

Zephaniah, Malachi, and the Two Days of the Lord

Shabbat Hagadol | April 7, 2022

For Jews, 1948 is affiliated with a miraculous moment: the birth of the State of Israel. But it was also a year of destruction and loss: when the Old City of Jerusalem was cut off from the Jewish people; when celebrated synagogues in the holy city were dynamited and destroyed; and when a Jewish community that had worked to establish itself in the Old City, that had lived there for centuries, suddenly saw all they had known disappear. Of course, the Jews who were exiled from the Old City did not know they would return and rebuild in less than 20 years, and the experience of this loss was incredibly traumatic. In his memoir, Rabbi Shlomo Goren describes the day in 1948 when the Old City fell to the Jordanians and the Jews of the Jewish quarter were expelled, including some of Jerusalem's most celebrated sages. He writes:

The Old City's surrender to the Jordanians occurred on a Friday morning. I was at my post, and was summoned to come and take care of the rabbis and the elderly men who were not taken captive (all the women and children had been allowed to leave the city earlier that week). The Jordanians conducted a "selection," taking into captivity anyone they deemed fit to fight, even the injured. The elderly were sent to a collection point on Mt. Zion, where we went to receive them and take them to the new city. I went up to Mt. Zion and saw them sitting there on the ground—the elders of the Old City of Jerusalem, including several great *talmidei hakhamim*. When my eyes beheld that sight, my mind reeled with the words of the Book of Lamentations, written after the destruction of the First Temple: "The elders of the daughters

of Zion sit upon the ground and keep silence; they have cast dust upon their heads; they have girded themselves with sackcloth; the virgins of Jerusalem hang down their heads to the ground" (Lam. 2:10).

It is a striking description: here we have Rabbi Goren, the first chief rabbi of the first Jewish army in the Holy Land in centuries, a man whose very position embodies a redemptive moment, seeing a scene that for him conjures up not the prophecies of Isaiah, but the lamentations of Jeremiah. But he would later that day experience something inspiring; something that, rightly understood, reflects the lesson at the heart of the Bible.

The collection of twelve prophets known as "*Trei Asar*" gives us a small biblical book by a man of whom we know little; he is called Zephaniah, which can be translated as "The Seer of God." Tradition places him with Huldah and Jeremiah in the reign of King Josiah, following the many abominations of King Manasseh, abominations that brought about the Divine decree of destruction on Jerusalem. Zephaniah, therefore, devotes his prophecies largely to a vision of the terrible destruction that will descend on the sacred city.

Now of course, we have many such visions in the Bible. What is interesting is that in Zephaniah, the prophet gives us a specific name for this event. It is called the "*Yom HaShem HaGadol*," "The Great Day of the Lord." Thus Zephaniah 1:14-18:

The great day of the Lord is near, it is near, and hasteth greatly, even the voice of the day of the Lord: the mighty man shall cry there bitterly.

That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of wasteness and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness,

A day of the trumpet and alarm against the fenced cities, and against the high towers.

And I will bring distress upon men, that they shall walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the Lord: and their blood shall be poured out as dust, and their flesh as the dung.

Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them in the day of the Lord's wrath; but the whole land shall be devoured by the fire of his jealousy: for he shall make even a speedy riddance of all them that dwell in the land.

This is indeed terrifying, and here the phrase “Day of the Lord” is affiliated, essentially, with Tisha b’Av, the day that Jerusalem will be overturned, made desolate, destroyed. But here is what is interesting: one of the last verses in the prophets is given to us by Malachi, and it too speaks of the “Day of the Lord.”

The verse from Malachi is read on *Shabbat HaGadol*, the Sabbath immediately preceding Passover, and it describes the return of the prophet who ascended on high, the mysterious man Elijah, who will return to herald the messianic age:

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and awesome Day of the Lord. (Malachi 4:5)

The description of Elijah declaimed before Passover certainly inspired one prominent Passover tradition, which is to open the door at the Seder for Elijah. This thereby reflects the talmudic teaching that “in the month of *Nissan* we were redeemed from Egypt, and in the very same month we are ultimately destined to be redeemed.” In other words, we are looking hopefully for the arrival of Elijah, because we *want* the great and awesome Day

of the Lord to arrive. Malachi’s vision of a great Day of the Lord also betokens destruction, but here the focus is on the ultimate end of evil and the redemption yet to come. It is the same exact phrase, “The Great Day of the Lord”—“*Yom Hashem HaGadol*,” but it betokens not Jerusalem’s destruction but her restoration. It is not a Day of the Lord that we mourn; it is a Day of the Lord that we eagerly await.

What are we to make of the fact that the “Day of the Lord” can describe both Tisha b’Av and the arrival of the eschatological age, both destruction and redemption? The point perhaps is that to be a Jew, to believe in the chosenness of Abraham’s people, is to believe in God’s presence in history. If Israel was able to overcome the destruction of Jerusalem, overcome exile from Jerusalem, it is because it proclaimed its faith even in days of destruction, and that faith sustained them until the redemption.

This joining of names connoting both destruction and restoration has found, in our age, another profound parallel. Rabbi Goren would ultimately be the rabbi most affiliated with the day in 1967 on which the Jewish people would return to Jerusalem, the day now known as “*Yom Yerushalayim*,” “Jerusalem Day.” But as I believe Rabbi Yaakov Medan has pointed out, this very same name once had another connotation. In the psalm that begins “*By the rivers of Babylon...*” the exiled Jews mourn what has been lost, and they plead with God: “*Zechor HaShem livnei Edom, et yom Yerushalayim, ha’omrim aru aru ad hayesod ba*,” “Remember, God, the day of Jerusalem, when the sons of Edom proclaimed, destroy it, destroy it to the very foundations.” This means that in the Hebrew Bible, the phrase “*Yom Yerushalayim*” described the day Jerusalem was destroyed: Tisha b’Av. For thousands of years, the words “*Yom Yerushalayim*” referred to the day the city was destroyed. Now it refers to the day when the most sacred parts of the city began to be rebuilt. The meaning of the name has come to be reversed. This may seem strange, but it is actually appropriate. At the moment of destruction, Jews exiled in Babylon proclaimed their faith in God, in the God of Israel, the God they believed was still profoundly connected to Jerusalem, and they exclaimed, “Remember God, the Jerusalem that was destroyed.” Today, we can celebrate *Yom Yerushalayim*.

The two are linked—the way that the Jews reacted to the first *Yom Yerushalayim* led to the second. The Jewish refusal to forget the God of Jerusalem allowed Jews to return to and rebuild Jerusalem; the remembrance of the *Yerushalayim* that was, led to the *Yerushalayim* that is, and will ultimately lead to the *Yerushalayim* that is yet to be.

Rabbi Goren, in his memoir, concludes his description of the day the Jewish Quarter fell by describing his sudden realization on that Friday that the Sabbath was approaching, and he needed a place to pray the traditional liturgy of the evening, known as *Kabbalat Shabbat*. Describing further his reaction to the elderly exiles of the city he writes:

That Friday, I took care of them and many more elderly evacuees. I tried to help them as best I could, to make sure they had places to go and to distribute them throughout the city. This mission preoccupied me for the entire day and I did not even have time to go to *daven* [pray] at my regular synagogue. I suddenly noticed the sun slipping toward the horizon and asked the people around me, “Where is there a synagogue near here?”

They told me that the Breslov Hasidim in the Shaarei Hesed neighborhood *daven* later than most congregations, and that I would be able to find a *minyan* there for *Kabbalat Shabbat*.

I went to the Breslov synagogue and was completely taken aback by the scene that unfolded there. Immediately following *Kabbalat Shabbat* and *Maariv*, everyone stood up and began to sing and dance, “May the Temple be rebuilt, the City of Zion replenished.” When I saw this, after everything I had seen and experienced over the course of the day, I could not hold back my bitter tears. I could not rejoice. Among the congregants, I noticed Shai Agnon, who lived in

Jerusalem’s Talpiot neighborhood, in the southeastern part of Jerusalem. That neighborhood was in the eye of the storm throughout the battle for the city. Talpiot suffered heavy shelling and Agnon had temporarily left his home and moved to Shaarei Hesed, and that Friday evening he had come to *daven* in the *beit midrash* of the Breslov Hasidim.

The prayers that Friday evening, with the singing and dancing, on the background of everything I had seen and experienced that day—the fall of the Old City and the sight of the elderly rabbis sitting on the ground, humiliated—greatly affected me. Ever since then, I have adopted the custom of singing “May the Temple be rebuilt” every Friday evening in my own synagogue, in the tune I heard that evening. I will never forget that particular Shabbat.

Can these two emotions go hand in hand? Can one mourn for the loss of Jerusalem, when that loss is so raw, as it was that Shabbat, and still sing of one’s confidence in the rebuilding of the Jerusalem that is yet to be? Of course one can, because, as we have seen, one is linked to the other. On that day in 1948, when the Old City was lost, Rabbi Goren surely did not know that he would be associated most famously with the moment in 1967 when the Old City was reclaimed. But it was his own faith that allowed him to remain profoundly connected to that site. We too today can ponder the history of the Jewish people. Unlike Zephaniah, we are not “Seers of God,” but we can surely *see* the hand of God. And while the ultimate Day of the Lord predicted by Malachi is not yet here, although Elijah has yet to arrive, we can rejoice that some of Zephaniah’s final words in his biblical book have come true in our age, with more yet to be fulfilled—hopefully very soon.

In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem, Fear thou not: and to Zion, Let not thine hands be slack.

The Lord thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing.

I will gather them that are sorrowful for the solemn assembly, who are of thee, to whom the reproach of it was a burden.

Behold, at that time I will undo all that afflict thee: and I will save her that halteth, and gather her that was driven out; and I will get them praise and fame in every land where they have been put to shame.

*At that time will I bring you again, even in the time that I gather you: for I will make you a name and a praise among all people of the earth, when I turn back your captivity before your eyes, saith the Lord.
(Zephaniah 3:16-20)*

Discussion Questions:

1. Rabbi Soloveichik describes how the prophecy of Malachi read before Passover inspired parts of the Seder. But why do you think we read this particular messianic prophecy immediately before our festival of national liberation from Egypt?
2. Rabbi Soloveichik makes the case that the faithfulness of the Jewish people to Jerusalem throughout their exile is what ultimately made their return to the land possible. What lessons can we take from this for our own lives?