

Verse 1:11

כָּל עַמָּה נֹאנְחִים מִבְּקָשִׁים לֶחֶם נִתְּנוּ מִחֲמֵדֵיהֶם בְּאֶכָּל לְהַשִּׁיב נֶפֶשׁ רְאָה ה' וְהִבִּיטָה כִּי הֵייתִי
זוֹלָלָה:

All her people are sighing and seeking bread. They gave over their treasures for food to sustain themselves. See, O Lord, and look at how I have become a glutton.

We All Have Descended So Dramatically

Most of the People Versus All of the People

The Midrash states (*Eichah Rabbah* 1:39):

“And the famine intensified in the city and there was no bread for the people of the land” (II Kings 25:3, Jeremiah 52:6). For the people of the land there was no bread, but for the tribe of Judah there was bread. Thus it was with the First Destruction. But with the Second Destruction—“All her people sigh and seek bread.”

The Midrash makes a point of telling us that the famine at the time of the First Destruction affected only the majority of the people, while the famine at the time of the Second Destruction affected the entire people. We need to understand the significance of this. It is not merely a matter of numbers. Indeed, it is likely that the majority of the Jewish population at the time of the First Destruction was comparable in size to the entire Jewish population at the time of the Second Destruction. What, then, does the Midrash aim to teach us?

Spiritual Garments

We will explain this Midrash with the aid of another Midrash (*Eichah Rabbah* 1:1), which reads as follows:¹

It is like a king who would dress his son in silken clothes when he was pleased with him, and in dirty olive-presser's clothes when he was angry with him.²

Our Prophets and Sages often compare our loftiness to garments. For example, the Prophet Hosea exhorts (Hosea 2:2-3): “Let her remove her harlotries from her face and her adulteries from between her breasts. Lest I strip her naked and set her as she was on the day she was born” As another example, a Midrash³ reports that God asked us: “With how many ornaments did I adorn you?” The Midrash then goes on to cite the teaching⁴ that 600,000 ministering angels came down from Heaven at the time of the giving of the

¹ The original text also quotes Psalms 137:1 here. I have moved the quotation to the point at which this verse enters the discussion.

² Building on the similarity between בָּדֵד, meaning *solitary* (Lamentations 1:1), and בַּר, meaning *olive press*.

³ *Eichah Rabbah* 2:17.

⁴ *Shabbos* 88a, also in various Midrashim.

Torah and adorned every Jew with two crowns. The Torah tells us that after the sin of the golden calf, the Jewish People were commanded to take off their ornaments.⁵ We must examine, in simple terms, the essence of garments and ornaments.

Tailor-Made Fittings

The matter is as follows. The Holy One Blessed Be He did not create a single thing for naught. Each creature plays a necessary role within the world; even flies and mosquitoes were created for a certain purpose and function. In *Koheles Rabbah* 5:6-10 on Ecclesiastes 5:8 this principle is expounded upon at length. Furthermore, the Holy One Blessed Be He formed each creature with special features tailored to its function: special capabilities and a specific anatomic structure. We see this in all the creeping beings and in all the domesticated and wild animals. Similarly, in the human realm, God implanted within each nation the traits and inclinations necessary for its purpose. Each nation was imbued with a nature tailored to the land and languages assigned to it.

There is a difference, however, between humans and other creatures. The powers placed within other creatures, which enable them to satisfy their needs, protect themselves, and perpetuate the species, operate by instinct. They have no free will to change their behavior. They are perpetually driven by the impulses that the Most High One implanted within them in accordance with their needs, and hence are led to engage continually in their instinctual behaviors. They never deviate from their function.

But the spiritual powers granted to a human being are activated by him according to his will. If he wishes he puts them into effect – “wears them,” so to speak – and if he wishes he casts them aside. Therefore all the special traits and endowments that the Holy One Blessed Be He granted to the human race are compared to garments. Further, the most exalted and praiseworthy traits are called ornaments. I do not intend here to follow the hidden Torah and portray these traits as being truly just garments and ornaments. Far be it from us, with our limited level of understanding, to enter such deep waters. Rather, I wish to keep my explanation at a simple level, in terms of revealed Torah alone. The *Menoras HaMaor* explains the matter along the same lines as we have above. Regarding the two crowns that each Jew received when the Torah was given, he explains that these “crowns” represent the traits and talents needed to learn Torah, grasp its meaning, and fulfill its commandments.⁶

Change of Clothes

We can now explain the Midrash which says that when God got angry at the Jewish People, He dressed them in dirty olive-presser's clothes, so to speak. The idea behind this is as follows. When the Jewish People received the Torah, God clothed them with the traits and talents necessary to understand and keep the Torah. When they cast off the yoke of Torah, these adornments – these special traits and endowments – were taken away from them, since now they were superfluous. As with all beings, God gave us our special

⁵ Exodus 33:5.

⁶ The Maggid also cites this explanation of the *Menoras HaMaor* in his commentary on Song of Songs 3:11.

powers and tools solely to enable us to carry out our intended mission and assigned tasks.⁷

A Prince in Laborer's Clothes

We will bring out the point through an allegory. A king had a son who was designated to succeed him on the throne. Obviously this lad was dressed in fine garments, as befitting the crown prince. After a time the lad got very sick, and the finest doctors were consulted. None was able to find a medicinal cure for the illness. But the doctors all agreed that he probably would be cured if he were burdened with heavy work. The lad would need to exert himself strenuously for a long period of time. He would need to keep working constantly, without resting even for a moment. The more exhausted he would get, the more likely it would be that he would be cured and return to his former state of health.

The king took counsel with his advisors over the matter. He asked them what course to take and how to carry it out. They said to him: "In the situation at hand, our master the king, you should treat your son as follows. Send him away and dress him in coarse clothes like those of the village farmers who work the soil. Let him live in a foreign land where people will not recognize him. Then they will force him to work constantly. But as long as he is wearing regal garments, who will dare to work him as a slave? Certainly nobody will, especially if he is with you or in a place where he is recognized. No one will lift his hand against your son, even if they know that you ordered that he be enslaved. Moreover, you yourself will not be able to bear the sight of his laboring and disgrace, since you know his delicate nature and how he has been pampered from youth."

The king followed this advice, and drove the lad away. The lad was to be taken to a certain foreign city, in accord with the advisors' recommendations. The king ordered his servants to escort the lad to the border of this city, and then return. It is clear that the king and his close circle suffered unbelievable pain over this. Nonetheless, they felt this pain only through reasoning and imagination, for they did not actually see what the lad went through. Conversely, the people in the distant land who saw the lad toiling away felt no sorrow over it at all. After all, they never saw the lad in his former glory. They saw him just in common clothes and assumed he was cut out for this type of work. But the king's servants were aware of both sides of the story. They were the ones who took the lad up to the city border, took off his coat and his golden-laced clothes, and dressed him in the simple worker's clothes. Therefore they really felt the great pain and disgrace that the lad suffered.

Our Clothes, Too, Have Been Changed

The comparison is clear. The Holy One Blessed Be He created us for the holy task of serving Him. He clothed us with fine robes—lofty character traits—and brought us out from bondage to freedom. By freedom we mean the Torah life, which our Sages tell us is the only true state of freedom (*Avos* 6:2). God lovingly bestowed upon us this loftiness. But afterwards, we abandoned the yoke of service to God. As Isaiah puts it (Isaiah 2:6), we became "filled from the east" with a hankering for idolatrous Aramean practices. We took

⁷ It seems to me that there is a connection between the idea developed by the Maggid here and King David's plea (Psalms 51:13): "Do not cast me away from You, and do not take Your holy spirit from me."

upon ourselves the yoke of mundane affairs and allowed ourselves to be subjugated. At that point, it was quite appropriate that we be divested of the precious robes – the lofty talents and traits – for we no longer had need for them. As Hosea prophesized, we were fit to be stripped naked.

At the Border

When was this punishment put into effect? A famous verse from Psalms provides the answer (Psalms 137:1): “By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat and wept, as we remembered Zion.” When Jeremiah saw that we had been sentenced to unbecoming and contemptible work, he lamented over us (Lamentations 4:1): “How has the gold become dimmed!” Nonetheless, as long as we were in the Land of Israel, the sentence was not put into actual effect. The sentence was not carried out until we reached the border. But at the border – by the rivers of Babylon – we were stripped of all our adornments of beauty, and dressed in wretched clothes fitting for slave labor. We fell, so to speak, from the sky to the ground, and were thoroughly shamed and disgraced. The fall was so shocking that anyone witnessing it would be moved to lament over it in full voice.

The beginning of the verse indicates where the punishment was put into effect; the end of the verse hints at its nature. The verse concludes: “There we sat and wept as we remembered Zion.” The psalm puts the focus on Zion (צִיּוֹן), whose gates were distinguished (מְצִיִּינִין) through *halachah*.⁸ Thus the Prophet Isaiah writes (Isaiah 2:3): “For from Zion shall go forth Torah.” By the rivers of Babylon we were stripped of the adornments and ornaments of Torah. There they remain buried until the final redemption, when the time for singing will arrive and the voice of the turtle-dove will be heard in our land.⁹

In the end, the Holy One Blessed Be He will give us back our adornments. Our Sages¹⁰ derive this conclusion from Isaiah's prophesy (Isaiah 35:10): “And eternal joy shall be on their heads.” The Sages tell us that the phrase “eternal joy” (שְׂמֵחַת עוֹלָם) may be interpreted as referring to the “joy from ancient times” (שְׂמֵחַת שְׂמֵעוֹלָם). Eventually we will be raised up to our former lofty state. But for now the adornments have been stripped from us. Jeremiah lamented over the loss of these adornments with a somber declaration (Lamentations 3:1): “I am the man who has seen the affliction meted out by His rod of wrath.” Jeremiah was the one in the best position to lament, because he was our leader as we fell from greatness into the darkness of exile.

Different People Were Affected Differently

We now proceed to explain the Midrash with which we began. There is in fact a big difference between a famine affecting the majority of the nation and a famine affecting the entire nation. People have different natures. Rabbeinu Tam, in his *Sefer HaYashar* (Gate 5), notes that a person's nature may be recognized by his actions and longings. A wise person

⁸ *Midrash Shocher Tov Tehillim* 87.

⁹ Cf. Song of Songs 2:12.

¹⁰ *Shabbos* 88a (also *Yalkut Shimoni* II:441). This is the very same passage in the Gemara that discusses the two crowns that each Jew received when the Torah was given. In his commentary on Lamentations 5:17, the Maggid interprets this Gemara in a different way.

is always longing for wisdom: by virtue of his great power of comprehension he is drawn to it. Conversely, boorish people of low intelligence desire only to eat and drink. They are like dumb animals. Regarding them it is written (Ecclesiastes 6:7): "For a man's labor is for his mouth." To these people, there is no greater blessing than a full stomach. Whoever follows such foolish ways will never achieve wisdom.

Jeremiah exclaims: "All her people are sighing and seeking bread." Here he laments our short-sightedness, which has led us to abandon the true good. We have cast Torah and wisdom aside. We all have become so devoid of intelligence that all we long for is bread: we seek only to satisfy our hunger, like an animal. Now, as the Midrash says, regarding the First Destruction it is written: "And there was no bread for the people of the land." This implies that only the simple, lower-class people were overcome with a urge to fill their stomachs.¹¹ There still remained an elite class engaged in the battle of interpreting the Torah. These men were not overcome with longing to eat to satiation like the beasts of the field and the wild animals of the forest. They desired only to seek wisdom and to behold the wonders of God's Torah, in the manner of true wise men. The presence of these elite scholars provided a measure of comfort. The simple, lowly people at least had someone before whom to be embarrassed about their waywardness; they could yet envy the people of upright character who still remained.

Look At How We Are Now

This was not the case, however, following the Second Destruction. Rather, everyone descended to lowliness. Thus it is written: "All her people are sighing and seeking bread." The Torah scholars almost completely disappeared, and the fountains of wisdom came to a virtual stop. The path of truth was abandoned; the whole Jewish nation just blundered about howling in search of food. The nation was left with no class of wise men before whom the rest of the people could become embarrassed. Thus, our verse concludes: "See, O Lord, and look at how I have become a glutton." Meaning, there is no one left but You, O Lord, who recognizes our deficiencies, for there is no wisdom and no knowledge of God in the land.¹² The Kohen is like a commoner, and the honorable one like a glutton. Who but You, O Lord, can recognize such universal degeneracy?

Regarding the use of the terms **הבט** (look) and **ראה** (see) in our verse, the Midrash states (*Eichah Rabbah* 5:1, end): "R. Pinchas says that looking (**הבטה**) is from a distance ... and seeing (**ראיה**) is close up."¹³ Thus the verse may be read as follows: "Look at us the way You knew us way back when, and then see what we are like now."

The following allegory brings out the point. There was a rich man who had a fall in fortune and became very poor. Out of neediness he was forced to move to a place where no one recognized him and work as a woodchopper. After some time, a person who knew this pitiful fellow in his better days had occasion to travel to this place. The visitor recalled how the fellow had grown up in a very wealthy household. He recalled also that the fellow had been very good-looking. In fact, people from distant places would come to his

¹¹ Perhaps the Maggid is building here on the fact that the expression **עם הארץ**, literally meaning *people of the land*, is used in the Talmud to refer to an ignorant person.

¹² Cf. Hosea 4:1.

¹³ The Midrash there cites also the opinion of R. Yudan, who holds the opposite.

city to marvel at his nice build and good looks. No one had ever seen anyone so good-looking. Artists would paint richly hued portraits of him, which people would put in their homes. But now the fellow's appearance was darkened and his splendor gone. When the visitor saw this, he rummaged around in his carrying-sack to find the portrait of the man's visage that he had from long ago. He held up the picture next to the fellow himself and said: "O how you have fallen from Heaven, O morning star! O how has your splendid beauty been obliterated!" And the visitor cried along with the poor fellow.

Thus have we changed as well. We ask God to take a look at how dramatically we have changed. We plead to God (Psalms 80:15-16): "O God of Hosts, please return. Look down from Heaven and see: Be mindful of this vine, and of the foundation that Your right hand has laid"

Dear God! Aside from You there is no one with enough understanding to be astonished by our descent to such a low level. We all have degenerated; we all are debased. No one realizes what has happened. We plead with You not to see us as we appear now, deserving of all this disgrace. Rather, look first at the likeness of Jacob engraved on Your throne of glory.¹⁴ Then turn back and look at us.

¹⁴ See *Bereishis Rabbah* 78:3 (end) and 82:2.