



The Road to Destruction

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Asarah b'Tevet (10th Tevet) commemorates the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem in the lead-up to the destruction of the First Temple, a blockade that lasted at least 18 months.¹ Unlike the related fasts of 17th Tammuz or Tishah B'Av, each of which memorializes a concentrated event (the breaching of the walls; the actual destruction of the Temple), 10th Tevet marks the beginning of a lengthy period of time.

In this context, I am reminded of the talmudic dictum (Tamid 32a): “Who is wise? The one who can see the *nolad*,” literally: that which is being born. Wisdom, the Talmud tells us, is the ability to understand the consequences of our actions, to see what will be born tomorrow from today's choices.

What would the people of Jerusalem have thought about during this time? Could they see what was coming? And if so, why did they not do anything about it? Was it simply too late to try to avert the natural consequences of their previous actions? Or did they fail to see and then heed the signs?

¹ Scholars debate whether it lasted 18 or 30 months, an ambiguity resulting from unclarity about how regnal years were reckoned; either way, it was quite a long time.



In retrospect, it seems impossible, outrageous even, that people living through the siege would not appreciate its meaning. Some of the most disturbingly memorable images in the book of Eikhah (Lamentations) are found in the fourth chapter's depiction of life during the siege. Unfathomable thirst and hunger drives the people to a subhuman existence: "their skin has shriveled on their bones, it has become dry as wood; better off were the slain of the sword than those slain by famine" (Lamentations 4:8-9). No one could live through such suffering and not understand that an epoch-shaking moment was at hand. It simply must have been too late by that point. This is the response to R. Ami's tortured question upon reaching the statement in chapter 3 of Eikhah that if the sinner absolutely subjugates himself "perhaps there is hope" (Lamentations 3:29): "All of this, and [only] **perhaps?**"² Yes, only perhaps. Sometimes, disaster simply cannot be averted; it is just too late.

There is another biblical description of the siege, however, and it offers another interpretation of what might have been going through the minds of those living through the blockade of Jerusalem. Both 2 Kings 25 and Jeremiah 52 provide a more prosaic, documentary narrative of this moment. Nebuchadnezzar surrounds the city on 10th Tevet. Not until 9th Tammuz, well more than a year later, did the famine "become acute in the city; there was no food left for the common people" (2 Kings 25:3; Jeremiah 52:6). This is the immediate precursor to the breaching of the walls and eventual fall of Jerusalem, which takes place in the very next verse.

Two aspects of this description are notable. First, it took a long time for things to get truly severe, and relatively little time to go from this severe suffering to the actual defeat. The residents of Jerusalem could have spent almost the entire time convincing themselves—even as things were getting worse and worse—that this was not and would not become catastrophic. The writing may have been on the wall, but because it was written piecemeal, one word at a time, only gradually getting worse and worse, they could therefore convince

² Talmud Bavli Hagigah 4b.



themselves that it was sending some other message. Like the proverbial frog that never jumps out of the boiling pot of water because the water heats up slowly, those enduring the siege may not have realized, at its start, that this was a moment that could lead to the kingdom's ultimate downfall. The prophets were screaming that it was,³ but the vast majority of the populace apparently was able to ignore those calls until it was too late, only a few days before the Babylonians would breach Jerusalem and the end was truly at hand.

The other crucial aspect of this version of history is its emphasis on the victims of the Babylonian attack. Even at this penultimate moment before the breaking through of the walls, apparently the famine's worst effects hit only the lower classes; in the language of the verses, "there was no food left for the common people." Even at the very end, for the city's elite, the worst apparently had not yet come.

This depiction of the siege suggests that 10th Tevet was not necessarily a crossing of the Rubicon. There was indeed hope when Nebuchadnezzar began his encirclement of Jerusalem; the people, however, failed to read the signs and respond to them.

For those of us living through turbulent times, two essential messages emerge. First, the omens that prefigure destruction do not come upon us all at once; they can be gradual, and if we want to be the sorts of wise people who can see the *nolad*, we must be prepared to react to signs that may be ambiguous. Second, when destruction is coming, its effects will not be evenly felt. Those who live in relative or absolute privilege may be able to avoid the worst consequences of the increasingly dystopian signs. In a great and disastrous irony, those who likely have the most tools to change the course of history are the most insulated from feeling the need for change. We know that we should care for every human, irrespective of their social status. But even when we are unable to muster the requisite empathy to feel the

³ See Ezekiel 24.



suffering of others, we should recognize that it is in our own interests to heed their cries. If the elites of Jerusalem had paid greater attention to the situation of the “common people,” they might have had the time to avert the eventual destruction.

10th Tevet thus calls on us to consider not only the moments of ruin, but also the often long roads that bring us there, to look out for the offramps that may still be available to us, the chances to change our direction before it is too late.

May we know no further sorrows, and may our ability to foresee the consequences of our actions bring us to redemption.

