

Devarim

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Illuy Nishmas Leah bat Tzvi, z"l, whose *yahrzeit* is on *Tisha B'Av, b"H*. May her soul have *aliyah* after *aliyah*, and may she always be a *meilitz yoshar* for her family and all of *Klal Yisroel*.

The simple fact is that man is, by definition, a religious being. No matter how secular he tries to be, a person needs to believe in something more powerful than they are or life becomes hopeless. We require a cause worthy of getting out of bed each morning. It's just the way we're made. So the argument is never whether or not we need to be religious. It's always just, *which* religion and *whose* god?

After all, what is religion but a set of beliefs that usually centers around some all-powerful being. This usually results in some form of "worship" and a bunch of rituals, that every normal human being tends to have, whether they belong to the clergy or a Board of Directors of a Fortune 500 company.

So when people casually throw around terms like, "Almighty Dollar," or talk about "worshipping the ground" someone walks on, there is truth to it. Not that the dollar is ever almighty, but people certainly treat it that way and tend to "worship" it as a god. They listen wholeheartedly to its "profits."

The thing about every religion in the world other than Torah is that all of them have been manmade. The god they worship is one they themselves have concocted, or borrowed somewhat from Judaism. Only Judaism claims to have received its manual directly from God, not as Divine inspiration but word-for-word from the mouth of God.

People have a hard time believing that because, they just haven't taken the time to check it out or to appreciate what it means. It's outside of their experience so they assume it's outside of reality altogether. They can't get their head around it, so they think it is not something that could have happened. They can't see it happening today, so they can't believe it happened yesterday.

But that's not the only reason why. It's also because they don't sense anything in the world to support the idea that God exists, let alone talks to man. Even people who do believe in God and the prophecy of Torah don't exactly live like people who believe. There is too much inconsistency, too much discrepancy between religious groups, too much lack of religious zeal, and too much leaning towards the secular world. It can take a couple of years of intense discussion and classes to open the heart of a non-religious Jew to Torah. It can take but five minutes of negative press to shut it.

Shabbos Day

SOMETIMES YOU CAN walk past a restaurant and see the chef cooking. It's part of the show to draw customers in. There is steam billowing from a pot as he quickly stirs it, while others run from one thing to the next to make sure everything comes out just right.

As you watch in amazement at the skill and energy, you have this longing to smell what they are cooking. But there is a window between you and the action, only allowing you to watch, not smell. After a short while you feel you've seen enough and decide to move on, quickly forgetting the chef and his food.

It's a different story for the person after you. They happened to walk by the same restaurant as a customer was leaving, and the smell that accompanied them from inside was so amazing they had to stop and watch the chef at work. However, after a few moments, they didn't move on, but in. They decided to stay for lunch and see if the good smell tasted good as well.

For almost two thousand years, we've been like the customer who could see but not smell. We can see the Torah, we have read about Mt. Sinai, and we know about Jewish history since then. We pray to the same God, and believe in the same Divine Providence. Yet, the whole God experience seems beyond us, as if we're on the other side of a glass window.

In Temple times, even evil leaders like Nebuchadnetzar and Achashveros could not escape the reality of the Jewish God. In non-Temple times, even people who accept

His existence and follow His Torah can forget that He is all around them. The Temple made that much of a difference, not only because of what it represented, but by how it impacted Creation. It was not only a place for the *Shechinah* to dwell within mankind, but a channel for spiritual energy that emanated to all parts of the world.

The presence of the Temple affected everything. It says that even food tasted better and did not have to be seasoned to bring out its richness. All natural pleasures were more pleasurable. If you consider how much we spend each year just to enhance our daily pleasure with all the products being pushed our way, you can get a little bit of an idea of what the Temple meant to Creation.

Having said that, one might ask how anyone could have been evil while the Temple stood, especially the Jewish people. With such positive spiritual energy in the world, how could anyone have abused Creation? Isn't that what *Eichah* asks in the end?

Seudas Shlishis

THE GEMORA recounts a story about the *yetzer bara* for idol worship from Temple times. It is mystical, but the point is not:

“Woe, woe, it (*yetzer bara*) is what destroyed the Sanctuary, burnt the Temple, killed all the righteous, driven all of the Jewish people into exile, and is still dancing among us! You have given him to us so that we may receive reward through him. We want neither him, nor the reward!”

At that point a tablet fell down from Heaven for them upon which the word ‘truth’ was inscribed. Rebi Chanina said: “One may learn from this that the seal of The Holy One, Blessed is He, is truth.” They ordered a fast of three days and three nights, after which it (*yetzer bara*) was handed over to them. It came forth from the Holy of Holies like a young fiery lion, and the Prophet told them: “This is the evil desire of idol worship” . . . As they took hold of it a hair of its beard fell out, and it raised its voice and it was audible 400 “miles.” They said: “What shall we do? Perhaps, *God forbid*, they will have mercy upon it from Heaven!”

The prophet told them: Put it into a lead pot, and close its opening with lead because lead absorbs the voice.” (*Yoma* 69b)

And that was the end of the *yetzer bara* for idol worship until this very day. As the evil king Menashe told Rav Ashi in a dream, had we lived during the time of its “reign,” most of us would be powerless to resist its temptations (*Sanbedrin* 102b). It was that powerful.

This is because free will requires a balance between good and evil. If one of the two is more powerful than the other, it ceases to be a contest because a person more readily is pulled to the stronger side. Since during Temple times the reality of God was so strong, there had to be a counterforce of idol worship to make the choice of rejecting it a free will decision.

The problem was, is, that over time people become sloppy. As the *Mesillas Yesbarim* emphasizes, vigilance against sin is a must in the service of God. Let your guard down for a moment and that moment can wipe away years of vigilance, just like that. Entire lives can be made, and broken, in a single moment.

And that's what started to happen in the time just after the Temple was destroyed. So the rabbis figured it was better to remove the challenge altogether than to fail at it, and they were successful. It's just that unfortunately, success often comes at a high price, and this one did as well.

Ain Od Milvado, Part 59

THE GEMORA GOES on to show how evil is just a corruption of the positive. This means that man's drive to worship false gods is a corruption of his need to worship the real God. It's just easier to make up gods that only expect from you what you expect from yourself. There's no demand to make yourself into a better person.

Therefore, when the rabbis had the *yetzer bara* for idol worship removed, ironically it weakened our drive for God. They figured that as tragic a consequence as it was, it was more tragic to watch good Jews fall to the idol worshipping wayside. It was, they calculated, the lesser of two evils.

Consequently, though we have little or no desire to worship wood or stone, we also struggle with being real with God, and how He is *everything*. It's the reason why we can do *mitzvos* without heart and pray without much intention. It's the reason why *ain od Milvado* doesn't resonate with us as deeply as it should, and why we think we can do just fine without the Temple.

The Nine Days begin this Tuesday night, *b"H*. Other than for *Shabbos*, it means no meat, no hot showers, no freshly laundered clothing. It means a big drop in *simchah*, because we are meant to mourn over the destruction of both temples, and all the other calamities that happened over the millennia on the ninth of *Av*. It's inconvenient, uncomfortable.

More than that, it's an awakening. It's supposed to wake us up to the fact that, as great life seems, it's missing so much without a temple and the drive to serve God in

it. We might be physically vibrant but we're spiritual zombies. In many respects, the Nine Days are the most real part of the year because the reality they mourn is the real one that we're living without. It's the rest of the year we kind of live a dream, and miss out on the higher and more fulfilling connection to God we were created to have.