

PARSHAT MASEI

SHABBAT SHALOM

As we approach Tisha Ba'av, we have many catastrophes to ponder – the sin of the spies, the destruction of the First and Second Temples, the fall of Beitar, and First and Second World War. I would like to concentrate on the destruction of the Second Temple.

Josephus recounts over one million casualties in the war that led to the Temple's destruction. These numbers do not take into account tens of thousands who became slaves nor thousands more who lost their homes and land.

The Jews had to pay a tax to the Roman god Jupiter in place of the half shekel they annually gave to the Temple.

In addition, they were subject to another onerous tax to maintain Roman soldiers and bureaucrats, who became their masters, and to forced labor.

It was under these conditions that Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai reconstituted Judaism in Yavneh more as the religion we know today and less as a cult that centered around the Temple.

Rabbi Yochanan's successor as leader of the Jews was Rabban Gamliel II. He was the son of Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel who was killed in the siege of Jerusalem and a direct descendant of Hillel the Elder, the Hillel of Hillel and Shamai fame.

To Rabban Gamliel we owe the requirement to say the Shemoneh Esreh, the 18 prayers that really are 19, for he had an extra prayer added to condemn the Minim, probably early Jewish converts to Christianity.

Why was Rabban Gamliel so insistent about the regular reciting of the Shemoneh Esreh. We can only speculate.

Against the backdrop of the destruction of the Temple we may understand his resolve this way. What do we ask for in the Shemoneh Esreh? We ask for the revival of the dead, mechaye hametim.

Among other matters we also ask for enlightenment, a return to Torah, repentance, relief from our misery and suffering, redemption, healing, prosperity, and freedom.

We seek the judges to rule over us once again, the scorners to be cursed, the seed of David to be restored, and G-d to listen to our prayers.

Of special importance we implore G-d to return to Zion.

We start with the revival of the dead and near the end say that the living should know G-d.

Then, we conclude with a prayer for peace, Sim Shalom, establish peace among Israel.

Then, as now our people suffered from bitter wars.

Rabban Gamliel's wish was for peace.

It is something for us to think about as we recite the Shemoneh Esreh.

To Rabban Gamliel we owe the obligation to say the evening service, of which the Shemoneh Esreh is a central part.

He forced his opinions on Rabbi Yehoshua, for which Rabban Gamliel was temporarily ousted as head of the Sanhedrin.

Rabban Gamliel was very insistent about our saying the Shemoneh Esreh in its entirety.

Neither Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Akiva, nor Rabbi Eliezer agreed with Rabban Gamliel's views.

Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Akiva allowed for a shorter version of the shemoneh esreh.

Rabbi Eliezer gave Rabban Gamliel a sharp retort, "He who makes his prayer fixed will find that his prayer lacks sincerity."

Rabban Gamliel was not willing to compromise. Three times a day we have to recite the Shemoneh Esreh.

In its entirety!!!

Three time a day we have to conclude with the wish for peace, the end to bloodshed.

Rabban Gamliel knew science and disputed with the philosophers. On many issues he had very liberal views. He bathed in a bath house in Akko that had Greek idols saying that the statutes were nothing more than an ornament, not some kind of gods. He spoke Greek fluently and often traveled to Rome to defend the Jewish people in front of imperial authorities.

His final days were marked by another important controversy concerning Torah authority that involved Rabbi Eliezer, the story of the oven and the Bat Kol, where it was decided that the majority opinion of the Rabbis and not the intervention of heaven was to be decisive in Jewish law.

This decision in an indirect way led to his death. Rabbi Eliezer, the same Rabbi Eliezer who opposed Rabban Gamliel on the fixed form of the Shemoneh Esreh, was the one to whom the Bat Kol appeared. He also happened to be Rabban Gamliel's brother-in-law.

Rabbi Eliezer suffered the humiliation of excommunication because of his challenge to the Rabbis in the case of the oven. After his excommunication, his wife, Rabban Gamliel's sister, refused to let Rabbi Eliezer bow during the Tachunun prayer.

She was certain that the power of her husband's supplication would lead to her brother, Rabban Gamliel's, death.

Distracted one day, she was not present when Rabbi Eliezer recited tachunun. As a result she was unable to stop her husband from bowing.

Meanwhile Rabban Gamliel died.

Rabban Gamliel was strict. He forcefully imposed his authority on the Rabbis in the period after the Second Temple's destruction, perhaps in a way not as sensitive as possible.

He insisted on the recitation of the shemoneh esreh three times a day in its entirety.

Everyday three times we must wish for peace.

Rabbi Gamliel shamed Rabbi Joshua, he hurt Rabbi Eliezer. He felt remorse about what he had to do.

Many stories are recounted about his humility. He maintained that he acted only in the interests of the people – to prevent strife and promote unity in the period after the destruction -- not to benefit himself or his family.

We need to remember this history. Our customs do not arise in a vacuum. They have historical roots.

These historical roots give them meaning, often one that is somber.

Our obligation is to recite the shemoneh esreh three times a day.

Our obligation is to conclude the shemoneh esreh with a prayer for peace

This custom was hoisted upon us by Rabbi Gamliel in the very dark period after the destruction of the second temple.

We need leaders that understand our history, that transform our tragedies into rejoicing.

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