

This Week's Parshah - Parshas Eikev

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Esther *bas* Reuven *a"h*

a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

The Retired Musician

Two weeks ago, we discussed the reason for the Churban Beis Hamikdash (Destruction of the [first] Temple). In an amazing and somewhat enigmatic statement, the Gemara in Bava Metzia (85b) seemed to suggest that, to all appearances, the Jews were upstanding and observant and deeply involved in Torah study. The chief factor responsible for the Churban was the fact that – prior to learning Torah – they deleted the preliminary blessings.

This idea raises some major issues. First and foremost, what on earth were they doing? They were already *davening*, they were already learning – what led them to take this extraordinary misstep of skipping that paragraph in the *siddur* that contains the blessings over the Torah? Furthermore, accepting that they did so for whatever reason – why does this constitute such a grievous and unforgivable offense? Surely it is not a good idea to skip those blessings, as they are obligatory, but it seems difficult to understand why this relatively minor offense should result in a national tragedy of such colossal proportions.

The first issue – what led them to such conduct (of deleting the blessings) was the focal point of the earlier article. Their fault lay in an erroneous understanding of the role of Torah study. The Beis Halevy explained that they viewed Torah study as a mere practical endeavor, a technical prerequisite for the “real job” of doing *mitzvos*. To fulfill the *mitzvos*, one needs to know how to do them – hence, one needs to first study the details. They missed the other essential aspect of Torah study: how it is more than just a means to an end, but a goal in and of itself. Had they appreciated the notion of studying Torah for its own sake, they would have realized that pure Torah study itself is a *mitzvah* – not just a “preparatory *mitzvah*” – and as such, it necessitates a preliminary blessing like any other *mitzvah*.

Let us now turn to the issue of the severity of this misdeed. Why, indeed, did skipping the blessings warrant a Churban?

Contradiction?

The truth of the matter is that this greater issue of what caused the Churban might be punctuated with more uncertainty than we previously had realized.

As stated, the Gemara in Bava Metzia describes how the wise men and prophets – in light of the ostensibly upstanding behavior of the Jewish people at that time – were initially baffled as to what warranted such destruction. The cause of the Churban was ultimately attributed to the deletion of the Torah blessings.

However, the Gemara in Yoma (9b) seems to present a different picture – one that's a lot less rosy. The Gemara there states that the (first) Beis Hamikdash was destroyed because the Jews at the time were actually involved in the most heinous acts. They violated the three cardinal sins: idol worship, immorality, and murder!

And so, the backdrop of the Churban now appears murky, indeed: Was the Beis Hamikdash destroyed because their appreciation for Torah learning was not up to par (as evidenced by the deletion of the blessings), or was it caused by overt and wanton transgressions?!

Saving Grace

R' Yeruchem Olshin demonstrates that the issue can be resolved based on some poignant words of one of the classic commentators. In his commentary to Avos (1:2), the Chassid Ya'avetz presents the following parable:

A king once retained a musician, who was renowned for his remarkable ability. His musical talent was simply unmatched, and his tunes could uplift the spirit to the greatest of heights.

One day, this musician was found to have committed a grave offense against the king. Having participated in an attempted rebellion, he was found liable for execution.

But at this point, the king intervened. "No one provides me with such joy as this particular musician," the king declared. "I simply need him and his talents around; the sentence is waived."

The musician continued playing at the court. One day, though, he announced that he had come to a decision: Apparently, he had enough and refused to play anymore.

The king's swift reaction to the musician's surprise announcement was expected. "If that's the case," declared the king, "his life is forfeit. The original sentence of execution should be stayed no longer."

Based on the above, not only is the apparent contradiction (regarding the causes of the Churban) resolved, but we can better understand how "the punishment fits the crime." The true underlying cause of the destruction, as outlined in the Gemara in Yoma, was the rampant indulgence in idolatry, immorality, and murder. These transgressions alone were reason enough to render the Jews guilty.

But there was another factor at play here, one that was able to delay the Destruction: involvement in Torah study. The entire purpose of Creation and the very *raison d'etre* of the Jewish people is to be immersed in Torah learning. As the Mishnah states (*Avos 2:8*):

אם למדת תורה הרבה, אל תתזיק טובה לעצמך, פי לךך נוצרת.

"If you have learned a lot of Torah, do not accord for yourself extraordinary greatness, for that is the very reason you were created (to study Torah)."

One of the reasons this particular Mishnah is key is that it reveals the very purpose of our existence. One who studies much Torah should not become overly haughty, for he is merely fulfilling that which he was created to do!

When a person learns Torah, his existence is "justified," and Creation's purpose is affirmed. As the verse testifies: "If not for My covenant (of Torah)... I would not have established... Heaven and earth," (*Yirmiyahu 33:25; see Nefesh Hachaim, 4:11*). Consequently, Hashem delights in the fact that His Torah is being learned properly and His Creation has achieved its goal.

But then the Jewish people ceased to appreciate the Torah's special role as the purpose of Creation and the ultimate fulfillment of Hashem's Will. Once they didn't view Torah study as an end in itself, they omitted its blessings, as explained above. Having removed the source of Hashem's unbridled joy, their original conviction could be overlooked no longer, and the inevitable Churban arrived.