

Renewed Listening: From the Spies to the Third Beis HaMikdash

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In the heart of the Nine Days, on the eighth of Menachem Av, the Jewish people stand between memory and anticipation. The fast of Tishah B'Av begins at sunset. From midday the practices of mourning intensify: ordinary Torah study is set aside in favor of texts that speak of the Churban and of consolation; meat and wine are refrained from except at a siyum or seudas mitzvah; tzedakah is increased; and, following the directive of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, a siyum is made each day so that the verse “Zion shall be redeemed with justice and her captives with charity” (Isaiah 1:27) becomes operational rather than merely consolatory. Historically this date recalls the return of the spies with their demoralizing report in 1312 BCE and the outbreak of civil war within besieged Jerusalem in 67 CE. Tachanun is omitted in the afternoon. The Shir Shel Yom is Psalm 94, the Wednesday psalm of the Levi'im that opens with the cry for Divine justice and closes with the assurance that the Lord will not abandon His people.

Against this backdrop the daily portions assigned for study form a single, coherent banner that may be raised over the entire period of mourning:

The path from the failure of the spies and the destruction of the Temples to the rebuilding of the Third Beis HaMikdash runs through the daily re-hearing of the words spoken at Sinai, the exacting purification of every personal offering, the primacy of ahavas Yisrael as the indispensable criterion of all spiritual attainment, and the active drawing-down of redemptive light through tzedakah and the study of the laws of the Mikdash.

This banner is not an external imposition. It emerges organically from the intersection of the Chumash, the Tehillim, the Tanya, the Rambam, the Hayom Yom, the daily Daf, and the Shir Shel Yom. What follows is a sustained exploration of each strand and of the whole they constitute.

I. Chumash: Parshat Va'etchanan, Fourth Portion (Devarim 5:1–18) — The Command to Hear Anew

Moshe Rabbeinu does not merely recall the Decalogue; he re-presents it to a generation that did not stand at Sinai. “Hear, O Israel, the statutes and the ordinances that I speak in your ears this day, that you may learn them and be careful to perform them. The Lord our G-d made a covenant with us at Horeb. Not with our fathers did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, we who are here alive this day” (Devarim 5:1–3). The insistence on “this day” and on “we who are here alive” is the foundational claim of Jewish consciousness: revelation is not a past event to be commemorated but a present reality to be received.

Rashi emphasizes the face-to-face quality of the original giving—“panim be-panim dibber Hashem imachem” (5:4)—and the consequent demand that the listener stand again in that directness. The Ramban develops the theological implication: the covenant is renewed in every generation precisely because the words retain their original force. The structure of the portion is carefully ordered. The first two commandments establish the exclusive relationship with the G-d who liberates; the Sabbath command binds that relationship to social justice by requiring

rest for the servant as for the master and by grounding the obligation in the memory of Egyptian bondage. The remaining commandments secure the integrity of the person, the family, and the community under that same sovereignty.

In the context of the Nine Days the portion acquires particular force. The spies failed because they did not hear the prior promise of the Land with the same ears that had heard the Decalogue. The civil war of 67 CE was a collapse of the mutual recognition that the commandments presuppose. National catastrophe begins when the people cease to listen with immediacy. Therefore the daily portion requires that the words of the Decalogue be received again today—not as familiar liturgy but as the living foundation upon which any rebuilt sanctuary must rest. The pedagogical command that follows the Shema—“v’shinantam l’vanecha”—is not merely private instruction; it is the formative education of a covenantal people. In republican terms, it is the cultivation of the civic virtue necessary for a polity that refuses domination by any human power precisely because it has already accepted the non-dominating sovereignty of G-d.

II. Tehillim: Chapters 44–48 — From Lament to the Vision of Restored Zion

The five consecutive chapters assigned for this day trace a deliberate arc. Chapter 44 is a national lament of unusual intensity: “All this has come upon us, yet we have not forgotten You, nor have we been false to Your covenant... Arise, why do You sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not cast us off forever.” The people protest their faithfulness even while they are sold “like sheep for slaughter.” Chapter 45 turns suddenly to the figure of the anointed king whose throne is forever and whose scepter is a scepter of equity. Chapters 46 and 47 envision the cessation of war, the recognition of G-d’s kingship by the nations, and the ascent of the people to the House of G-d with the sound of the shofar. Chapter 48 culminates in the praise of Zion itself: “Walk about Zion and go round about her; count her towers... that you may tell the next generation that this is G-d, our G-d forever and ever; He will guide us beyond death.”

Read on the eighth of Av, these chapters refuse to allow mourning to become terminal. They insist that the same G-d who permitted the destruction remains the G-d who will rebuild. The progression from lament to messianic vision is itself a form of listening: one must hear both the cry of the present and the promise that answers it. In the language of the banner, the Tehillim supply the horizon toward which the renewed listening of the Decalogue is directed. Without that horizon the re-hearing of Sinai remains incomplete; with it, mourning becomes oriented toward reconstruction.

III. Tanya: Iggeret HaKodesh, Conclusion of Epistle 3 — The Soul’s Unquenchable Yearning and the Drawing-Down of Light

The daily Tanya portion brings the cosmic drama of divine light into the most intimate realm of the soul. The Alter Rebbe explains that the additional radiance drawn down by the performance of the mitzvot—especially acts of tzedakah—transcends the ordinary emanation of the sefirot. This light, associated with the “helmet of salvation” (yeshu’ah) and the three hundred and seventy lights of the Zohar, reaches the physical world only through the union of the Holy One and His Shechinah that is effected by human action. Yet even the highest revelations do not fully

satisfy the soul. The soul continues to press outward in yearning for true deveikus, for the essence that lies beyond all revealed light. The closing phrase—“as is the wish of one who seeks Him (ke-nefesh tidreshenu)” —captures this unquenchable longing.

On the threshold of Tishah B'Av the teaching is especially pointed. The destruction of the Temple was a contraction of revealed light. The path of restoration is therefore the deliberate drawing-down of additional light through mitzvot and tzedakah, while simultaneously acknowledging that the soul's deepest desire remains unfulfilled until the full revelation of the Time to Come. Mourning that does not issue in increased action remains incomplete; action that does not leave room for yearning becomes mechanical. The Tanya thus supplies the inner dynamic of the banner: the renewed listening of the Decalogue and the precise guarding of offerings must be accompanied by the soul's restless seeking, which is itself answered by the light drawn down through concrete deeds of charity and Torah.

IV. Rambam: Hilchos Pesulei HaMukdashim, Chapters 5–7 — The Exactitude of Sanctity

The three chapters of the daily Rambam cycle address the intricate laws governing offerings that have become disqualified—through blemish, loss, error of intention, or the death of the owner. A chatat whose designated funds are lost, an animal that develops a disqualifying mum, money set aside under a mistaken obligation—all these require precise treatment so that holiness is neither wasted nor misused. Remainders are redirected to freewill offerings or, when necessary, disposed of in a manner that prevents private benefit. The overarching principle is that sanctity once conferred must be guarded with exactitude; the smallest defect or improper intention can render an offering unfit.

The timing of these chapters during the Nine Days is not accidental. The Rebbe repeatedly urged the study of the laws of the Temple and of the sacrifices precisely in this period. The physical Temple was destroyed, yet the category of kodshim remains. Every prayer, every act of learning, every donation is an offering. The Rambam's meticulous distinctions teach that these offerings can be disqualified by the slightest admixture of improper intention, by ga'avah, by lashon hara, by indifference to another's pain. Conversely, careful attention to the details of sanctity prepares the ground for the restoration of the actual Temple service. The study itself becomes a form of rebuilding. In the language of the banner, the Rambam supplies the discipline of purification without which the renewed listening of Sinai cannot become a living structure.

V. Hayom Yom: 8 Menachem Av — The Six Remembrances and the Primacy of Ahavas Yisrael

The entry recorded by the Lubavitcher Rebbe from the teachings of the Rebbe Rayatz states two interrelated points. First, the Six Remembrances are recited every day, including Shabbat, festivals, Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur. Second, the piercing aphorism of the Rebbe Maharash: “What good is all the Chassidus and yiras shamayim if the main thing is missing—ahavas Yisrael—even to the point (G-d forbid) of causing pain to another Jew?”

The Six Remembrances keep the foundational events of Jewish consciousness continually present: the Exodus, the revelation at Sinai, the attack of Amalek, the golden calf, Miriam's affliction, and the Sabbath. Yet the aphorism subordinates every spiritual attainment to the

practical test of love for another Jew. In the heat and tension of the Nine Days, when fasting approaches and tempers may fray, this teaching is urgent. All the depth of Chassidus, all the precision of kodshim study, all the yearning described in the Tanya, remain incomplete if they do not issue in genuine concern for the other. Ahavas Yisrael is not an optional ornament; it is the criterion by which the authenticity of all other avodah is measured. In the structure of the banner it occupies the central place: without it the re-hearing of Sinai becomes abstract, the purification of offerings becomes self-regarding, and the drawing-down of light remains unrealized.

VI. Daily Daf and Shir Shel Yom — Elevation of the Material and the Cry for Justice

Maseches Chullin, daf 83, continues the detailed laws of the sciatic nerve and of kosher slaughter. The gid hanashe is the remnant of the struggle with the angel; its prohibition memorializes both the wound and the blessing that followed. Even the physical act of preparing meat for consumption is framed by the awareness that certain parts must be separated and elevated or discarded. Psalm 94, the Shir Shel Yom, opens with the cry “G-d of vengeance, O Lord,” and closes with the assurance that the Lord will not abandon His people and that He will cut off the wicked. Together these texts insist that the material and the spiritual, the prohibited and the permitted, the cry of injustice and the certainty of ultimate justice, remain bound together. They complete the banner by grounding the high demands of listening, purification, and love in the concrete realities of daily life and national suffering.

VII. Synthesis: The Banner as Practical Program for the Nine Days

Taken as a whole, the portions of 8 Menachem Av articulate a single demand that may now be stated with greater precision. Listen again to the words spoken at Sinai as though hearing them for the first time, receiving them not as historical memory but as the living covenant of “this day.” Allow the soul’s unappeasable yearning to press outward rather than settling for revealed light alone. Guard the sanctity of every personal offering with the same exactitude required of the Temple sacrifices, recognizing that the smallest blemish of intention can disqualify. Place ahavas Yisrael at the center, for without it every other attainment is hollow. Study the laws of the Mikdash and increase tzedakah so that the verse of Isaiah becomes practical program rather than distant consolation.

The Nine Days are not merely a period of restriction; they are a concentrated opportunity for the work of reconstruction. The same generation that stood at the threshold of the Land and heard the Decalogue anew is called, in every subsequent generation, to stand at the threshold of destruction and to choose listening, love, and precise sanctity. In that choice the path from the present mourning to the rebuilt Temple is already being walked.

In broader terms the banner also addresses the perennial tension between particular covenant and universal aspiration, between the discipline of sanctity and the openness of love, between the cry of the present and the promise of the future. It refuses both the despair that would abandon the project of rebuilding and the activism that would rebuild without the inner purification and the mutual recognition that alone make a sanctuary possible. It is, in short, a standard that can be raised and defended in every generation that finds itself still in the long shadow of the Churban and still in the light of the promise.

Conclusion

May the learning of these portions, the careful attention to the details of holiness, the concrete acts of ahavas Yisrael and tzedakah, and the renewed listening to the words of Sinai serve as a collective zechus for the complete and speedy redemption, the rebuilding of the Beis HaMikdash, and the restoration of the service that will once again rise in its place. The banner has been raised. It remains only to walk beneath it.

Amen. May it be so, speedily in our days.

Extended Bibliography

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