

Zechariah 7 and 8

Fasting on the Ninth of Ab Transformed

These readings in Zechariah happen to fall for us this year during the time many Jews observe the Fast of Ab. It is considered a time of mourning for the two times the Temple was destroyed, first by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. and later by the Romans in 70 A.D. Both catastrophes happened in the summer on the 9th of the Jewish month Ab.

Many modern American Jews don't mark this event, and in fact the prayers and rituals concerning the fast were deleted from Reform Judaism's prayer books. If it is observed, it focuses on more general subjects like antisemitism or remembering the Holocaust or victims of war or natural disasters.

We discovered the fast in our research into the Jewish roots of Christianity. The Jews fasted in grief over how their sin and rebelliousness led them into idol worship. In response God allowed first Babylon and later the Romans to besiege and destroy both the city of Jerusalem and the Temple itself.

The various readings for the fast point to our own idolatry and serve as a warning to us to leave off serving false gods and return to the cross.

But the origin of the fast came from the people themselves, not God's command. Only one fast is commanded in the Torah. On Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the people are instructed to "afflict their souls," which tradition interpreted to mean to fast in various ways.

The scriptures we will read today in Zechariah 7 and 8 reveal how God really feels about these man-made fasts.

A Timely Question

Some of the Jews who had returned to the Promised Land from exile in Babylon, seeing how there was progress in rebuilding the Temple, sent representatives to Jerusalem with a question.

- Should we continue to fast and weep on the Fast of Ab?

After the Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians, the people in exile could not conduct any of the sacrifices or rituals of the Temple commanded by God. There was no Temple, and they were not free to publicly observe religious rites (see the experiences of Daniel and his companions).

According to the Mishna, for 70 years the people in exile observed only a few rituals - they fasted to mark the day when Nebuchadnezzar breached the wall of Jerusalem in the fourth month Tammuz and the day when the Temple was destroyed in the fifth

month of Ab. They also fasted in the seventh month Tishri to mark the disastrous murder of Gedaliah, who had been appointed a governor of Judah over the poor people who were not taken into exile (**Jeremiah 41:2-3**).

These fasts were not commanded by God in the Torah but sprang from the grief and guilt of the people.

Zechariah 7:1-3 - "And it came to pass in the fourth year of king Darius, that the word of the LORD came unto Zechariah in the fourth day of the ninth month, even in Chisleu; When they had sent unto the house of God Sherezer and Regemmelech, and their men, to pray before the LORD, And to speak unto the priests which were in the house of the LORD of hosts, and to the prophets, saying, Should I weep in the fifth month, separating myself, as I have done these so many years?"

Their question apparently did not get a sympathetic hearing from God.

Zechariah 7:4-5 - "Then came the word of the LORD of hosts unto me, saying, Speak unto all the people of the land, and to the priests, saying, When ye fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh month, even those seventy years, did ye at all fast unto me, even to me?"

The fasts for Jerusalem had become mournful remembrances and even self-indulgent seasons of self-pity rather than a time to genuinely seek God. Apparently they were bemoaning their fate rather than repenting of their sins.

Instead of building a monument to your sin by keeping these fast days, God seems to be saying, just be in the moment and obey his commandments... *now*.

Fasting won't be meaningful if all the rest of the year you eat and drink for Self.

Zechariah 7:6-7 - "And when ye did eat, and when ye did drink, did not ye eat for yourselves, and drink for yourselves? Should ye not hear the words which the LORD hath cried by the former prophets, when Jerusalem was inhabited and in prosperity, and the cities thereof round about her, when men inhabited the south and the plain?"

What would it mean to "fast unto God?"

As Paul said,

- 1 Corinthians 10:31 - "Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God."

It should glorify Him in some way. But if I'm concerned or focused only on myself - positive or negative - it's glorifying me.

David said:

- Psalm 51:2-3 - "Wash me clean of my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know

my transgressions, and my sin is always before me."

Whenever David thought about himself, all he could see was a terrible sinner. It was "ever before him." But if he looked to God, he could be lifted up, assured of God's forgiveness and covering.

If you find yourself looking at yourself, if you are the subject of your sentence, then it's time to examine yourself, run to the cross and reclaim your true identity.

- 2 Corinthians 13:5 - "Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?"

We don't need a season of fasting to do that - we can repent in a single second.

If we don't see Jesus Christ in us, we need to go back to the cross. But there's no need to erect a monument to remember a terrible sin, unless it is overshadowed by the joy of forgiveness. Our sin has been removed as far as the east is to the west.

A fast can easily involve a vow of some kind, or worse, an attempt to manipulate God in some way.

[This is a good place to read **Isaiah 58** on the true fast which is a fast from self].

At this point, God gives Zechariah a new word, which expands on the previous message.

This is almost a restatement of Isaiah 58.

Zechariah 7:8-10 - "And the word of the LORD came unto Zechariah, saying, Thus speaketh the LORD of hosts, saying, Execute true judgment, and shew mercy and compassions every man to his brother: And oppress not the widow, nor the fatherless, the stranger, nor the poor; and let none of you imagine evil against his brother in your heart."

This is basically a paraphrase of the "neighbor" part of ""Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and your neighbor as yourself." (**Matthew 22:37-39** and **Leviticus 19:18**)

It's the basis for just treatment of our fellow humans.

- Deuteronomy 24:14 - "Thou shalt not oppress an hired servant that is poor and needy, whether he be of thy brethren, or of thy strangers that are in thy land within thy gates"

- Leviticus 19:18 - "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against any of your people,

but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD"

But God reminds them that their forefathers refused to hear this word.

Zechariah 7:11-12 - "But they refused to hearken, and pulled away the shoulder, and stopped their ears, that they should not hear. Yea, they made their hearts as an adamant stone (*šāmîr*), lest they should hear the law, and the words which the LORD of hosts hath sent in his spirit by the former prophets: therefore came a great wrath from the LORD of hosts."

The Talmud says the *šāmîr* was a mythical creature who could etch and cut into stone as hard as diamonds. It was unimaginably hard.

With hearts that hard, the outcome was inevitable:

Zechariah 7:13-14 - "Therefore it is come to pass, that as he cried, and they would not hear; so they cried, and I would not hear, saith the LORD of hosts: But I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations whom they knew not. Thus the land was desolate after them, that no man passed through nor returned: for they laid the pleasant land desolate."

Zechariah 8 - Hope in the Messiah

After that grim prophecy revisiting the failures of their forefathers, God gives Zechariah a vision of future prosperous and vibrant Jerusalem in which God will dwell with them, and the people are regathered from exile and are obedient to the Torah. God would bless them, and they in turn will be a blessing to the Gentiles.

And at the end he gives important instructions for observing the fasts.

Zechariah 8:1-3 - "Again the word of the LORD of hosts came to me, saying, Thus saith the LORD of hosts; I was jealous for Zion with great jealousy, and I was jealous for her with great fury. Thus saith the LORD; I am returned unto Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem: and Jerusalem shall be called a city of truth; and the mountain of the LORD of hosts the holy mountain."

The Targum renders it, "I will return to Zion" and "cause my Shechinah to dwell there." But neither the Spirit, the Shekinah, nor the Ark of the Covenant were present in this Temple that was being rebuilt. So, much of this vision concerns the future Temple, the New Jerusalem and the age of the Church.

Jerusalem to be "A City of Righteousness"

- **Isaiah 1:26** - "And I will restore thy judges as at the first, and thy counsellors as at the beginning: afterward thou shalt be called, The city of righteousness, the faithful city."

- **Revelation 21:27** - "And there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb's book of life."

Security

Zechariah 8:4-5 - "Thus saith the LORD of hosts; There shall yet old men and old women dwell in the streets of Jerusalem, and every man with his staff in his hand for very age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in the streets thereof."

The returned exiles rebuilding the Temple probably had few elderly among them because of the difficulty of the journey. And there were probably few children. The city walls would only be built by Nehemiah 60 years in the future. This was a promise of security for Jerusalem's residents.

Regathering

Zechariah 8:6-8 - "Thus saith the LORD of hosts; If it be marvelous in the eyes of the remnant of this people in these days, should it also be marvelous in mine eyes? saith the LORD of hosts. Thus saith the LORD of hosts; Behold, I will save my people from the east country, and from the west country; And I will bring them, and they shall dwell in the midst of Jerusalem: and they shall be my people, and I will be their God, in truth and in righteousness."

Encouragement

Zechariah 8:9 - "Thus saith the LORD of hosts; Let your hands be strong, ye that hear in these days these words by the mouth of the prophets, which were in the day that the foundation of the house of the LORD of hosts was laid, that the temple might be built."

Prosperity

Zechariah 8:10 - "For before these days there was no hire for man, nor any hire for beast; neither was there any peace to him that went out or came in because of the affliction: for I set all men every one against his neighbor."

This is referring to the situation when they were focusing on their own houses and not rebuilding the Temple, rife with internal divisions and beset by opposition from their neighbors the Samaritans.

- **Haggai 1:6** - "Ye have sown much, and bring in little; ye eat, but ye have not enough; ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink; ye clothe you, but there is none warm; and he that earneth wages earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes."

Zechariah 8:11-12 - But now I will not be unto the residue of this people as in the former days, saith the LORD of hosts. For the seed shall be prosperous; the vine shall

give her fruit, and the ground shall give her increase, and the heavens shall give their dew; and I will cause the remnant of this people to possess all these things.

A Blessing not a Curse

Zechariah 8:13 - "And it shall come to pass, that as ye were a curse among the heathen, O house of Judah, and house of Israel; so will I save you, and ye shall be a blessing: fear not, but let your hands be strong."

- **Ephesians 1:3** - "Blessed is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavens in Christ."

This is looking to the Messiah and salvation through Jesus' death on the cross.

"but let your hands be strong" - An exhortation that concerns us as well as those rebuilding the Temple in Zechariah's day.

Zechariah 8:14-15 - "For thus saith the LORD of hosts; As I thought to punish you, when your fathers provoked me to wrath, saith the LORD of hosts, and I repented not: So again have I thought in these days to do well unto Jerusalem and to the house of Judah: fear ye not."

Restating Again the Simple Basics of Justice

Zechariah 8:16-17 - "These are the things that ye shall do; Speak ye every man the truth to his neighbor; execute the judgment of truth and peace in your gates: And let none of you imagine evil in your hearts against his neighbor; and love no false oath: for all these are things that I hate, saith the LORD."

Finally, the prophet addresses their original question about fasting (in 7:3).

The Fasts Transformed

Zechariah 8:18-19 - "And the word of the LORD of hosts came unto me, saying, Thus saith the LORD of hosts; The fast of the fourth month, and the fast of the fifth, and the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth, shall be to the house of Judah joy and gladness, and cheerful feasts; therefore love the truth and peace."

These fasts were the Fast of Tammuz, the Fast of Ab, and the Fast of Gedaliah which were in the original question. But also here are added a fast of the 10th month marking the day when Nebuchadnezzar started to besiege Jerusalem (**Jeremiah 52:4**). The fasts of the seventh month Tishri might also include the fast on Yom Kippur.

Maimonides says that all these fasts shall cease in the times of the Messiah, with all others, which will be times of joy and gladness. (Hilchot Taaniot, c. 5. sect. 19.)

Although the end of time has not come, yet we're in the Times of Messiah, we live in

His kingdom and we preach His gospel - the offer of salvation through His death on the cross and resurrection from the dead.

As soon as this began to be preached in the world, a strange phenomenon began to happen.

The Prophet Foresees the Gospel Going Worldwide

Zechariah 8:20-22 - "Thus saith the LORD of hosts; It shall yet come to pass, that there shall come people, and the inhabitants of many cities: And the inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, Let us go speedily to pray before the LORD, and to seek the LORD of hosts: I will go also. Yea, many people and strong nations shall come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem, and to pray before the LORD."

This vision and promise is all through the scriptures:

- **Psalm 65:2-3** - "O You who listen to prayer, all people will come to You. When iniquities prevail against me, You atone for our transgressions..."

- **Psalm 86:9** - "All the nations You have made will come and bow before You, O Lord, and they will glorify Your name."

- **Psalm 22:27-28** - "All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD. All the families of the nations will bow down before Him. / For dominion belongs to the LORD and He rules over the nations."

- **Isaiah 45:22** - "Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other."

- **Isaiah 66:23** - "From one New Moon to another and from one Sabbath to another, all mankind will come to worship before Me," says the LORD."

We have seen throughout history people, families and nations around the world come to worship the Lord.

At the end of time EVERY knee shall bow -

- **Isaiah 45:29** - "Every knee will bow before Me, every tongue will swear allegiance."

- **Philippians 2:10-11** - "...that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

The Hem of His Garment

Zechariah 8:23 - "Thus saith the LORD of hosts; In those days it shall come to pass,

that ten men shall take hold out of all languages of the nations, even shall take hold of the skirt of him that is a Jew, saying, We will go with you: for we have heard that God is with you."

skirt = *kanaph* - wing, corner of a garment

- **Psalm 91:4** - "He shall cover (*sakkach* - the root of *sukkah*, meaning to cover, to weave together) thee with his feathers, and under his wings (*kanaph* - wing, skirt, corner of garment) shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler.

In the book of Ruth we encounter this word *kanaph* as Boaz speaks to Ruth:

- **Ruth 2:12** - "The LORD recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the LORD God of Israel, under whose wings (*kanaph*) thou art come to trust."

And again when Ruth lays down by Boaz on the threshing floor and pull the corner of his garment over her. That indicated her willingness to come under his protection and covering as his wife.

- **Ruth 3:9** - "And he said, Who art thou? And she answered, I am Ruth thine handmaid: spread therefore thy skirt (*kanaph* - wing, skirt, corner of garment) over thine handmaid; for thou art a near kinsman."

John uses the same idea in the Book of Revelation concerning tbeing covered by the booth built on Tabernacles:

- **Revelation 7:15** - "Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple: and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell (*skēnoō*) among them."

"dwell among them" = means "will spread his booth, tent or tabernacle over them"

Zechariah sees a future time when people from all languages in the world will desire to grasp the *kanaph* or corner of the garment of the Jew, Jesus/Yeshua and cover themselves with His garment to be part of His Bride.

Or to be healed, like the woman with an issue of blood, who merely touched the tassel of His prayer shawl:

- **Luke 8:43-44** - "And a woman having an issue of blood twelve years, which had spent all her living upon physicians, neither could be healed of any, Came behind him, and touched the border of his garment: and immediately her issue of blood stanchèd."

The Talmud relates that in the end of days, "all the nations of the world will express a desire to repent, and God will judge them through the commandment of building a *sukkah*... He will give this single commandment to the entire world to fulfill." (Babylonian

Talmud, Avoda Zara 3)

Probably thinking of this later prophecy in Zechariah:

- **Zechariah 14:16** - "And it shall come to pass, that every one that is left of all the nations which came against Jerusalem shall even go up from year to year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Tabernacles."

Bottom Line: The fasts listed are no longer to be observed as a time of mourning, guilt and afflicting our souls, but they are to be transformed into feasts of joy and delight in the Lord, celebrating His grace, forgiveness and mercy to us.

Instead of mourning how our sins have kept us "outside the camp," we can rejoice that we are covered with the wing of His garment of righteousness as His Bride.