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Rethinking Jewish History

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ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
Emil W. Herman  who loved and supported Torah learning.

Terumah

Rethinking Jewish History

A community member once told me that he had been invited to the wedding of a friend who had become religious. The man told me that he felt really bad for his friend who was “going to meet his bride for the first time on their wedding night.”

I asked him where he got the idea that he had not met his bride beforehand. He told me that it was an arranged marriage—that a matchmaker had arranged it. He remembered how in the movie *Fiddler on the Roof*, the matchmaker arranged matches without the knowledge or agreement of the parties involved—and he was sure that this was the case here, too.

In the United States of America, for many Jews, being Jewish means having a Bar Mitzvah and watching *Fiddler on the Roof*. For many Jews, that film is almost the only opportunity they have to learn about Judaism.

The problem is that the movie is not a positive movie—it essentially tells the story of the deterioration of the generations, how the situation gets worse and worse with each passing generation.

In the movie, Tevya the Milkman, who only has daughters, tries to marry off his oldest daughter with an arranged marriage. However, the daughter goes ahead and finds a groom on her own. And even though Tevya protests the fact that they arranged the match themselves, he still eventually gives his approval to the marriage.

So while the daughter gets married to a religious boy, the problem was that she served as her own matchmaker.

Tevya’s second daughter already gets married with a socialist Communist who believes that they need to change the world and, of course, is already far from Jewish tradition. And the third daughter breaks all boundaries—she goes and gets married to a non-Jew, even though Tevya doesn’t agree to the marriage and doesn’t bestow it with his blessing.

The impression one gets from the movie is that Judaism is bankrupt and that the situation is only going to get worse.

But in the Torah, there are two ways to look at Jewish history—which brings us right to this week’s Torah portion.

This week, we read the Parshah of Terumah, in which the Jewish Nation is commanded to build a Mishkan, the Tabernacle, for G-d. And even in the history of the Mishkan, it's possible to see the "yeridas hadoros," the "descent of the generations."

The Mishkan that was built in the desert was Moshe Rabbeinu's handiwork. It contained the Aron (the Ark), the Menorah, the Shulchan (Table), the Altar, and so on. It was all perfect. The Mishkan was in the desert for 40 years, after which they entered the Holy Land and set it up in a place called Gilgal for 14 years.

From there, the Mishkan was moved to Shiloh, where it remained for 369 years. And then, the problems began.

The sons of Ayli the High Priest took the Ark of the Covenant with them into battle against the Pelishtim, the Philistines. They fell in battle, and the Ark was captured by the Philistines (though the Jews ultimately got it back).

That was the first descent—they lost the Ark. It caused the Jews to abandon Shiloh. (Shiloh was not completely destroyed—the Philistines only took the Ark, leaving all the other vessels intact.)

Years later, Shlomo HaMelech (King Solomon) built the Beis Hamikdash, the Holy Temple, in Jerusalem from stones and earth. For 410 years, the Beis Hamikdash stood. And then, Nevuchadnezzar, the King of Bavel (Babylon), destroyed the Beis Hamikdash. That was the second descent.

But with all that, Nevuchadnezzar didn't completely destroy the Beis Hamikdash. The Rebbe quotes the Talmud Yerushalmi that says that in the First Beis Hamikdash, only the roof was destroyed—the walls remained intact. In other words, it was not a complete destruction.

Seventy years after the Destruction of the First Temple, they built the Second Temple. But in the Second Temple, it wasn't the same thing. In the Second Temple, the Ark of the Covenant containing the Two Tablets, was not in the Holy of Holies. The Second Temple was already not on the same level of holiness.

On top of that, every synagogue has a Ner Tamid, an eternal light which is there to symbolize the Menorah which was in the Beis Hamikdash and which was lit every night. Its candles would remain lit until the morning. But there was one Menorah candle that miraculously would burn "tamid," constantly, and so to remember this, there is a Ner Tamid in every synagogue.

But in the Second Temple, this miracle didn't occur for most of its years. Even the Ner HaMa'aravi, the miraculous Western Candle, only burned from night to dawn.

And so it went from descent to descent until the Destruction of the Second Temple.

This time, the Romans destroyed the Beis Hamikdash completely. No remnant remained of even the walls. The famous Kotel, the Western Wall, is only an outer wall of the Temple Mount—the Temple itself was destroyed down to the foundations. On that, the verse in Psalms says, “Those who say, ‘Destroy, destroy, until its very foundation.’” Only the Temple Mount remained.

There are those historians who say that after the revolt of Bar Kochba, the Romans even lowered the mountain itself so the Jews shouldn’t dream that they’d one day dare to try rebuilding the Temple.

As of today, we have been without our Holy Temple for 2,000 years.

But that’s a negative point of view—a view which says that the more time goes by, the further we get from the Stand at Mt. Sinai and the era of the Holy Temple, and the more we lose our intimate connection with G-d.

Chasidic philosophy, however, has an entirely different view on life. And when it comes to the subject of the Mishkan, it can be seen in an entirely different light.

The Mishkan that the Jewish Nation had built in the desert was constructed essentially of wood, and it was small and portable. It existed for the 40 years they were in the desert, and another 14 years in Gilgal.

Later, when they got to Shiloh, there was some progress made. Now the Mishkan was not a portable house of wood. Now they built walls of stone, and only the roof was the same portable roof that had been used in the Mishkan. And this “new and improved” Mishkan in Shiloh stood for 369 years.

Then they came to Jerusalem, where they went from “temporary lodging” to a “permanent address.” Here, not only were the walls made of stone, but the entire structure too was made of stone—even the roof. And the First Temple stood longer than did the Mishkan—the First Beis Hamikdash stood for 410 years.

Then came the Second Temple, on which it was said, “Greater shall be the glory of this latter house than the former.” And the Talmud (Tractate Bava Basra 3:1) tells us that “latter” means the Second Temple, which stood ten years longer than the first—the Second stood for 420 years. Additionally, it was taller and more beautiful than the first.

And now we proceed to the Coming of the Moshiach and the building of the Third Temple, which will be an eternal house.

On top of that, from a spiritual point of view, the Jewish Nation has indeed progressed. In the desert after the Exodus from Egypt, a mere 40 days after G-d’s Revelation on Mt. Sinai, the Jewish Nation worshiped the Golden Calf. During the First Temple Era, when there were open miracles, the Jews also worshiped idols. And so when ten of the Tribes went into exile, they were assimilated and lost, and as such are known to this day as the Ten Lost Tribes.

It was specifically in the Second Temple Era that the Jewish Nation progressed and were on a higher spiritual level. Even though there were less miracles, the Jews observed the mitzvos and so, even when they were exiled from their land, they did not assimilate.

Today, we are their descendants. And, contrary to less and less miracles the more and more our exile continues, the Jewish Nation remains strong in Torah and mitzvos.

Thus, with that perspective, one can look at Jewish history with a positive eye.

And this is also true as far as Fiddler on the Roof goes.

It may be true that in the 19th Century, things got worse and worse for the Jews. But now it's time to make a new movie about the history of the Jews at the end of the 20th Century. If, in the 19th Century, Jewish parents were the ones who safeguarded tradition and the kids were the ones who abandoned tradition, in our generation it's exactly the opposite—Grandpa didn't keep Torah and mitzvos at all, while his children's generation got a lot closer to Judaism: they put on tefillin, eat kosher, go to shul, and so on.

And not only that, but Grandpa's grandchildren are already studying in Jewish schools and are now already on higher religious level than their own parents.

Now that's the modern version of Tevya.

Bottom line? The closer we get to the coming of Moshiach, the Jewish Nation marches forward and progresses, and its connection with Judaism only gets stronger and stronger.

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