* was delivered by HaRav Gigi on the 17th of Tammuz 5780 (2020).]

1. This *sicha* was delivered at the height of the corona epidemic. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See *Bava Batra* 60b. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Not to mention the very arrival of the Romans in Eretz Israel in the days of Pompey, which stemmed from the civil war between Hyrkanus and Aristobolus of the house of the Chashmonaim. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In the course of which there were three consecutive election campaigns. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)