

Still On The Journey

By Rabbi Pinchos Lipschutz

On Friday, we usher in the month of *Av*, which conjures up so many bitter collective memories. On *Shabbos*, we *lain* the *parshiyos* of *Mattos* and *Masei*, which discuss the travels of the Jewish people in the desert. And then, when done, we call out to ourselves and each other, “*Chazak, chazak, venischazeik* – Let us be strong.”

The experience of the Jewish people ever since our founding has been full of hills and valleys, ups and downs, times of great tragedy and times of great deliverance, periods of enormous destruction and periods of tremendous growth.

And it's not only extended periods, because even during times of relative calm, such as ours, there are great tragedies as well as times of great exhilaration. Our job is not to be broken by tragedy and not to become complacent when things are going well. The *parshiyos* of *Sefer Bamidbar* are full of the ups and downs of *Klal Yisroel*, the nation rising to great heights and then suddenly plunging to catastrophic sin and then climbing back up.

Mattos and *Masei* read like the pattern of our people since the *churban*. We were here, we went there, we stayed for a while, and then we moved on to somewhere else, until we finally reached the Promised Land. We are still on the journey, however, traveling the world, as if on a giant cruise ship, docking in one place and then getting back onto the ship to decamp in some other city. We've been on that ship for almost two thousand years and have gotten seasick many times over as we await docking at our final destination with the arrival of *Moshiach*.

Throughout our history, the first week of *Av* has seen wrenching, with catastrophic events for the Jewish people. That legacy of sorrow and disaster continues. It's a sadness shrouded in this rootlessness, a sense that things are not as they should be and we are not where we should be.

As we enter *Chodesh Av*, we wonder what we can do to reverse that cycle. When will it end?

Our search for a ray of hope begins with the awareness that the root of all our sadness and misery is the *churban Bais Hamikdosh*. We reflect on the *Gemara* in *Maseches Yoma* (9b) that teaches that the first *Bais Hamikdosh* was destroyed because we did not properly observe the *halachos* of *avodah zorah*, *gilui arayos* and *shefichas domim*.

The *Gemara* says that at the time of the destruction of the second *Bais Hamikdosh*, the Jews were proficient in Torah and *gemillus chassodim*. What brought about that *churban* was *sinas chinom*.

We've heard it so many times, but apparently we need to continue hearing that since *sinas chinom* caused the *churban*, the final redemption likely won't take place until we have all been cured and cleansed from that sinful failing, ridding ourselves of the ridiculous hatred that seems to accompany the Jewish people wherever we are. Somehow, there is always a fight going on or brewing. For some reason, we can't disagree without getting into a battle and disparaging one another.

When will we say that we've had enough of hating others? When will we stop dividing ourselves into different factions?

Klal Yisroel has many *shevotim* with differing customs all rooted in Torah. Why must we call into question observant people who have different customs than us? Why can't we decide once and for all that what unites us is greater than what divides us and stop disparaging people who don't behave exactly the way we do?

Chodesh Av is about connection. It is about a relationship that was severed, to ultimately be renewed. We are working towards returning to our portion in Eretz Yisroel.

The *parshiyos* of *Mattos* and *Masei* are always read during the period of the Three Weeks. They deal with the connection of the Jewish people to Eretz Yisroel. We are connected to that land not only as a nation, but also as individuals.

The *parshiyos* contain the seeds of our *geulah*, lessons for us to improve our behavior in *golus* in order to merit our share in Eretz Yisroel.

Parshas Mattos begins with the laws of *nedorim* and *shavuos*, different types of vows and promises a person makes, and the obligation “not to defile your words and to do whatever you said you would” (30:3).

In our society, words are thrown around carelessly, sometimes to impress and sometimes just to pass time. In the social media generation, everything is superficial, most of all words. They are used to express opinions and feelings that contain little meaning and no depth. Little thought goes into what is said, or written. They are just released to provoke a momentary rise, a passing chuckle, and then on to the next silly thought. And if someone gets hurt in the process, it is of little concern.

There was a time when people valued written and spoken words, when they perceived the inherent value of every utterance. People thought before speaking, before writing, and certainly before publishing. Today – not to sound like a *kvetch* – people post and publish whatever pops into their head, without thinking about how it will impact other people, and whether it will bring harm or benefit anyone in any way.

We need to remember that words affect us and other people. What we say affects other people. To end the *golus* and help rebuild the *Bais Hamikdosh*, we should think before we speak and ensure that our speech is neither hurtful nor insulting.

Words have the power to break and to repair. The words we use can destroy a person’s self-confidence or build it up. Words heal and words sicken. Words bring people together and words separate people. Words can make enemies into friends and friends into enemies. The words we use have lasting repercussions.

In this period of the Nine Days, among the other things we do to mark the *churban* and seek to bring about the redemption, we can add to the list to be careful about what we say and write, refraining from engaging in idle chatter and certainly when it is harmful, hurtful, and without any benefit.

With such gestures, we can impress upon ourselves the great loss as we aspire to reach the levels of our forefathers with a home for the *Shechinah* in our world.

We know that whatever happens to us is but a sentence in an unfolding story. Chapters have been completed and many more remain to be written. We must forge ahead to our destiny, neither tiring nor being satisfied with past accomplishments, nor becoming bogged down by failure.

On *Tisha B'Av*, we mourn the tragedy of the loss of the *Bais Hamikdosh*. We also mourn the loss of Beitar. While we commonly understand that the tragedy of Beitar was that tens of thousands of Jews were killed in that city by the Romans after the *churban*, the *Rambam (Hilchos Taanis 5)* describes it a little differently:

"A great city by the name of Beitar was captured. Inside were many tens of thousands of Jewish people. They had a great king whom all of Yisroel and the rabbis believed was the king Moshiach. He fell into the hands of the gentiles and they were all killed. It was a great tragedy, as great as the destruction of the Bais Hamikdosh."

Rav Moshe Shapiro explained that the tragedy was that their king, Bar Kochva, who could have been *Moshiach*, was killed. What could have been a period of redemption instead became one of destruction. Through their *chatoim*, an era that could have returned the Jews to the state they awaited since the *chet hameraglim* turned into tragedy. That is what we mourn on *Tisha B'Av*.

We have come so close to the redemption that we can hear the footsteps of *Moshiach* and suffer from the *chevlei Moshiach*. Before *Moshiach's* arrival, the *tumah* of the world increases, as the *Soton* fights to prevent his arrival.

We must work to raise the levels of *kedusha* in this world so that we can overcome the *kochos hatumah* and allow *Moshiach* to reveal himself. It is plainly evident to anyone that *tumah* is spreading rapidly. It has a foothold everywhere and many have become entangled in its temptatious grasp.

The *posuk* tells us, *"Tzion bemishpot tipodeh veshoveha betzedakah."* If we do what is correct and engage in righteousness and charity, we strengthen *kedusha* in the world and weaken the *koach hatumah*.

Nisyonos abound. The test of greatness is how you handle a moment you didn't expect. If you have strengthened yourself through learning Torah and *seforim* such as *Chovos Halevavos* and *Mesilas*

Yeshorim, you will be able to withstand difficult situations. The *yeitzer hora* won't be able to destroy you. Even if you temporarily fail, you will be able to rebound.

The Satmar Rebbe, Rav Yoel Teitelbaum, would say that following the awful tragedies of the Holocaust, Hashem was about to bring *Moshiach*. As a taste of the redemption to come, He gave the Jewish people the Land of Israel. It wasn't complete ownership; it was in the hands of scoffers. The *Bais Hamikdosh* wasn't returned; *halacha* did not rule. It was a taste of things to come. But the Jewish people were satisfied with the bone that had been thrown to them, so Hashem said, "If so, you aren't deserving of the redemption," and we were left with this small semblance of what could be.

Like two thousand years ago in Beitar, we were so close to redemption, but we transgressed. The blood that could have been the fuel of *geulah* was spilled in yet another *churban*.

It is not enough to abstain from swimming, music, and wearing new clothes. We also must realize that there is something wrong with us and the way we live. We need to know that we are not meant to be here, that we are in *golus*, removed from our right place in the world. We need to know that we, with the way we live, act and speak, have the ability to bring about the *geulah*.

We travel. We go to Eretz Yisroel and tour the Holy Land. We go to Yerushalayim and tear *kriah* at the sites of the *churban*. We go to the place from where the *Shechinah* never left and stand at the *Kosel*, imagining what was and what will be. We go to Bais Lechem and Chevron to *daven* at the *kevorim* of the *avos* and *imahos*. We feel their presence and beseech Hashem to help us in their merit. We ask to be united with them at *techiyas hameisim*.

At great expense, people travel to the *alter heim* in the countries of Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Belarus, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Croatia, Germany, Morocco, Spain, Turkey, and the other stations along the path of *golus*. They visit the old *botei medrash*, *shuls*, *yeshivos* and cemeteries, and *daven* to be united with our ancestors.

Wherever Jews find themselves these days, we mourn all the terrible tragedies that befell us since the *Botei Mikdosh* were destroyed. We get past the usual superficiality and frivolity. We take a break from the hubbub of life and think about all the persecutions, inquisitions, murders, pogroms, destruction and ruin that the Jewish people have suffered since we went into *golus* until the Holocaust

and this very day. We think about all the untimely deaths and losses, and we seriously ponder why they happened and what we can do about it.

Our ship sailed a long time ago, it is now approaching the port and about to lay anchor. A large ship needs tugboats to push and navigate it to shore. We are all little tugboats. Let's give it the final push it needs.