

PINCHAS (NUMBERS 25:10-30:1)

G-d's Apology

2011 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

THE 17th OF TAMMUZ AND THE THREE WEEKS

Next Monday night thru Tuesday, July 18-19, is the 17th of Tammuz, which begins a three week period of increasing mourning leading up to Tisha B'av, the anniversary of the destruction of the Temple.

Much like a mourner during the 30 days following the death of a loved one, we refrain from listening to music, making weddings, and taking haircuts during these three weeks. The 17th of Tammuz itself is a fast day. It is permitted to get up early Sunday morning to eat before the fast begins. The fast begins Tuesday at dawn, (72 minutes before sunrise.) It ends at dusk, (25-72 minutes after sunset, depending upon local custom.) For sunrise and sunset times for your community [click here](#).

The 17th of Tammuz commemorates five events:

1. Moses came down from Mt. Sinai and broke the Tablets when he saw the Golden Calf.
2. Due to the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem, there were no longer sheep available for the daily offering in the first Temple.
3. The Romans breached the walls of Jerusalem, three weeks before destroying the second Temple.
4. A Torah scroll was burnt.
5. An idol was placed into the Temple.

Some people make the mistake of assuming that the main Mitzvah on a fast day is to refrain from eating. This is a fallacy. The purpose of a fast is to turn our focus away from the physical and material, and to emphasize the spiritual. It is a time to evaluate our relationship with our Creator. A fast day is a time to ask G-d to watch over our Nation and keep us safe and secure.

Some commemorative days can be a little difficult to really relate to. On Shavuot, for example, it is a challenge to put oneself in a mindset where we can actually envision ourselves standing at Mt. Sinai. The 17th of Tammuz is different.

Jerusalem and all of the Land of Israel are under siege at this very moment. Our People are being murdered and world opinion is increasingly aligned against us.

It is time for us to take the situation seriously and beg G-d to help us. Let us pray that this year will be the last year that the 17th of Tammuz is a fast day, and that we will soon be privileged to see the redemption of our People, the rebuilding of our Temple, and peace in the world.

G-d's Apology

When the Temple stood, people used to come to Jerusalem to bring offerings. There were Thanksgiving Offerings and Peace Offerings. Sometimes, they were required to bring a Sin Offering.

If someone had accidentally violated certain Commandments, such as the Sabbath or eating bread on Passover, he would bring this offering to atone for his error. This sin offering could only be brought to atone for accidental transgressions; deliberate sinners did not qualify.

There were also Sin Offerings that were brought on holidays. These generic Sin Offerings served to atone for certain communal sins. Among these communal sin offerings is the offering for Rosh Chodesh, the first of each month.

The New Moon marks the beginning of each month on the Jewish calendar and is a minor holiday. The Torah lists the various offerings in honor of Rosh Chodesh. Among them is “. . . a Sin offering for G-d.” (Numbers, 28:15) All offerings are, of course, for G-d. This offering, however, is the only sin offering that uses this phrase as being “for G-d.” What does it mean?

Let us go back a few years, to the creation of the world. The Talmud records a fascinating “conversation” between G-d and the moon.

[It is important to understand the nature of such a “conversation.” Are we to understand that Jewish belief allows for the assumption that inanimate objects can think and speak? We see references toMt. Sinai speaking, and King David writes of the Red Sea “seeing.”**Rabbi Yaakov Haber, a world-renowned Torah educator, explained to me that everything in nature has a guardian angel that advocates in its behalf. The discussion cited here could be a debate between G-d and the moon's ANGEL. (There are other explanations given for this concept.)**Rabbi Haber, one of my weekly “reads,” can be found on the Internethereandhere.]***

Genesis, 1:16 describes the sun and the moon as ‘. . . the great light sources . . . the great light source to rule the day, and the small light source to rule the night.’

The Talmud observes a change in terminology. First they are both called “the great light sources,” and then they become “the great light source” and “the small light source.” Why the switch?

The Talmud goes on to explain that the original plan was for the sun and the moon to be of equal size. The moon, (or, as explained above, its angel), complained that two kings could not share a crown; they shouldn't be equal -- one should be the ruler. G-d responded by shrinking the moon. The moon then complained that it wasn't fair that it should be punished for pointing out the truth. G-d offered the moon the "consolation" of being permitted to occasionally appear during the day. The moon complained that moonlight during the daytime is irrelevant. G-d offered the moon the opportunity to be the basis for the Jewish calendar. The moon responded that the sun plays a role as well. In the end, the moon couldn't be placated. G-d said, "Let Israel bring a sin offering on every New Moon as an atonement for My sin of reducing the size of the moon." Hence, ". . . *a Sin offering for G-d.*" (Chullin, 60a)

This is a very troubling passage. It appears to be suggesting that G-d made a mistake. In His efforts to rectify His error, He becomes more and more entangled in His mistake. In the end, in His frustration, He throws up His hands and says, "I give up! I tried to make you happy, but I couldn't satisfy you. Forgive me, Moon for I have sinned."

IS THAT WHAT'S GOING ON HERE?! Are we, G-d forbid, to understand that our Creator "blew it?" Did the Master of the World fall asleep at the wheel? What does this mean?

I think what the Torah is telling us is to acknowledge the fact that life isn't always "fair." Some of us are smarter, and some of us are richer. Some people seem to get all the breaks. Although life is a trade-off, the other guy always seems to get the better deal.

If we try to analyze the "whys" in life, we will never be happy. I really wish I could play basketball as well as Shaquille O'Neal. I can't. I never will. ("Jewish men can't jump!" :-)) I will never be as tall as he is. I will never (as far as I know) be as rich as he is. So what should I do? Sue G-d?!

They say that if life gives you lemons, you should make lemonade. Some people would rather complain that the lemons are too hard to squeeze!

I was speaking recently with a lady who lives in a nursing home. Born with Spina Bifida, she is confined to a wheelchair. She lost her husband, and her two children live with their grandparents.

She has much to be bitter about. Or, so some might think.

"They told my parents that I would never walk. I walked for thirty years; now I can't. Big deal! Go complain!"

“I have two children; I have a new husband (note: he was also born with Spina Bifida, and is also in a wheelchair) and now HE has two children!

“G-d never does anything that is wrong. We don’t understand it? Too bad!”

(She has a book coming out this Chanukah, called “Yes I Can!” I look forward to letting you know where to get it!)

Although the Talmud doesn't finish the story, I don't imagine that a Sin Offering would have made the moon any happier. G-d was not admitting a mistake. Divine Genius has been invested into every molecule of Creation. G-d was not saying, "I'm so sorry, how could I have treated you so unfairly? Please accept this Sin Offering on My behalf!"

You know what G-d was REALLY telling the moon? He was saying, "I'm sorry that you don't accept My Divine wisdom in creating the world. This is how it is. You don't understand everything. No one, not even an angel, can fathom G-d's judgment.

"Stop kvetching. Deal with it!"

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

© 2011 Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz. Reprint permitted for non-commercial use with attribution to torahtalk.org.