



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BAMIDBAR > Balak

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Balak/17th of Tammuz

A Breach in the Wall



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

How are we to look at the recent events disrupting the world around us: A man in a commercial truck cold-bloodedly crushes throngs of innocent men, women and children enjoying their holiday on the promenade in Nice, France. A sniper picks-off police officers in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, another in Dallas, Texas. An attempted coup erupts in Turkey. In Israel, a young girl is slaughtered in her own bed in Kiryat Arba by an Arab teenager. A little while later, a rabbi is killed, father to ten holy children, now orphans, in Otniel. And that's just the events of the last two weeks!

From one end of the globe to the next, existing walls and structures are being breached. From Brexit rupturing the EU to the upheavals in the current US presidential election, disruption is in the air.

What are we to make of these breaches in the walls of convention?

Today, the 17th of Tammuz, provides us with the answer. On this day 2,438 and 1,948 years ago respectively the walls of Jerusalem were breached, leading to the destruction of the two Temples three weeks later, on the 9th of Av. The 17th of Tammuz is therefore normally a fast day, but this year it has been upended and suspended by Shabbat (and instead we fast on Sunday).

Why do we commemorate the breaching of the walls (and not just the destruction of the Temples)? What is its significance?

Both the consequences of these breaches, and the fact that this year the fast is pushed off by Shabbat, teach us tremendous lessons about the breaches in our social order today.

We will learn that breaches are tremors leading to true change. It is up to us to determine how that change will manifest. We have the power to ensure that breaches, as painful as they may be, can lead us to a new world order.

It is time, dear friends, to suspend all lamentation and mourning forever by rebuilding walls wherever they are breached.

**A BREACH IN THE WALL:
WHAT DO JERUSALEM, NICE, ISTANBUL, DALLAS & BATON
ROUGE HAVE IN COMMON?**

1. The Water Carrier (Story)

There was once a water carrier. The water carrier would draw water from a well and put the water into two buckets. One bucket would hang on one end of a pole which he placed over his shoulder; the second bucket would hang on the other end of the pole. Every day the water carrier would walk from the well at the outskirts of town to bring water to the home of his master, a great mystical scholar.

One day, under his great burden, the water carrier dropped his pole and one of the buckets cracked against the side of a rock. The carrier could not afford a new bucket and, while the other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water at the end of the long walk from the well to the home of his master, the cracked pot arrived only half full.

For a full two years this went on daily, with the carrier delivering only one and a half pots full of water to his master's house. Of course, the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments. But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its imperfections and miserable that it was able to accomplish only half of what it had been made to do. After two years of what it perceived as bitter failure, it spoke to the water carrier one day by the well.

"I am ashamed of myself, and I want to apologize to you."

"Why," asked the carrier? "What are you ashamed of?"

"I have been able, for these past two years, to deliver only half my load because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your master's house. Because of my flaws, you have to do all of this work and you don't get full value for your efforts," the cracked pot said.

The water carrier felt sorry for the old cracked pot and in his compassion he said, "As we return to the master's house I want you to notice the beautiful flowers along the path."

Indeed, as they went up the hill, the old cracked pot took notice of the sun warming the beautiful wild flowers on the side of the path, and this cheered it some. But at the end of the trail, it still felt bad because it had leaked out half its load, and so again it apologized to the carrier for its failure.

The carrier said to the pot, "Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of the path but not on the other pot's side? That's because I have always known about your flaw, and I took advantage of it. I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walked back from the stream, you've watered them. For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate my master's table. Without you being just the way you are, he would not have this beauty to grace his house."

2. The Raging Current of Current Events

The pots of life have begun to crack. The structure of normalcy has begun to crumble. The walls of the status quo have been breached.

If you think I am just aiming for a dramatic effect, follow the raging current of current events and you, too, will conclude that this is no drama – this is reality!

- In a bloody carnage, a man in a commercial truck cold-bloodedly mows down and crushes throngs of innocent men, women and children enjoying their holiday on the promenade in Nice, France.
- A sniper picks-off police officers in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, another in Dallas, Texas.
- An attempted coup erupts in Turkey.
- In Israel, a young girl is slaughtered in her own bed in Kiryat Arba by an Arab teenager.
- A little while later, a rabbi is killed, father to ten holy children, now orphans, in Otniel.

And that's just the events of the last two weeks!

Take into consideration the overall upheaval taking place over the last 15 years in the Middle East, Europe and the world, the appalling massacres by Muslim terrorists, ISIS, Hamas, Iran – and we have a full blown shattering of the walls of our existing world order.

From one end of the globe to the next, existing walls and structures are being breached and toppled. From Brexit rupturing the EU (Great Britain leaving that alliance) to the upending taking place in the current US presidential election, disruption is in the air.

The tumultuous winds of uncertainty used to blow strong in the Middle East, while the rest of the world sat in comfortable denial and ignorant bliss. Today, hurricanes of uncertainty rage throughout the globe.

And the question confronts us: What does it all mean and what are we supposed to do about it?

What are we to make of these breaches in the walls of convention?

3. 17th of Tammuz

Today, the 17th of Tammuz, provides us with the answer. On this day 2,438 and 1,948 years ago respectively the walls of Jerusalem were breached, leading to the destruction of the two Temples three weeks later, on the 9th of Av.

The 17th of Tammuz, *Shiva Asar b'Tammuz*, is therefore normally a fast day, but this year because today is Shabbat, the fast is suspended until tomorrow.¹ Shabbat is a day of joy and transcendence and joy and transcendence always supersedes sadness. If today were not Shabbat, we would be fasting and beginning the saddest three weeks of the Jewish calendar, which culminate with the fast of *Tisha b'Av*, the 9th of Av.

Why do we normally fast on the 17th of Tammuz? The Talmud explains:

Five things happened to our ancestors on the 17th of Tammuz: 1) The tablets [of the Ten Commandments] were broken, 2) the continuous [daily offering in the Temple] ceased, 3) The walls [of Jerusalem] were breached, 4) Apustumus burned the Torah, 5) The graven image [of an idol] was placed in the Sanctuary [by Menashe].²

All these five reasons are in some way a breach, but it is most vividly manifest in the breaching of Jerusalem's walls (as well as in the breaking of the tablets).

Why do we commemorate the breaching of the walls (and not just the destruction of the Temples)? What is its significance?

¹ Megilah 5b.

² Mishne Taanit 26a-b.

Since at the end of the story the Temples were ultimately and tragically destroyed, why do we today need to remember and honor the breach of the walls, which pales in comparison to the actual destruction of Temples?!

Because a breach – a crack of any sort – is a sign, a warning of things to come. In this instance, the breach of the Jerusalem walls on the 17th of Tammuz was a warning and wakeup call that the situation is dire. Take for example the feeling of pain: Pain is a signal that something is wrong and action is needed quickly in order to prevent the problem from escalating and leading to worse things, even death, G-d forbid.

The destruction of the Temple was a result of the Jews crimes and iniquities. The Second Temple was destroyed due to *sinas chinam*, baseless or senseless hatred between the people.³

The breach in the walls was a warning, a wakeup call: Do something now to prevent the destruction from coming. But sadly, the problem was not remedied. And thus the breach became far worse – a precursor to the disaster that followed: the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians and the destruction of the rebuilt Second Temple by the Romans, both of which happened three weeks later on the same day, *Tisha b'Av*.

4. It Starts with a Breach of the Wall

A wall symbolizes normalcy and the parameters of healthy structures, including the demarcation of boundary between countries and between ideologies. A wall signifies a line drawn between culture and barbarism, between religion and state, between right and wrong. A wall defines the border between the holy and the profane, between the six days of the week and Shabbat, between the Jewish people and the nations of the world, between people who live up to the Divine Image in which they were created and those who desecrate its purity.

³ Yuma 9b.

The start of something negative begins with a breach in the wall. A house doesn't crumble overnight; a Temple is not razed with one blow. The destruction begins slowly, with a small crack – a window shattered here, a brick dislodged there.

Before you know it, the wall comes tumbling down and what was now isn't and what will be is unknown.

The breach is where all destruction begins.

5. A Warning

I am sure many of you are thinking: So, is the rabbi saying that when a wall is breached it is all over? Was the destruction of the Temple an unchangeable fact once Jerusalem's walls were breached?

Absolutely not! I mean the exact opposite.

The breach in a wall is like a human being suddenly discovering something wrong – like elevated blood pressure or irregular heartbeat. It doesn't mean that there will be a stroke or heart attack, but it is a warning.

When we get a warning, we can have one of two reactions: 1) ignore it and wait for the inevitable outcome, or 2) address it, repair the breach before there is more damage.

A breach is either the beginning of destruction or the beginning of construction. The choice, my dear friends, is ours.

Breaches can break us or they can compel us to fix things. Use the breach to build walls of a magnificent structure that unites families and bridges polarities – whether between liberals and conservatives, religious and secular, or right and left.

The reason we Jews commemorate the 17th of Tammuz is to remind us to heed the breaches, fix them, and ensure they don't happen again.

This offers us many lessons, both personal, which can be personalized to each of one of us, and collective, and also shed light on the breaches we are experiencing today.

Here are a few personal lessons that I would like to impart to you – lessons which can be learned from the breaching of Jerusalem’s walls back then and the breaching of the world’s walls today (with events in Israel, France, Turkey, Britain, the US...)

6. Personal Lesson One

Lesson One:

The wall around a city is only a wall, but it protects the citizens of the city. Our skin consists of outer layers that are not nearly as life sustaining as our vital organs, yet they are the key to protecting our insides from infection.

We build many walls in our lives to protect ourselves and our loved ones. Walls include small things we do for them that may not be the essence of our relationship, but they express by far the deepest dimension of our relationship.

The deepest love, for instance, is expressed not in the things that we are required or asked to do – not even in the things that our beloved hints that we do – but in the things that we do out of sheer desire to please the other, the so-to-speak “optional walls” we build that surround and protect the vital aspects of the relationship.

Walls also include special care we take to ensure that our weak and blind spots not get the better of us. If we are particularly prone, say, to bouts of anger, we have to build extra “walls” – be extra careful, employ additional measures to prevent this part of us from bursting out of control.

Each of us has areas of weakness where we need protective “walls” and boundaries.

Never allow those walls to be breached. Never think, “Hey who cares about the walls, as long as the inside is intact.” Never underestimate the power of intact walls. Because a breach in a wall can lead to more serious consequences.

7. Personal Lesson Two

Lesson Two:

On this day, not only the walls of Jerusalem were breached, but the tablets of the Ten Commandments were also broken.

On one hand, a broken thing is nothing positive. On the other hand, when something breaks it is a warning signal that there is an underlying problem. Had it not cracked and broke, we would never have known that we needed to repair the underlying problem.

When he broke the tablets, Moses was actually telling the people of Israel that, by building the Golden Calf, they had broken their commitment to G-d and compromised their special relationship with Him.

These tablets represented G-d giving of His essence to the Jewish people. Just as the sacred words of the Ten Commandments were engraved on these stone tablets, so too, was G-d engraving Himself into their very beings. By building the Golden Calf and worshipping a false G-d, the people in effect “broke” this essential connection (on the surface level at least). And Moses was simply demonstrating this spiritual break by physically breaking the tablets.

And, in doing so, Moses brilliantly and subtly revealed the cure for a problem such as this. Feel broken for your errors, and you are on your way to redeeming yourself. “Nothing is as complete as a broken heart,” says the Rebbe Yosef Yitzchak. The first step to healing and growth is humbly recognizing that you are broken. If you feel complete when you really are not, you are truly lost. When you are aware that you are broken, then you are on your way to repairing yourself.

This is why the broken tablets lay side by side with the complete ones in the Ark of the Covenant. If they represented only the tragic event of the past, why would we want to remind ourselves of that fact by preserving the broken pieces? The truth is they carry a positive message – a reminder that for us to be truly complete we must also know where we are broken. This is not meant to demoralize us – just the opposite. It is meant to uplift and motivate us to heal, grow and become greater than before.

Life breaks all people, but some of us are stronger in the broken places, because we have confronted whatever needed mending. When we have broken something in life but go on as if nothing happened, it is hard to imagine how we can ever heal that break.

Being aware of the break helps us find our way back. Allowing it to continue until it becomes the “natural” state of affairs, is not only tragic, but leaves us with little hope for ever awakening.

The 17th of Tammuz wakes us up to the fact that there is something broken, and that we have the power to fix it.

8. Personal Lesson Three

Upheavals and ruptures open up the doors for new and unprecedented revelations.

We must always know that a breach is a crack that opens us up to a new reality. Cracks are how the light gets in (paraphrasing Leonard Cohen).

It is up to us to determine how that change will manifest. We have the power to ensure that breaches, as painful as they may be, can lead us to a new world order.

9. Shabbat and Suspension of the Fast (Conclusion)

Even though it is the 17th of Tammuz and we are examining its lessons, we are not fasting or mourning. The reason for this is Shabbat. On Shabbat, the fast of 17th Tammuz is suspended. In the words of the Talmud, *Ho'il v'nidcha yidcha – since it is suspended, let it remain suspended*. This refers to a debate between the Sages, as to whether a fast suspended due to Shabbat should be postponed to the next day. Most sages maintained that it should (and this is the law), but one Sage opined that *since it is suspended, let it remain suspended*, so let us not mourn nor fast at all.⁴

But the mystics⁵ read this a little differently: *Ho'il v'nidcha yidcha – since it is suspended, let it remain suspended forever!* Since the joy and transcendence of Shabbat has the power to supersede and replace the sadness over the devastation, let us tap into our inner Shabbat, our inner peace, our inner wholeness and tranquility where there are no breaches and suspend the sadness and destruction forever!

Furthermore: May the powerful soulfulness of Shabbat transform the breaches into openings for greater revelations.

The destruction of the Temple was the result of people not getting along. In other words, one might say that the breach in the walls of Jerusalem was a result of the breach between brothers.⁶ Sadly, when people destroy one another, the outcome is the destruction of everything near and dear, and especially the Temple which manifests the Divine presence on Earth.

The cure to and suspension of this devastation is Shabbat, peace, oneness. We transform the unhealthy breach of baseless and senseless hatred into a healthy breach of the norm through baseless and super-rational love (beyond the one dictated by logic).

⁴ Megilah 5b.

⁵ See Likkutei Sichot vol. 33, pp. 156-163.

⁶ Yerushalmi, Yoma 1:1; Bavli Yoma 9a-b.

So let us build walls that unite, walls that allow us to live together, walls that contain dining rooms brimming with the royalty of a regal Shabbat feast, walls of homes that invite guests, walls that protect humanity, walls that are never breached.

And even when there is a breach, let us use the breach as a springboard to leap into new unprecedented ways of loving each other.

And our efforts will surely inspire the building of the third and everlasting Temple, and “transform these days into days of joy and celebration.”⁷ Amen!

Shabbat Shalom!

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⁷ Zechariah 8:19. Rambam end of Laws of Fasting.