

The Temple

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The Temple has been the most significant building in Jewish history. The Fast of Av commemorates two occasions when it, Jerusalem, and the Jewish state were destroyed. Tradition has it that the 3rd Temple will last forever! But how essential is it? We managed before we had a Temple with a collapsible, moveable Tabernacle. Babylonian Jewry survived without one. And we have managed without it for some two thousand years. Why do we make such a fuss of it?

I can understand its symbolism. Once we were in charge of our own land and could build whatever we wanted to. The Temple represents a time before Christianity and Islam tried to displace and eliminate us. It is the myth of the past, a mixture of El Dorado, Atlantis, and Tintagel, with great, wise, victorious kings like Solomon. When conquest was conquest, whoever the conqueror might have been, for better or for worse, and there were no interfering international proxies.

After the Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70, the Jewish people had to make significant adjustments to a new reality. Community prayer and study replaced community sacrifices. Hundreds of years later, when the Byzantium exiled the remnant of Judean Jewry and authority, the reality hit that there was no chance of a military Messiah regaining what had been lost. Instead Judaism focused on a mystical Messiah.

As the likelihood of things being again exactly as they had been, receded, the rabbis had to allow for a new order that might be different than the previous one. So the idea developed that the prophet Elijah would come back down to earth to give us details of a new order. What new rituals and old laws would or would not apply? One opinion declared that all festivals would no longer apply, except for Purim—as the example of God's presence being hidden, because His name is not mentioned once in Esther's Scroll, and that we should enjoy life and be happy despite all awful things going on around us!

It was this idea of God's presence withdrawn that lay behind the idea in the Talmud (Ketubot 111a) that we should accept our fate in exile and not try to return by force. Instead, wait patiently for God to intervene. Most rabbis have taken this as symbolic. Besides, the agreement not to use force was conditional on force not being used against us. Only the immensity of our suffering and political circumstances helped bring Jewish nationalism to fruition. Yet individual Jews always returned when they could—Nachmanides, Yehudah HaLevy from Spain, the Spanish Exiles to Safed, and the second generation of Chasidic masters and Lithuanian pietists from Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century. All of these groups shared one dream: to return to Zion, if just to die.

The place where the Temple stood remained holy ground, and under biblical law

no one ritually impure could enter its space. Only the ashes of the Red Heifer could provide such purification. Even if such a Red Heifer were to be found, only a proven priest could carry out the ceremony. And it is a fact that we do not know for certain who a priest is today. The Cohanim we have are accepted symbolically, but not with the same authority or functions as Biblical priests. Yes, I know there are these fancy genetic tests, but none of them satisfies all the criteria for proving a priest's pedigree today. We will just have to wait until Elijah comes, no matter what the crazies plan.

It is for this reason that you will not find Charedi Jews going to visit the Temple Mount. No one from my yeshiva ever tried to in my day. Even though it is probable that the Temple did not occupy all of the territory now called Haram Esh Sharif, or Al Quds, they did not and do not go there. When in doubt, one should not, particularly if there's a danger of infracting a biblical law. Those who now campaign to go up there are the less Charedi. They are the nationalists who are motivated less by spirituality than political assertion of rights. When one side plays politics, so too does the other.

Those Muslims who object to Jews being up there and try to scream and scare them away are being racist and playing politics too. But in a tinderbox, one ought to be careful about lighting a match. One has to choose one's fights. In this case the overwhelming majority of Orthodox and other forms of Judaism do not approve of trying to take over the Temple Mount. Neither does the Israeli government, nor any really significant rabbi that I am aware of.

Ironically, since the success of secular Zionism as a Jewish liberation movement in achieving a Jewish homeland, most secular Israelis have drifted so far away from religious Judaism that they don't care about the Temple very much at all. Those who want to claim rights are regarded as crazy by both the Charedi and the secular.

But the Temple will not fade from our psyche. We pray for it every single day. Certain Charedi yeshivot study every law to do with Temple procedure in great depth—every inch of the building in its first and second phase, every movement of procedure, every ceremonial, every garment, tool, and artifact. They are not the ones scouring Africa or Hollywood or the Vatican for the Lost Ark, nor going up on to the Temple mount to say their prayers. They are waiting patiently for God to reveal, through history, the fate of the Jewish people.

Meanwhile, given the world we live in, we have no option but to fight for our survival. Since most of the Charedi world doesn't fight and more secular Israelis avoid military service, it is the National Religious who are following in the footsteps of Bar Kochba, taking up arms in defense of Jewish sovereignty. I admire them. Just wish some of them didn't have designs on the Temple Mount. History never exactly repeats itself. But it seems to me that any attempt to provoke by trying to take over the Temple site is a fool's game. Worshipping stones instead of God is itself an example of how some Jews continue to worship idols.

There is, of course, immense significance in the Western Wall, the last

physical vestige of our Temple. As much as it reminds us what we have lost, it also stands as testament to the fact that we have done pretty well without a Temple, and this seems to be the will of God at this moment in time.

So as we mourn the loss, I think we should also celebrate how we have risen from the ashes like a phoenix. As Rabbi Akiva said on seeing foxes where the Temple once stood, the same voice that prophesied our loss also prophesied our survival.