Hurban: Lessons from Jewish History and Tradition

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Catastrophes are all too well known in Jewish history and therefore in the Jewish psyche and in the Jewish faith. There is even a Hebrew word for such an event: Hurban. This word comes from a verb that means “to destroy” and is related to the Hebrew word for sword. It means destruction and it is used primarily to refer to the destruction of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem. By extension it can refer to any of the catastrophes in Jewish history: the Crusades (during which many Jewish communities in Europe were massacred), the Expulsion from Spain in 1492, and the Holocaust among others. There is an entire literature on the subject. I will look at some of the events related to the destruction of the two Temples in ancient Israel, and the responses to them by those who witnessed them.

I would divide the kinds of responses into three categories: lamentation, destruction (the desire for revenge or power), and construction (acts of faith and building for the future). The second and third are two sides of the same coin, as each is a way of seeking empowerment in the wake of being overwhelmed by violence or oppression. It is the choice between these two that is most crucial in drawing lessons from the catastrophes in Jewish history.

The Destruction of the First Temple

The Temple of Solomon, known to Jews as the First Temple, was built at the point in Jewish history which is regarded as the ideal, the high point of our history. Our borders were at their greatest extent, there were no wars, and the kingdom was prosperous, engaging in trade perhaps as far away as India. As with most peoples in that part of the ancient world, the Jewish kingdom considered the temple to its God as the symbol of the power and welfare of the entire nation. When one nation defeated another the loser's God's temple was often destroyed. In 586 BCE the Babylonians attacked and besieged Jerusalem because of repeated rebellions against their empire. They destroyed the city and the Temple with it. The people were forced into exile as was often the case with rebellious subject nations.

The book of Lamentations in the Bible, usually ascribed to the prophet Jeremiah, is a lamentation over the destroyed city. It begins

Alas!

Lonely sits the city

Once great with people!

She that was great among nations

Is become like a widow… [1]

This powerful elegy does much more than weep and wail, however. It does describe the horrors of the Destruction and what followed and Jeremiah howls with grief. However Lamentations also tells of why God allowed this Hurban to occur. It was the just punishment for a people that had strayed from faithfulness to its covenant with God. Many prophets had warned that this would happen, beginning with Moses in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Jeremiah calls on the Eternal to forgive the people and to restore them to their land and to allow the city to be rebuilt. Jeremiah calls on the people to repent.

> Let us search and examine our ways.
>
> And turn back to the Eternal.
>
> Let us lift up our hearts with our hands
>
> To God in Heaven.
>
> We have transgressed and rebelled.
>
> And you have not forgiven.[2]

The justification of Divine Justice (theodicy) and the appeals for repentance represent a revolutionary departure from the thinking of the time. Most nations that suffered this kind of destruction simply disappeared from history, their very identities obliterated. Jeremiah affirmed that there is only one God and that God is sovereign over all nations. The covenant made at Mount Sinai is eternal and still stands. If the people will repent it will be restored. Against all the rules of history the Jewish people survived destruction and exile because they were made to see beyond themselves and beyond the

present moment.

Jeremiah himself performed an act shortly before the destruction, which he foresaw. Following a legal obligation he wrote a contract that would redeem a piece of family property in the future.[3] After following the most traditional form of the transaction he said to God,

…the city, because of sword and famine and pestilence, is at the mercy of the Chaldeans who are attacking it. What You threatened has come to pass – as You see. Yet You, Eternal One, O God, said to me, 'buy the land for money and call in witnesses – when the city is at the mercy of the Chaldeans.'

Like many things Jeremiah did during his life, this was a symbolic act expressing faith that in the future what had been destroyed would be rebuilt and the people would return from their exile.

The Destruction of the Second Temple

After only seventy years the Persian Empire defeated the Babylonians and returned all of the exiled peoples to their homelands. A contingent of Jews did go back and rebuilt Jerusalem. The majority, who remained in Babylonia and elsewhere became the beginning of the Diaspora community. From that time until this a majority of the Jewish people, but never all the Jewish people, has lived outside of the Land of Israel. The task of creating a national existence outside of the Land of Israel was successful. For example, it is believed that the synagogue was created in the Babylonian exile as a center for meeting both spiritual and social needs.

It would be too much to recount the history of the Second Temple here, but in the year 66 CE there was a revolt by Jewish nationalists against the Roman Empire. That war lasted four years and ended predictably with a Roman victory and the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. Once again this was a completely devastating event. There is a very large literature of responses to it.[4] There were lamentations written. These may be found within various works of Rabbinic literature that were edited and published long after this event.

There were two primary reactions at the time. The first was a continuing movement of rebellion against Rome. The Zealots who started and led the revolt held out in the fortress of Masada for a few years, but were overwhelmed by the Romans.[5] The following two generations saw Jewish revolts all over the Roman Empire – in Alexandria and Cyprus, among other places. None of these succeeded. Finally there was another great revolt in the Land of Israel led by a man named Simon bar Koziba, better known as Bar Kochba. His followers believed he was the Messiah who would drive out the Romans, restore Jewish independence and rebuild Jerusalem with its Temple. This revolt was a spectacular and devastating failure. The Romans were driven out, but they came back, defeated Bar Kochba, and committed such a great massacre of Jews that it was said the Mediterranean ran blood-red all the way to Cyprus. Jewish self-government, which had been allowed after the first Great Revolt, was ended. Jerusalem was rebuilt as a Roman city called Aelia Capitolina dedicated to Jupiter. Jews were not allowed to set foot there. Bar Kochba has been rehabilitated as a heroic figure in modern

times, but his contemporaries condemned him as an impious brute who brought destruction and exile on the Jewish people.[6] This response was one of seeking empowerment after destruction through war and conflict. It ignored reality and reached out for a messianic solution to the destruction of Jerusalem. If this had been the only Jewish response, Jewish history would probably have ended there and then.

It was, fortunately, not the only response. There was another which was every bit as revolutionary as the one that had followed the destruction of the First Temple. The most respected Rabbinic leader at the time was Yohanan ben Zakkai who was already eighty years old. He pled with the Zealots who had completely taken over Jerusalem, which was then besieged by a Roman force, to offer some token of conciliation. He wanted to avoid the destruction of Jerusalem, which he knew would occur if the Romans entered the city by force. The Zealots' response was to declare that anyone who went over to the Romans in any way would be executed.

Rabbi Yohanan confided in his nephew Abba Sikra, a Zealot leader, and asked for his help. On his advice they would give out the news that Rabbi Yohanan had become ill and then that he had died. That meant that his body had to be carried outside the city walls, because the dead were not permitted burial within. They got past the Zealot guards at a gate and went immediately to the Roman camp where they were taken to the general Vespasian. Yohanan ben Zakkai greeted Vespasian, "Hail Caesar." The astonished general said, "I am not the Emperor." Just then a messenger arrived to announce that the Emperor Nero was dead and that the Roman legions had declared Vespasian his successor. Vespasian told the Rabbi, "Since you were the first to address me as Caesar, I shall reward you. What would you want as a reward?" Rabbi Yohanan replied that he wanted to establish a school in the nearby town of Yavneh, which the Romans already controlled. Vespasian granted his wish.[7]

The "school" that Yohanan ben Zakkai established was not a school in the sense of it being a place where students were educated. Yavneh became the seat of the Jewish government that was allowed to govern after the Revolt. At Yavneh the Rabbis created something new – a form of Judaism that could survive destruction and exile. It would not require a central shrine or even a tribe of priests. The practice of Judaism devolved to every Jew equally. Rabbis would not be clergy, but teachers and judges. The legal tradition, which existed mostly in oral form until then, was to be codified and published. Community, family, and education, along with the synagogue would be the means of continuing the covenant tradition. Essentially this group of scholars created Judaism as a religion. This worked so well that it continues down to the present day, almost two millennia later. The Dalai Lama, impressed with this history, consults with Jewish scholars to see if our history can serve as a model for Tibetans to have their identity, faith and culture survive in the long run outside of Tibet.

There were two responses to the destruction of the Second Temple. One was to try to recover what was lost by force. That failed completely. The other was to create something new. That succeeded so well that the Jewish people far outlasted the Roman Empire.

[1] Lamentations 1:1

[2] ibid. 3:40-42

[3] Jeremiah 32:6-25

[4] The author's Rabbinic thesis, entitled "Tannaitic Reactions to Persecution", deals with some of this literature, especially the Midrash on Lamentations, *Eykhah Rabbati*. That work is available at the HUC-JIR library in New York City.

[5] For reasons far too complex to go into here the author does not believe that the famous mass suicide actually occurred.

[6] This historic lesson is discussed and applied to modern Israel by Yehoshfat Harkabi in **The Bar Kokhba Syndrome: Risk and Realism in International Politics**, Rossel Books, Chappequa NY 1983.

[7] Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 56a and Lamentations Rabbah I:33