

Bellows Family

# MATAN AL HAPEREK

The Six-Year Online Weekly | Tanakh Learning Program

With the building of the Second Temple and the end of the seventy years of exile, the people began to wonder how to relate to the fast days which were decreed after the destruction of the First Temple. Perek 7 begins with a description of the arrival of a delegation, apparently from the Babylonian exile, to the priests and prophets in Jerusalem in order to ask about one of the fast days (7:1-3). Zechariah's answer includes several short prophecies which are based on quotes from earlier prophecies of the "former prophets", mostly from Yirmiyahu. At the beginning and again at the end Zechariah addresses the question of the status of the fast days directly, and in the middle he reviews the past and remembers the early prophecies of doom and then the prophecies of consolation. These prophecies are presented in a chiasmic structure and together are designed to deal with this question:

**7:1-3** – Opening – the delegation arrives "to pray before the Lord".

**7:4-7** – Contrast between the mourning and fasting and the commandment of God to the prophets.

**7:8-14** – Violation of God's commandments in the past led to the destruction and exile.

**8:1-8** – The return of God and His nation to Jerusalem.

**8:9-13, 14-17** – The flourishing of the land in peaceful times, the future compliance with God's commandments.

**8:18-19** – The reversal of the mourning and fasting to happiness and joy in the future.

**8:20-23** – Conclusion – The arrival of many nations "to pray before the Lord" in the future.

## 1.

"Shall I weep in the fifth month?" Opening – the question of the delegation (7:1-3).

What is the motive for asking the question about cancelling the fast for the destruction and what is the root of the dilemma? Think about the timing of the question (1, 5) and the identity of those asking. See the **Radak**:

*Shall I weep?* – For as yet they did not believe in the building of the Temple, on account of the enemies who had caused the work to cease for many years; and now, although they had heard that they were building, they were weak in faith, and did not wish to go up from Babylonia, for they did not believe that the building of the Temple would be finished and

## Zechariah 7-8

would stand because of these enemies; they therefore asked whether they should fast on the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av, as they had done during the seventy years.

### 2.

*“Did you fast for Me, even for Me?”* – between the fast and the commandment (7:4-7).

The halakhic question is posed to the priests and prophets, however only Zechariah responds to the people and the priests together.

What is the attitude to the fast of those asking the question, and what fundamental error does Zechariah find with this? Pay attention to the difference between the halakhic perspective of the question and the prophetic perspective of the answer. How is the fast characterized according to the words of Zechariah?

### 3.

*“And they made their heart as a shamir, not to listen to the Torah ... by the earlier prophets.”*

- The violation of God’s commandments and the punishment (7:8-14).

In this section Zechariah reviews the demands of the former prophets of the people, and reminds them that they did not listen.

**a.** See the prophetic claims (9-10). What characterizes them? Pay attention to the structure of the section – four phrases each divided into two parallel pairs. Examine the development within each pair and between the pairs.

**b.** These words are based on the prophecies of Yirmiyahu (especially Yirmiyahu 7:5-9). Compare the two prophecies. Which rebuke from Yirmiyahu’s prophecy did Zechariah choose not to repeat? Which claim did he add? Try to explain these choices based on the historical period in which he lived.


### 4.

*“I will return to Zion, and I will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem”* - The return of God and His nation to Jerusalem. (8:1-8)

After describing the sins of the earlier generations and the destruction that came because of them, Zechariah goes on to give a prophecy of consolation which appears at the heart of the series of prophecies. This prophecy describes the rebuilding of Jerusalem.

**a.** Within the prophecy there are two parallel sections (2-3, 7-8) which describe the return of God and the nation to Zion. How is redemption characterized in the prophecy of Zechariah?

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## Zechariah 7-8

**b.** In pesukim 4-5 at the center of the prophecy the prophet paints an idyllic picture of bustling lives in the streets of Jerusalem. Two extremes are shown – the elderly men and women sitting and the young boys and girls playing. What is the relationship between this section and the pesukim which frame it? What is the meaning of the differences highlighted between the elderly and the children? What is the meaning of this image? Why are the elderly specifically mentioned? Compare to the descriptions of the destruction in Eichah 2:11-12, 21 and 4:16.

### 5.

*“Let your hands be strong, you who hear in these days these words” (8:9-17)*

In pesukim 9-17 Zechariah goes from the present *“these days”* to the future *“those days”*. The first section (9-13) begins and ends with the words *“Let your hands be strong”*, encourages *“you who hear in these days”* and describes the turning point in the fate of the nation which will take place from now on. These words are a concise summary of Chaggai’s prophecy of encouragement (2:15-19).

**a.** The words truth, justice and peace are found throughout the prophecies of destruction and consolation: examine their context throughout the prophecy (7:9, 8:3 and 8, 8:10,12,16 and 19) and see their double role in both the destruction and the redemption.

**b.** In pesukim 16-17 the prophet returns to the demands of the former prophets: compare this to his earlier words in 7:9-10 – what additional demand do we find here, besides the demands for thought and action and why? (See also the end of pasuk 19.)

### 6.

*“The fast of the fourth ... shall be for the house of Judah for joy and happiness and for happy holidays.” (8:18-19)*

In this section the prophet returns to the question of commemorating the fast days, but here his answer is different than in the opening. What is his precise answer to the question of the delegation and how does the series of prophecies until now lead to this answer? Pay attention to the meaningful addition at the end of the answer: *“but love truth and peace.”* Pay attention as well to the fact that Zechariah speaks of turning the fasts into days of *“joy and happiness”* (and not just cancelling them as the delegation had asked). What is the spiritual source of this reversal? See **Rav Y. Bin Nun**:

In our perek in Zechariah this prophecy serves not only as the beginning of consolation and salvation, but also as an explanation for the destruction – and this is precisely the context of the question. The way the question is asked – *“Shall I weep in the fifth month?”* is seen by the

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## Zechariah 7-8

prophet as a religious error, as if the fast is a religious obligation to God. However, truthfully, it is only an opening for us to repent and to correct our sins to Him. Therefore, there is a need to return to the former prophets to understand the deep anger, and to remember its reasons: the false justice and the oppression by man of his fellow man, especially the poor and weak in society. In addition to Zechariah's summary of the prophecies of Yirmiyahu about the reasons for the anger and the destruction, we see in the continuation of perek 8 the summary of the demands of the prophet of the people, before he gives the answer about the fasts.


### **APPENDIX: “Shall I weep in the fifth month?” – The question of the cancellation of the fasts in commemoration of the destruction throughout history**

Throughout history the question of cancelling the fasts arose several times. The fact that the question arose at the time of the building of the Second Temple, and that the prophet Zechariah answered about the future cancellation of these fasts, and the possibility that they were indeed cancelled in the time of the Second Temple, reinforce the idea that the question must be examined each time there is further progress in the redemption of the nation. We are not necessarily talking about completely cancelling them, rather reducing their severity, and making certain changes that would reflect that progress in the stages of redemption. These attempts began after the destruction of the Second Temple and continue until today. In Massechet Megilla (5b) we are told that Rebbi bathed in the bathhouse of the marketplace of Tzipori on the 17<sup>th</sup> of Tammuz, and wanted to eradicate the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av as a fast day, and the Rabbis did not let him. Tosafot explain that Rebbi wanted to eradicate certain strict behaviors on the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av. In the continuation of the Gemara Rabbi Abba bar Zavda explains that that year the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av fell on Shabbat and Rebbi said – since it must be postponed, let it be postponed forever. This attempt by Rebbi to cancel the fasts of that particular year, or to lessen their severity was explained by the GR”A, “since in his time Israel had a reprieve from their troubles, as we know.” It seems, therefore that Rebbi wanted to express that reprieve from trouble in his times, and tried to do so by lessening the severity of the fast on the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av...Even so, they did not allow him to do so and they did not accept his ruling.

This attempt by Rebbi, who lived only a few decades after the destruction, connects to another attempt which happened when the nation began to return to Israel in the last century. After the long period of exile there were those who thought to reexamine the question of the fast days. When Herbert Samuel, who was Jewish, was appointed the high commissioner of Palestine, Rav Avraham HaCohen Kook wrote a response about the cancelling of the fasts:

19 Tammuz 5680, the first year of our brother the high commissioner of the Land of Israel, Mr. Eliezer ben Menachem, Sir Herbert Samuel, his highness.

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## Zechariah 7-8

Greetings to his honor my venerable friend, who awaits the salvation of the nation of God, our teacher the Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Zisselman,

I received your precious letter, and our emotions which have been affected by the salvation of God, who dealt with us in a miraculous way, to found our redemption with the appointment of our brother the great minister, filled my heart with joy, when I saw that the elders of the generation feel the light of salvation. This is an auspicious sign for the revival of the house of Israel. However, as to the fast days, I think that until God will reestablish our destroyed Temple before our eyes, on top the high mountain, as a glory before all of the nations, we cannot cancel them ... and when God will illuminate us with the encompassing light of salvation, the fasts will transform, and become joyous and happy holidays. The complete light of salvation, and the glory of our righteous Messiah and the building of our Temple will come to us, because we will not forget the house of our Lord and our brothers, all of our nation who are in distress, and we will participate in their pain and sorrow by fasting our fasts of old, and together we will make the effort to rise up in our holy land, a pure spirit full of belief in God's word, and with thanks to God for his grace and truth.

The appointment of a Jew as a ruler of Israel, even if under the authority of the British seemed to be the foundation of redemption, a light of salvation. However, Rav Kook writes that the fasts will be cancelled only when the redemption will be complete in all aspects, and in the meantime we must find the way to express our thanks for the progress which has been made.

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