

## **“A Temple destroyed; a people re-born”**

Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen  
(Delivered in HGS, 10<sup>th</sup> July 2010)

We usher in, this coming week the month of Menachem Av and the nine days of semi-mourning for the destruction of our ancient Temples, the second of which was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70 CE.

The Temple was more than a central sanctuary. It was the symbol of monotheism in a sea of paganism. It was a national and spiritual focus, providing a sense of intense pride, identity, cohesion and centralised authority to the inhabitants of an occupied country. It stood therefore as a most imposing and impenetrable challenge to Rome's supremacy. As long as the Temple stood, Jewish heads were held high. The Romans may have occupied the soil of Judea, but they could never claim its soul, or the allegiance of a nation whose very identity was determined by its belief in the God, *ha-shokhein betziyyon*, who dwelt in Zion, in a citadel that was a symbol not just of power and of the unity and antiquity of the nation, but also of the beauty of holiness, a place of pilgrimage for Jews from all over the Diaspora, and which also attracted would-be converts, pious gentiles and curious sight-seers.

As the 1<sup>st</sup> cent. Philosopher, Philo of Alexandria expressed it, 'Jerusalem is not only the metropolis of the single country of Judea, but of most other countries also.' It was the hub of intellectual life, with its countless academies a magnet for the greatest scholars of the Jewish world. Its dense population also made it the main focus of economic life. 'Here the cream of the artisans and craftsmen of the country gathered – weavers, dyers, potters, perfumers. The Temple alone needed many hands skilled in the building trades and its allied crafts. The city attracted merchants and business men from far and near' (H.H.Ben-Sasson, *A History of the Jewish People*, p.262).

The Romans realised full well that their own pretension to the position of *Cosmocrator*, the world power would never be fulfilled as long as this most talented, stubborn, independent-minded, fearless, spiritually and morally-disciplined, nation still retained its national superstructure, international prestige and spiritual leadership. They did not need any further excuse, therefore, for attempting to dismantle all that by brute force, though they must have known, in their heart of hearts, that self-sacrifice, faith, learning, piety and national unity can never be totally eradicated. Like branches that are trimmed, they re-grow with added vitality and bear even riper fruits. The reports of tens of thousands of Roman citizens embracing monotheism, and Jewish practices in particular, were also sending shudders through the Senate.

They realised that Jews were a nation that had to be crushed and destroyed root and branch if all that Rome stood for – namely adoration of the physical, the artistic and the material – was not to be supplanted and swept into oblivion before the whirlwind of the spiritual, and if Rome's class hierarchies were to survive what they perceived as the dangerous Jewish heresies of the equality of all men before God and the democratic spirit that underpinned Judaism and Jewish life.

So the Temple had to go; Judaism had to go, and Jews had to go. In reality, not even one of those objectives was fully achieved. Yes, the Temple was destroyed. But it was resurrected within just a few years. Not physically, but spiritually, in the way that Jews knew best; and the way the Romans feared the worst. In the cities of the Galilee, in particular, countless citadels of Jewish learning were established, countless Temples-in-miniature, or synagogues, countless scholars, sages and rabbis, heirs of the High Priests and priests of the sanctuary. The nation became invigorated with a spiritual vitality, that more than rivalled that which had characterised the worship at the Temple. Instead of being mere passive spectators of the ritual at the great metropolis, every Jewish child, in every town and village, was given an intense Jewish education, and with it, an opportunity to rise to the dizzy heights of rabbinic scholarship, which brought with it fame, influence and leadership – albeit with just a tincture of poverty!

So the spiritual Temple survived, Jews survived, and Judaism certainly survived. And they are all here today to tell their story and to reminisce about the bad old days when there was a world power called Rome, and where so many people all over the world spoke Latin.

And as part of our story, we should not fail to mention the fact that, whereas about 7 million people speak Hebrew today, as a modern language, inspiring a modern culture, Latin is consigned almost to oblivion, as a literary or ecclesiastical relic of a bygone age.

The sages enigmatically describe the fast of Tishah B'Av as a festival. In one sense it truly is. For we cannot recall and lament the loss of our ancient Temple, and the accompanying devastation, without, at the same time, marvelling at the resilience of our nation, the indomitable quality of our spirit, and our capacity for survival and renewal against all odds. In the face of a well-documented diminution of the Zionist spirit, especially on the part of our younger generation, this cannot be celebrated or reinforced vigorously enough, my friends, by those of us who love Zion and who understand that its and our survival are wholly inter-dependent.

*Kein yovdu oyvekha Adonai, v'ohavav kitset ha-shemesh bigvurato,*

'So may all your enemies perish, O Lord,  
but those who love you shall be like the  
Rising of the sun in all its brilliance.' Amen.