



## BAMIDBAR

Matot Masei / 28 Tammuz  
Why Are We Still Crying? Roots of Trauma  
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## WHY ARE WE STILL CRYING? ROOTS OF TRAUMA

### ABSTRACT

What would you tell someone you cared about who experienced a loss and could not stop grieving for years on end? Someone who wanted to continue sitting *shiva*, G-d forbid, not for seven days, but for seventy years?

Out of deep empathy (not indifference) you would gently and sensitively encourage your friend to move forward and rebuild his life. Because just as it is unhealthy to under grieve (and prematurely abort the cathartic process), it is equally unhealthy to over grieve.

And yet, 2,000 years since its destruction, we still find ourselves mourning the loss of the holy Temple during this saddest period of the Jewish calendar, the Three Weeks!

Torah law actually explicitly forbids one from over grieving – from mourning a loved one for more than seven days. And here we are sitting *shiva* for over 19 centuries... And for what? For a physical structure, not a life! Isn't it unhealthy to wallow in misery for so long?!

What is the meaning behind this period in time? What life affirming lessons can we learn from the sad Three Weeks?

This sermon analyzes the five tragic events that took place on the 17th of Tammuz, demonstrating that these events are actually the five elements that lie at the roots of all our trauma and pain. And that by understanding the root causes, we have a chance to repair them as they manifest in our daily lives today.

### 1. I Don't Get Involved in Politics...

A fellow was sitting with his friend in a cafe during the Three Weeks. When the waitress came over to take their order, he asks her: "Usually you have nice music playing here in the café. Why is there no music playing today?" She replies: "It's because of the Three Weeks." When she leaves them, the fellow asks his friend, "what are the Three Weeks?" His friend gets all exasperated and yells at him: "Your father is a Rabbi and you don't know what the Three Weeks are?! You don't know that during this period we commemorate the siege and destruction of both temples, first by the Babylonians, and then by the Romans?!"

Nonchalantly, the fellow shrugs and responds: “Babylonians. Romans. Please... I don’t get involved in politics.”

## 2. Saddest Period

We are now in the saddest period of the year called “The Three Weeks.” This period began two weeks ago on the 17th of Tammuz on the Hebrew calendar, the day that the walls of Jerusalem were first breached prior to the city’s destruction. And it will end in a week, on the 9th of Av, the day the Temple was destroyed, first by the Babylonians (2434 years ago) and later by the Romans (1944 years ago).

This entire period is considered a time of mourning, and the beginning and end of it are both fast days. During this time we are forbidden to celebrate weddings, listen to music, purchase new clothing, and do anything material that brings us great joy.

But let me ask you this. After close to 2000 years why are we still mourning the destruction of a ... building?!

What would you tell someone you cared about who experienced a loss and could not stop grieving for years on end? Someone who wanted to continue sitting *shiva*, G-d forbid, not for seven days, but for seventy years?

Out of deep empathy (not indifference) you would gently and sensitively encourage your friend to move forward and rebuild his life. Because just as there is a time to cry and it is unhealthy to under grieve (and prematurely abort the cathartic process), it is equally unhealthy to over grieve.

Indeed, Torah law explicitly forbids one from over grieving – from mourning a loved one for more than seven days<sup>1</sup>. And here we are sitting *shiva* for over 19 centuries... And for what? For a physical structure, not a life! Isn’t it unhealthy to wallow in misery for so long?!

True, it was a holy edifice, the holiest on earth. But it was still a structure of stone. What did this building carry that would cause millions of people to continue grieving over its loss, and praying for its restoration until this very day?

The answer is that the Temple wasn’t a mere structure of bricks and mortar. It was much more than even a life; it was life itself. The Temple was *sha’ar ha’shomayim*<sup>2</sup> – a literal gate to heaven. An interface between us humans and the divine. “Build Me a Sanctuary,” G-d said, “and I will dwell among you<sup>3</sup>.”

And this is what we lost.

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<sup>1</sup> Talmud, Moed Katan 27b. Shulchan Aruch Yoreh De’eh 394:1.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 28:17.

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 25:8.

And as long as the Temple is not rebuilt, we continue to grieve over the loss of this gate that bridged heaven and earth, and pray – and do whatever we can – for the day when the third Temple will be rebuilt. As we are taught: “Every generation in which the Temple is not rebuilt, is considered to be one in which it was destroyed<sup>4</sup>.”

### 3. Getting at the Root

Now, of course, many terrible calamities have befallen the Jewish people throughout our long history. There are many important, tragic events to remember and commemorate. However, by remembering and mourning the destruction of the Temple, we get to the root of all our troubles and all our sorrows.

As the saying goes: There are those that see the symptoms of pain; and there are those that look for its roots.

And this is the root:

The Temple was a gate that bridged the chasm between our inner spirits and our outer lives, and its destruction reflected – and exposed – this duality.

Awareness is the first step in healing from any trauma or abuse. Awareness is half the cure of an illness. Denial doubles its effects.

If we ignore the destruction of the Temple and continue to live our lives oblivious of its loss, we then will be forced to always suffer the symptoms, never getting to the cause. By acknowledging the root of the problem – and acknowledging by observing the mourning period of “The Three Weeks” – we take our first step toward complete healing.

Commemorating the destruction of the Temple is recognizing the root of all our problems – personal, psychological, interpersonal, national and historical. For if we were able to bridge the dual forces that split us apart and discover the underlying unity within, all our problems would be gone.

But that is easier said than done.

Therefore, we cannot be satisfied in just recognizing that all forms of destruction are rooted in the split between the sacred and the secular manifested in the Temple’s destruction. We need to clearly understand what this means, so that we can find ways to actually repair the problem.

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<sup>4</sup> Talmud Yerushalmi, Yoma 1:10.

## 4. Five Events

The Talmud<sup>5</sup> tells us that five tragic events happened on the 17th of Tammuz. These five events are actually the five elements that lie at the roots of all our trauma and pain. They are:

- The tablets of the Ten Commandments were broken
- The daily offerings in the Temple ceased
- The walls of Jerusalem were breached
- The Torah was burned
- An idol was placed in the Sanctuary

Let us examine them one by one. [OR: Let us examine some of them.]

## 5. The Tablets Were Broken

The first of the five events offers us insight into the dual nature of all things that “break” in our lives.

On one hand, to have something break is not a positive experience. On the other hand, when something breaks it is a warning of an underlying problem. Had it not cracked and broke, we would never know that we needed to repair the underlying damage.

By breaking the tablets Moses was actually expressing the true nature of what the Israelites had done. They had built the Golden Calf, thereby breaking their commitment to G-d and compromised their relationship with Him.

In other words: The breaking of the tablets was not the *cause* of the problems, it was the effect.

These tablets represented G-d giving His Essence to the people of Israel. Just as the sacred words of the Ten Commandments were engraved on these stone tablets, so too was G-d engraving Himself onto our very beings. By building the Golden Calf and worshipping a false G-d, the people in effect broke this essential connection. Moses was simply demonstrating this spiritual break by physically breaking the tablets.

And in doing so, Moses brilliantly and subtly revealed the cure: Feel broken as a result of your errors, and you are on your way to redeeming them.

“Nothing is as whole as a broken heart,” say the Chassidic masters.

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<sup>5</sup> Mishne, *Taanit* 26a-b.

The first step to healing and growth is humbly recognizing that you are broken. If you feel whole when you really are not, you are lost. But when you are aware that you are broken, then you will look for ways to repair yourself.

This is why the broken tablets were eventually placed side by side with the whole ones in the Holy Ark of the Temple.

If they represented nothing more than a tragic event, why would we need to remind ourselves of that fact by preserving the broken pieces? But they represented far more than that. They carried a positive message. And that positive message is a reminder that there is a break in our lives, and for us to be truly whole we must also feel just how broken we are. This is not meant to demoralize us, but uplift us and motivate us to heal, grow and become greater than before.

Life breaks all people, but some become stronger in the broken places. This happens only if they acknowledge that something is broken. When you have hurt someone and broken something in your life, but you go on as if nothing happened – worse yet, blaming the other party – it is hard to imagine how you will ever heal the break.

Being aware of our brokenness helps us find our way back to wholeness. Denying it, and allowing the break to the “natural” state of affairs, is not only tragic, but leaves us with little hope for ever awakening.

Thus this first event of the “Three Weeks” wakes us up to the fact that there is something broken, and that we have the power to fix it.

## 6. The Daily Offerings Ceased

The daily constants in our lives are those eternal experiences that are there for us even when all else is lost. Once a constant has ceased, the end is near.

There were many activities and services in the Temple. But the most enduring one was the daily offering – called the *tamid* – that was brought each day of the year, including Shabbat, holidays, even Yom Kippur, without fail.

Once the enemy caused this constant to cease, the Temple’s fate was sealed.

We all go through many fluctuations in the vicissitudes of our lives. Ups and downs. But we should never allow a bad mood, a blip on the screen, to stop our good habits, the things that we do without fail.

Consistency is a very powerful force – not the cramming all in one day, but the incessant and relentless persistence is what creates true and enduring change in the world. Witness the example of all the greatest innovators: persistence was the ultimate key to their success.

From time to time we need a jolting new experience to ignite our spirits, but the key to success is always what happens the day after the inspiration: Can it be maintained?

Hay may light quickly, but it also burns out quickly. Logs – good dry logs – take a while to ignite, but once they do, they can be depended upon to warm us for an extended time.

## 7. The Walls of Jerusalem Were Breached

The wall around a city is only a wall, but it protects its inhabitants.

So, too, 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 those we love 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 suggests that we do, but in the things that we do out of our sheer desire to please our beloved. These are the “optional walls” we build to surround and protect the vital aspects of our 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 – that is, be extra careful, and employ additional measures to prevent that this part of us does not burst out of control.

Each of us has areas of weakness where we need protective walls and boundaries. We should never allow those walls to be breached. We should never think, “Who cares about the walls; as long as the inside is intact.”

This is another root of trauma – breached walls. And the cure is to fortify them.

## 8. The Torah Was Burned

Burning someone’s books is a desecration often equal to burning the person himself. By burning his valuable books, you are in effect burning his passions, his beliefs, his very identity.

If this is true with mere books, how much more so with the Torah – the divine blueprint of life.

Torah was often the target of those that could not stand the absolute devotion Jews showed to it. Indeed, many a Jew risked his own life to save a Torah scroll from being burned in a torched synagogue. Why? Because

Torah was not seen merely as a book; it was (and is) “our life and our sustenance,” and therefore is considered one with life itself.

If you burn my Torah, you are in effect burning my past and my future. The Torah is my enduring link to generations past, to those who passed it on to me, and to generations to come.

Understanding the root problem helps us uncover its cure. We need to hold on strong to our “book.” We need to ensure that we dedicate time to Torah study, recognize its relevance to our lives and apply it. We need to strengthen our connection to its eternal power.

This is why we intensify Torah study during the Three Weeks, as the Prophet Isaiah says: “Zion will be redeemed with law [Torah] and its captives with charity<sup>6</sup>.”

## 9. An Idol Was Placed in the Sanctuary

A true enemy always likes to strike at the heart of his adversary in order to humiliate and demoralize him. Placing a *tzelem* – an image of an idol or “strange G-d” – in the Sanctuary was the ultimate insult and humiliation.

Each of us has a very pure place in our heart and soul. It is the most beautiful spot in our life. We cherish and protect it. We should never allow anything to desecrate it. Because, after everything is said and done, this place is the key to our redemption.

The last and final of the five roots of trauma is desecration of our most intimate and precious part – our *tzelem Elokim*, the divine image within each of us.

We must ensure that our inner sanctuary always remains clean and pure of strange G-ds.

## 10. Conclusion

By recognizing and focusing on these five roots, we can learn how to untangle the multiple symptoms that plague our lives and society at large.

For this is all about us.

And when we do our part in rebuilding the spiritual sanctuary within our hearts, souls and communities, we create a platform for the rebuilding of the physical third Temple, which will stand forever.

But, on a final note, we do have one question for G-d:

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<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 1:27.



For thousands of years our nation has been mourning these five events. We have not forgotten. We have searched for and found the roots of so many of life's problems. We have brought civilization to this world. We have demonstrated the power of faith and hope, even under most severe circumstances. How much longer do we need to cry during these Three Weeks?

When will it finally end?

Amen.

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