

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Devarim)

Walk into The Old City through the Jaffa Gate, and after a short stroll down *Ohr HaChaim Street* you will suddenly find yourself looking down upon one of the oldest streets in the world. Known as the *Cardo* and built by the Romans nearly two thousand years ago, it was the main (*cardinal*) thoroughfare in Jerusalem for nearly seven centuries, and one can still see the magnificent Roman columns which adorn its path, rediscovered (courtesy of Jordanian mortar shells) after the Six Day War in 1968.

Any tourist who has ever visited Jerusalem in the last fifty years has most probably seen and even walked on this magnificent colonnade. But there is a detail concerning this street that changed the way I look at it forever.

This street was built by the emperor Hadrian following the *Bar Kochba Rebellion*. (There are some who suggest it was partly a cause of the rebellion, but many choose our approach.) After the Great revolt, when the second *Beit HaMikdash* (the second Temple) was destroyed in the year 70 C.E., there was still a sizeable Jewish community in Israel (Judea) who suffered greatly under the heel of Rome.

And in the year 131 C.E. they finally had enough. *Shimon Bar Koziva*, one of Rabbi Akiva's prize students, rebelled against the Romans and drew tens of thousands of young Jewish fighters to his cause. Rabbi Akiva believed it was within his power to be anointed King and savior (*Moshiach*) of the Jewish people. And it made sense: six centuries earlier, seventy years after the first Temple was destroyed the Jews were successful in building a second Temple. So, seventy years after the Second Temple was destroyed perhaps it was time for the Third Temple? Alas, it was not to be...

Hadrian, the emperor of that time, was determined to put an end to this spirit of rebellion; (the Jews had rebelled twice in less than seventy years). He assembled an army comprised of six full legions (and elements of six more legions) comprising approximately 100,000 men, brutally quashing the rebellion. Some suggest as many as a million Jews were murdered or died of hunger and disease.

And when the rebellion was put down Hadrian was not done; he was determined to put an end to every last vestige of Jewish independence. It became forbidden to practice Judaism in any form, which led tens of thousands of Jews to go underground and hide from the Romans. As an example, over 5,000 caves where Jews hid were found in the *Beit Jubrin* and *Elah* valleys alone...

During this time the Romans determined that the secret to Jewish continuity was not our armies but our teachers, hence the great Rabbis were hunted down and murdered, with Rabbi Akiva himself tortured to death.

As part of Hadrian's determination to destroy Jewish belief in any independent future he razed what was left of Jerusalem to the ground and rebuilt it as a Roman city renaming it *Aelia Capitolina*; it became forbidden to even say the name Jerusalem on pain of death; hence the adage from the Psalms (*Tehillim* 137:5) which became popular: "*If I forget thee O' Jerusalem let my right arm wither and my tongue cleave to my pallet...*".

And as part of rebuilding Jerusalem as a Roman city the Romans followed their standard plan for Roman cities, building a grid of streets with the *Cardo*, a North-to-South Street at its center.

And here is the detail that changed the Cardo for me forever: It was built by Jewish Slaves, most probably captured and perhaps even tortured during the Bar Kochba rebellion. But once completed, it was forbidden for Jews to walk there; any Jew caught inside the city that was once Jerusalem was put to death on the spot. In fact, the Cardo was lined with shops; it was a marketplace. And what did the Romans sell on this market avenue?

Think about it: *There were over 80,000 Jews in Salonika before the Holocaust; almost all of them were shipped to Auschwitz and nearly 85% of them never came back. So what happened to their refrigerators?*

I recall, on a trip to Poland, having a little free time to wander around Warsaw in the area that had once been the Jewish ghetto. I happened across a silver store and there in the display window I could not help but notice a menorah and a pair of Shabbat candles complete with the Mogen David symbol on their base. I stood there for ten minutes debating what to do; it did not take a genius to figure out how those Jewish articles had ended up in that Polish store; it is highly doubtful they were ever properly purchased from the original Jewish owners...

You know what they sold in the Cardo? The Romans profited from the loot of the destruction of the Jewish people. And if you want some confirmation: if you look for it, if you are ever in Rome and visit the Coliseum (on the second level) you will find a plaque explaining that the original building of the entire Coliseum in Titus' honor, was funded by the loot from Judea... (It was built to commemorate Titus' victory against the Jews in the Great revolt...)

The Cardo then has become a street that represents Jewish exile; it was a symbol of Roman domination and the destruction of the Jewish people. By all odds, we as a people should long ago have ceased to exist, and we should most certainly have given up on Jerusalem, and yet, we never stopped dreaming about coming home.

Ever wonder why the Mount of Olives became so special? You see, after the Temple was destroyed and the Bar Kochba rebellion crushed, Jews were forbidden to enter Jerusalem but they desperately wanted to remain connected and the closest they could get that they were allowed to visit (when they came up from Tiberius and Beit She'an, and down from the North) was the ridge overlooking the ruins of the Temple Mount which happened to be the Mount of Olives

But why is Jerusalem so important? Why does every Jew anywhere in the world (including in Israel) always pray facing Jerusalem? Why do we mention Jerusalem every time we say the Grace after meals, at every wedding, and three times a day in our Prayers? Jerusalem is mentioned over 500 times in the Bible (though not once in the Muslim Koran), and its sanctity is deemed by Maimonides to be eternal. No matter what happens to the Jewish people and how far away we may have been physically, Jerusalem will forever be our holy city; why?

Maimonides in his *Hilchot Beit Habechirah* (6:16) explains that the sanctity of Jerusalem never departs as it stems from the Divine Presence which is never lost ...

My teacher Rabbi Shlomo Riskin points out that the first time Jerusalem is mentioned in the bible is when Abraham has just miraculously defeated the Four Kings with only a few hundred men, in what essentially amounts to the First World War. Malki'zedek the king of Shalem recognized G-d's hand proclaiming: "*Blessed be Avram to G-d most High who delivers your enemies into your hands...*"

(*Bereishit* (Genesis 14:19-20). Indeed, this is the first time G-d is recognized as the guiding hand of History, hence the name Jerusalem: *Yerushalem* which literally means where G-d is seen (or sensed.)

Indeed, the entire idea of a Temple in the center of Jerusalem is that we might have a place where Hashem (G-d's presence) can be felt on an entirely different level. Hence Jews are commanded to visit Jerusalem three times a year that they might benefit, however briefly, from an environment where G-d's presence is so expressly experienced. Such an experience might make one more sensitive, more ethical, kinder; better ...

And there is a second idea historically which contributed the special nature of Jerusalem.

Rav Soleveitchik points out that there are actually two mountains in Judaism:

Mount Sinai, where we received the Torah, and **Mount Moriah** which was where the binding of Isaac took place and which Jewish tradition identifies as the Temple Mount.

Interestingly, we left Mount Sinai, have no idea exactly where it is and most certainly gave it back to Egypt in the 1979 peace treaty with nary a mention as far as losing Mount Sinai. Mount Moriah on the other hand, is the Temple Mount which is the center of all of Judaism.

You see, suggests Rav Soleveitchik, Mount Sinai is the mountain where we received (the Torah) *from* G-d; Mount Moriah where Abraham was willing to give up his beloved son Isaac, is where we were willing to give back *to* G-d.

Jerusalem then, represents the place where we reconnect with the Divine, becoming intensely conscious of all Hashem has given us, and thus feel a profound sense of responsibility as to what we should be willing to give back in response. And this dichotomy is what Judaism is all about.

This Shabbat as we read the portion of *Devarim* which is always read just prior to the Ninth of Av, when both Temples were destroyed, let us appreciate the gift we have been given to see Jerusalem being rebuilt before our eyes, and live up to what that gift means and how much more we still need to do to finish the job....

Every summer I always noticed the pebbles that would mysteriously appear on the tops of the Roman columns of the cardo, but could never figure out how they got there, until late one summer afternoon, I saw a group of kids from the Jewish quarter standing at the railing opposite the Cardo. They could not have been more than seven or eight, and they were playing a game, taking turns tossing pebbles across and trying to get them to land on the tops of the Roman columns... They had a system, one point in the middle of the column, another point close to the edge and an additional point if your stone knocked someone else's off the column...

Do you understand? Jewish children have turned what is left of the Roman Empire into their game ...

Wishing you all a Shabbat Shalom and a meaningful fast of Tisha B'Av, from Jerusalem...

Binny Freedman