
chapter two

exile

THE JEWISH PEOPLE are in exile, again. It is the FOURTH and hopefully the FINAL time. There was the Babylonian Exile after the destruction of the First Temple, the Median Exile which finished off that one, the Greek Exile during the Second Temple Period, and this one, the Roman Exile, which began when Pompey conquered Jerusalem in 63 BCE.

These are just the MAIN exiles mentioned in the Midrash. Of course there have been MANY others since then, especially throughout this long and final Roman Exile, including the one from England in 1290, and later from Spain in 1492.

How many exiles do we not even know about because they affected smaller and more distant Jewish communities?

One of the MOST important exiles of all, however, is rarely discussed, and is definitely off the grid of just about every Jew today. That is because it is not an exile of JEWS, but of the SHECHINAH, the Divine Presence...Golus HaShechinah.

The material success we enjoy may help US forget we're in exile, but it only intensifies the reality of exile for the Shechinah. WE have homes, while the "house" of the Shechinah not only remains occupied by a foreign religion but it is surrounded by places of worship of yet another religion.

It's like a person who is having the time of his life, completely oblivious to the deadly disease that is taking over his body. The bright world on the outside, for the time being, completely covers up the very dark world on the inside.

The spread of agnosticism and atheism bothers some, but for many, if it's out of sight, it's out of mind. The fact that even a SINGLE person questions the reality of God greatly pains the Shechinah, so how much more so when entire societies do. The fact that WE believe may appease us, but it is far from enough to appease the

Shechinah.

This perhaps is the worst part of our exile, the fact that we have difficulty sympathizing and empathizing with God. Sure, He's perfect and above anything bad man can do. But He chooses, for our sake, to act as if He's NOT, in order to see if we will sympathize and empathize with His plight”

HIS plight?

To begin with, there is an Arab mosque on the Temple Mount. Har HaBayis is the holiest place in the universe, the place God set aside for HIS Temple, where the Jewish people can serve Him as per the Torah. Instead, not only is there no Temple there, but a foreign religion occupies its place, and its members worship their idea of God as THEY see fit.

That's similar to being evicted from your home and watching another family move in. Not only is it hurtful, but it is offensive, especially when you see its members abuse what you found valuable. And when they see you, they don't act with mercy but rather with arrogance, as if you never belonged in your home in the first place. The pain would be unbearable.

And it's worse in this case. Not only has God been evicted from His house, but His house happens to have been holy, along with the place on

which it was built. It was dear to Him, not just because it was His, but because it was holy. To see that holiness trampled on makes the unbearable even worse.

And it's not over yet. Just beyond the Temple Mount are churches. Islam at least worships one God. Christianity believes in one God, but with three parts, which puts it into the category of idol worship. It may not be on the Temple Mount, but ALL of Jerusalem is holy, as is the whole country. In the time of the Sanhedrin, there was a Torah mitzvah to rid the land of such things.

Is anyone crying yet?

Then we have the Jewish people. A work in progress? Certainly, but often in the wrong direction.

There are approximately 13,000,000 known Jews in the world today whose halachic status is not questionable. These are Jews whose ancestors are confirmed to be Jewish, or converts who fulfilled all the ORTHODOX halachic criteria to become Jewish.¹

Of the 13 million, maybe a few million live a Torah-based lifestyle. Putting a mezuzah on at

¹ Others can claim that their conversion rites are just as "kosher," but most barely comply with what has been Torah tradition going back to Moshe Rabbeinu at Mt. Sinai.

least the front door is standard fare for many secular Jews, as is coming together as a family for a Pesach Seder. Even going to Cheder a few days a week is somewhat acceptable, but beyond this, it's a secular lifestyle across the board.

Of the few million Jews that may live by Torah, they do so in varying degrees of observance and seriousness. For many, you do what you do because you were born religious and raised in a religious environment. Many might have a difficult time explaining how they know God exists or that Torah came from Mt. Sinai.

Let's face it, as God's emissaries on earth, the Jewish people are having a VERY difficult time living up to that responsibility. Of the almost eight billion people alive today, VERY few respect the Jewish people or their way of life, and if anything, marginalize their existence. Jews THEMSELVES marginalize their existence.

Then there is the issue of Eretz Yisroel, the land God gave to the Jewish people. The very first Rashi on Chumash says that the Torah begins the way it does to counter all those who will eventually claim that the Jewish people stole the land. Well, they're claiming it, including Jews THEMSELVES, and we're having a difficult time countering it.

Within the Torah community, things are less than ideal. There is a distinct lack of unity, and a

lot of political confusion. Things happen that often draw negative attention, giving outsiders and insiders alike reason to point fingers and register complaints. Kiddush Hashem, the sanctification of God's name is not as commonplace as it is supposed to be.

Yet most religious people are quite oblivious to this, or at least the seriousness of it. Personal and community survival seems to be top priority for many. They do not feel that they can afford to worry about much else beyond that, sometimes selfishly, often out of necessity.

Not God, though. He loves ALL His children, and worries about EACH child. He is FAR from oblivious to what is going on, and each moment of life that people don't get right hurts Him—A LOT.

In fact, the state of the world is so far from what it is supposed to be that it is a wonder that it is still here. The world may LOOK nice and orderly, but it is really TOHU out there. God has rebooted Creation for much less, and probably the only reason He hasn't done it again up to now is that people are so lost and confused that He has few expectations of them.

But that does not reduce the exile of the Shechinah. It's not only about not having the Temple. It's also about being banished from the minds of people. Out of mind, out of sight. If peo-

ple stop THINKING about God, then they stop SEEING Him, and that is EXTREMELY painful for the Shechinah, for OUR sake.²

This is not just during the Three Weeks, but ALL year round, all HISTORY round, until Moshiach comes. WE may act as if everything is safe until the 17th of Tammuz, and safe again after the 9th of Av. But the truth is that it may be SAFER, but still far from safe.

Tohu is EVERYWHERE. If you want to know how much, just see how close or distant a place, event, or even a person is from the IDEAL Torah reality. Just see how difficult it is for the Shechinah to dwell in any of those places, because they are so spiritually inhospitable.

Even worse, see how acceptable the lack of Torah is. For example, people line up and pay considerable sums of money for entertainment, much of which is COMPLETELY unacceptable—to say the LEAST—by Torah standards, for one reason or another. People may enjoy themselves and see nothing wrong with it, but from God's perspective, it's TOHU.

Even something like paying exorbitant

² As mentioned, God never actually FEELS any pain. But He runs history as if He does in order to give meaning to our actions.

amounts of money for things that don't really measure up spiritually, while families cannot put food on the table, is *tohu*. Even something that in principle can fit into a Torah lifestyle becomes unacceptable when done to extremes not sanctioned by Torah. Just having the wrong priorities in life is a level of evil and function of *tohu*, especially for someone who already lives by Torah.

Just ask yourself, if God were running the world, what would it look like?

We had a glimpse of that before man went ahead and sinned, and was expelled from Paradise. Subtract the world we have now from the first one, and you get the amount of *tohu* oozing through Creation today. Because that had been a nearly perfect rectified world.

It can be compared to running a business, and then watching the employees wasting your hard-earned money. When they finally do work, it is counter-productive. At times they even make you think that they are really spies for the competition, sent in to sabotage your company's success. How would YOU feel?

Betrayed?

Frustrated?

Tempted to fire everyone and start anew?

Now imagine being a stranger in a strange town and wandering from place to place, not

quite fitting in anywhere. Feeling like an outsider, you decide to try another city, and then another one, and another one after that, and each time it is the same story. People are nice, but they're just not on your wavelength. How would YOU feel?

Rejected?

Dejected?

Like giving up on the world?

Welcome to the world of the Shechinah b'Golus. In God's world, we're the "employees" running the business to the ground, the unwelcoming townspeople. We may be having a blast, but the Shechinah is not. And when the Jewish people make exile seem like redemption, it is one of the greatest insults to the Shechinah possible. How is GOD supposed to feel?

This is what the Three Weeks are REALLY for. To compel us to look at the world the way GOD sees it. It's not just a matter of fasting on the 17th day of Tammuz, and then on Tisha B'Av, or of shutting ourselves out from even spiritual pleasures. It's a matter of getting outside this world and looking down on it with a heavenly perspective...to join the Shechinah b'Golus.

It's the first step to ending our own. We're still in exile after thousands of years because we have been dealing with the symptoms, not the cause. We're in exile because the Shechinah is in

exile. Working on the first without working on the second is like treating a cold by only focusing on the runny nose. It doesn't work.

But realizing that the Shechinah just doesn't fit into the world the way it now exists needs to lead to doing something about it. It may be very little and very personal, but it gives the Shechinah a place to go and a reason to stop wandering. It's the beginning of the end.

Then it will spread:

If someone sanctifies himself a little, Heaven sanctifies him a lot. (Yoma 38b)

Heaven will make sure of that. We need to start the process, but it is God who finishes it:

It is not for you to finish the work, but you are not free to desist from it either. (Pirkei Avos 2:21)

The reward is as if we did it ALL.