

(Judy Shapiro- Shabbat Nachamu, 8/1/15)

Shabbat shalom. If you know this song, please join me:

“Al Naharot Bavel, al naharot Bavel, sham yashavnu, gam bachinu, B’zochreinu et tzion, b’zochreinu et tzion.” By the rivers of Babylon, there we dwelled and cried at our memory of Jerusalem. With Tisha B’av one week behind us, our ancestors would be enroute right now to Bavel, walking eastward on a long, sad trail of tears.

I recently read a book that brought to life this period of our history, the destruction of the first Temple in the year 586 BCE. Some of you may recall Allan Rabinowitz, who lived here in Minneapolis in the early 1990’s and taught Hebrew at Torah Academy. He made aliyah and became a guide and an author, and wrote a book of historical fiction called [The Disciple Scroll](#), about the period just before the destruction of the first temple, and about the life and prophecy of Jeremiah. It is told through the perspective of Baruch Ben Neriah, a historical figure known to be Jeremiah’s assistant and scribe. This well-researched book sparked my interest in this part of our history. We seem to know more about the second temple period and its destruction, with its inspiring stories of Masada, the Bar Kochba revolt, the moral of sinat chinam, than we know about the first temple. So I would like to share with you some of what I have learned about Jeremiah and the tumultuous years of political upheaval leading up to the destruction of the first temple.

The Ten tribes of the north had already been “lost” (that is, conquered by the Assyrians) about 135 years before the first temple fell. So the kingdom of Judah, consisting of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin constituted the remainder of the Jewish people. The kings of this period included Hezekiah, of the famous tunnel in Jerusalem, and then a series of bad kings who had let idolatry run rampant in Judea. Josiah took the throne in 640 BCE, tried to clean things up and put a stop to the idolatry that his father and grandfather had permitted, and it is during his reign that Jeremiah began to preach the received word of God. God said to Jeremiah, “Attack you they will; overcome you, they can’t”.

Jeremiah was a kohen from the town of Anatot, just north of Jerusalem, in the territory of Benjamin. He is known for preaching about the primacy of the individual's relationship to God. In his early prophecies he focused on repentance, and on spirituality and individualization. But when King Josiah died in the year 609, Egypt captured the succeeding king, and controlling the strings, placed Yehoyakim in power. This is when things took a steep downward turn for the Jewish people. All the reforms of Josiah reverted back to rampant idolatry. And this is where the story of "The Disciple Scroll" picks up. In 605 Bavel defeated the Egyptians and the Assyrian empire was gone. Nebuchadnezzar conquered the Philistines in 604, then Ashkelon fell, and so began Bavel's inevitable march toward Jerusalem. Inheriting this political chaos, Zidkiyahu, who was only 21 years old, took the throne in 597. 9 years later he openly declared for Egypt against Bavel, enraging Nebuchadnezzar, and on the 10<sup>th</sup> of Tevet the siege of Jerusalem began. Zidkiyahu begged Jeremiah to pray for help, but we know how the story goes from there. Far from praying for help, Jeremiah spoke loudly and fearlessly about the destruction that lay ahead. Whenever Jeremiah was imprisoned or silenced, he dispatched his scribe Baruch to read aloud his message. Baruch, like Jeremiah, was shunned, spat upon, and branded a traitor.

Like Moshe, Jeremiah did not want the job he was given by God. As he condemned the sinning of the people, he was the most hated and abused and persecuted of our prophets. Even his own tribe of Benjamin rejected and ridiculed him. For 40 years he preached, and the last 20 years it was all "doom and gloom", as we would say today. Imagine an impending war, with a cruel and terrifying power on our doorstep, and all the while someone standing continually in the marketplace, defying the government, utterly without concern for his own safety, insisting that the enemy is bound to destroy us! It confused and terrified the people, it undermined the king's efforts to keep the people behind him. Jeremiah was repeatedly thrown in jail, accused by the king as a traitor (for aiding and abetting the enemy). He was begged to change his message for the sake of the people's morale, but he never would concede. At one point a competing voice emerged in the false prophet Chananiah, claiming an opposing prophecy of peace and success for the people, which made the people hate Jeremiah even more. Zidkiyahu even threw Jeremiah into an empty cistern, hoping he would die without actually having to kill him. Rather than heeding the message, they tried to

silence the messenger. As God said, “Attack you they will; overcome you, they can’t.”

Inevitably, the Babylonians loved Jeremiah: they interpreted his prophecy of their victory as a good omen, and even offered him protection from his own government and shelter. But Jeremiah wasn’t just some sort of “Tokyo Rose”, selling his propaganda services to demoralize the troops: he stood firm in delivering the word of God, but the underlying message, how to avert the coming disaster, was never heeded by Zidkiyahu. Zidkiyahu had placed his faith in Egypt for salvation, instead of in God.

The most interesting part of this story, which I had never really appreciated, was the political uncertainty and chaos of the time. People passionately argued over the relative merits of the Egyptians or the Babylonians as protectors. The small Judean nation was always vulnerable, and in deciding to throw in their hat with Egypt, King Zidkiyahu made a huge tactical mistake, as well as a spiritual one. Jeremiah actually told Zidkiyahu to surrender to the Babylonians in order to spare the city, but he refused. As you can see, it’s not surprising the Babylonians would see Jeremiah as a useful tool in their war against the Jews. And not surprising that he would be seen at home as a traitor. When Jerusalem finally fell, Jeremiah and his assistant Baruch had been in prison for months, in a vain attempt by Zidkiyahu to silence his message. The ambivalence of the leadership is also interesting: obviously, they could have killed Jeremiah, but instead, they were sort of fearfully drawn in by his message: not enough to follow his advice, but enough to keep him alive with a loaf of bread a day in prison, while the rest of the besieged city was starving. They seemed to understand that Jeremiah was speaking God’s authentic word, although they couldn’t muster the political will to heed it. Attack him they did; overcome him, they couldn’t.

In the end, Nebuchadnezzar invaded, destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple, tortured and exiled Zidkiyahu, and sent the people in chains, back to Bavel into exile. As a token of their alleged benevolence, they left a small remnant in Mizpah, under the puppet governorship of Gedalia, whose murder by a Jewish opposition group we commemorate on Tzom Gedalia. Jeremiah had been offered

a choice by Nebuchadnezzar, as a sort of war hero: he could go back to Bavel as an honored guest, or stay with the remnant in Judea. Jeremiah chose to stay, and lived in Mizpah with Gedalia until that night of the murderous revolt, then went with his scribe and assistant Baruch, either to Egypt or to Bavel. Eight years after the temple fell, it is believed Jeremiah passed all his teachings on to Baruch, and then died an old and broken man. His end was so unremarked that no one even knows where he died, whether in Egypt or in Bavel.

Abraham Joshua Heschel commented about Jeremiah that “his personality was shattered by being a vehicle for divine revelation: how awful to see ahead one’s own failure”. I have come to understand and appreciate more fully, the tragedy of Jeremiah, the inconceivable burden of being compelled to preach an unpopular and doomsday message to the entire people, including those in power. Jeremiah risked his life continually, kept himself alone and miserable in order to deliver his message with purity of purpose. He was instructed by God not to be afraid, to stand and speak truth to power. He imposed on himself his life of loneliness and bitterness. His message teaches us today to shun idolatry in all its modern forms, to turn toward God, not to depend on a foreign power for protection, and to listen to the difficult warnings and messages that we don’t want to hear. Not to silence them, but rather to listen to them.

Shabbat shalom.