

Parsha Ponders

Tisha B'Av | August 8, 2019 | 8 Av 5779

Horrific Consequences of sin¹

...אם-תאכלנה נשים פרים עללי טפחים אם-יהרג במקדש אדני"י כהן ונביא...

...Alas, women eat their own fruit, their newborn babies! Alas, Kohen and Prophet are slain in G-d's Temple²

Parshas Devarim always falls out the *shabbos* before Tisha B'Av³, the day commemorating the destruction of both the First and Second Temples⁴. The Prophet Yirmiyahu (Jeremiah) in *Megillas Eicha* (Lamentations), describes all the horrible things that happened at the time of the destruction of the First Temple. The scenes were horrific. Besides all the murders by the Babylonians, there was incredible hunger. The prophet describes how frantic mothers, desperate for food, succumbed to eating their own babies. This repulsive result of the destruction was in fact predicted by the Torah, where it says⁵ that people will eat the flesh of their daughters and sons.

Chazal teach us⁶ a story that depicts these events. Someone named Doeg ben Yosef died, and left a young child alone with his mother⁷. This young boy's mother would measure him every year⁸ and donate his weight in gold to the Temple. However, when Yerushalayim was destroyed, she slaughtered her son and ate him. It was upon this woman that Yirmiyahu bemoaned that: "Alas, women eat their own fruit, their newborn babies!" Hashem responded to his cry, and said: "Alas, Kohen and Prophet are slain in G-d's Temple". This was referring to Zechariah ben Yehoyada HaKohen, who was murdered by his fellow Jews⁹.

Since these tragic events were already forewarned in the Torah, what was so surprising to the prophet Yirmiyahu? While the sight was surely horrific, it sounds like Yirmiyahu was totally unprepared for what he witnessed. Something else to investigate is what does Hashem's response have to do with Yirmiyahu's cry? What does the death of Zechariah the prophet and Kohen have to do with mothers devouring their children?

Yirmiyahu knew that it was foretold in the Torah that the situation would be so desperate that people would end up eating their own children. However, he thought it would only be in situations where there was no evidence that they loved these children more than the average parent. The horrific conditions during the destruction of Yerushalayim would lead to this tragic and grotesque outcome. However, Hashem caused that the case where this should happen would be with an only son, whose father died, and was raised alone by his mother. His mother adored him so much, and was so appreciative of him

¹ Based on Be'er Yosef to Leviticus 26:29

² Lamentations 2:20

³ This is a consequence of Mishneh Torah Tefillah UBirkas Kohanim 13:2 and Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 428:4, quoting the Tur ad. loc. See Levush ad. loc. § 4 (brought by the Beur Halacha ad. loc. s.v. ט"ב קודם and Kaf HaChaim ad. loc. § 17) who explicitly says we want to read *Devarim* before Tisha B'Av, and gives an explanation. Cf. Hagahos Rav Avraham Azulaj ad. loc. for a different explanation

⁴ Ta'anis 4:6

⁵ Leviticus loc. cit.

⁶ Yoma 38b; Toras Kohanim ad. loc.; Eicha Rabbah 1:51

⁷ In Yoma it says that Doeg was the orphaned boy

⁸ In Yoma it says every day

⁹ See II Chronicles 24:20,21 and Midrash Aggadah to Numbers 30:11. See also Gittin 57b, Koheles Rabbah 3:16, and Kinnos § 17, 34

that she consistently donated his weight in gold to the Temple. This incredible generosity shows that his mother had more love for this child than the average person. And yet Yirmiyahu saw her so desperate for food that she succumbed to her base needs and consumed her own son. This tragic scene is why Yirmiyahu cried out to Hashem.

Hashem responded to Yirmiyahu that something else tragic already happened. This scene that Yirmiyahu was witnessing was measure for measure, where the punishment fit the crime¹⁰. It was a consequence of the Jews killing Zechariah ben Yehoyada. Murder is one of the most heinous crimes, even when an ordinary person is killed. The crime is worse when that person is a great and holy person. Zechariah ben Yehoyada was a prophet, a Kohen, a judge, and the son-in-law of the King¹¹. As well, he was killed in one of the holiest places, the Temple courtyard, on the holiest day, Shabbos Yom Kippur¹². Therefore, just like they committed one of the worst crimes, in an incredibly horrible and shocking way, so too the fulfillment of the prophecy of parents eating their children, as horrific as it already was, came about in the worst of ways.

However, how can this be considered measure for measure? Did the punishment really fit the crime? One explanation is¹³ that although worldly suffering is very difficult, we believe that in some way it is for our benefit¹⁴. Therefore, as hard as these situations are, they're not something for a prophet of Hashem to cry over. However, that is only when the suffering will accomplish some positive outcome. If the suffering leads to further sinning, these situations are worthy of crying out to Hashem. This woman, who due to her suffering felt compelled to consume her only son, who she adored, was guilty of a heinous crime of murder. In the end, it didn't even do her any good, as a few days later she died of starvation. The whole thing was for nothing. As a result of seeing this tragedy, Yirmiyahu cried to Hashem.

Hashem responded to Yirmiyahu by referring to the incident with the prophet Zechariah ben Yehoyada. When the Jews weren't following the Torah, Hashem did them a tremendous *chessed* by sending them His prophets. These prophets were tasked with correcting the ways of the people, and teaching them the proper path in life. It would have been fitting for everyone to listen to these prophets and repent. However, when Zechariah ben Yehoyada rebuked the people for their sins, they didn't correct their ways. Instead, they stoned him to death, on Shabbos Yom Kippur, in the Holy Temple. They descended even deeper into sin. Hashem was informing Yirmiyahu that He added suffering which caused people to further sin, because the Jews themselves decided to further sin by killing His prophet.

This is alluded to in a *Midrash* which points out¹⁵ that there are a lot of doubles with regards to the destruction of the Temple. The Jews doubled their sins, as the verse says חטא חטאה ירושלים, that Yerushalayim sinned a sin¹⁶. The verse says that their punishments were doubled¹⁷. Afterwards, the

¹⁰ The concept of מדה כנגד מדה is mentioned in [Nedarim](#) 32a. This concept seems to be the same as במדה שאדם לו מודד בה מודדין לו ([Sotah](#) 1:7)

¹¹ [Eicha Rabbah Pesikta](#) § 23

¹² [Ibid; Yerushalmi Ta'anis](#) 4:5

¹³ The [Be'er Yosef](#) says in his youth he heard this from [Rav Yitzchak Blazer](#), a major disciple of [Rav Yisroel Salanter](#)

¹⁴ See [Berachos](#) 5a

¹⁵ [Eicha Rabbah](#) 1:57

¹⁶ [Lamentations](#) 1:8

¹⁷ [Isaiah](#) 40:2

prophet double consoled them by saying נחמו נחמו עמי, consoled, be consoled My nation¹⁸. What does it mean that they doubled their sins? It could be understood by the above explanation, that the Jews added onto their sins instead of repenting. They scorned the *chesed* Hashem did for them by providing them prophets as leaders. Consequently, Hashem caused them to suffer to the point that they further sinned.

May the Temple be rebuilt, speedily in our days

¹⁸ *ibid* v. 1