

15 Av, 5765
August 20, '05

Va'eschanan (Nachamu)

After Mourning

This Shabbos will be the fifteenth day of the month of Av, a day that the Gemora identifies as one of the most joyous of the Jewish year. Interestingly, according to some, this date is referred to in the opening line of this week's parsha, and this very fact may help us to understand the true happiness of the day.

The thirty-third day of the Omer is traditionally observed as a day of celebration, although the reason for such celebration is not immediately clear and is not specified in the Gemora. The Vilna Gaon, in a cryptic gloss to Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim, 693), intimates that the celebration of Lag B'Omer is similar to that of the fifteenth of Av -- just as the Gemora tells us that one of the reasons for rejoicing on the fifteenth of Av is that the Jews who were condemned to die in the desert stopped dying on that day, so too, since the twenty-four thousand students of Rabbi Akiva who were condemned to die stopped dying on Lag B'Omer, the day is celebrated.

But these hardly seem like fair reasons for joy. Is the fact that a harsh decree has been carried out fully, leaving no one left to die, a reason to celebrate?

Rather, it seems more likely that the Vilna Gaon was referring to a different element that is common to these two incidents. The Gemora says (Yevamos 62b) that after the students of Rabbi Akiva died, the world was spiritually desolate until Rabbi Akiva trained five new students, from whom Torah was revived and communicated to the Jewish People. Thus, it is not the end of tragedy, but the beginning of Torah rebirth that we celebrate on Lag b'Omer. And herein lies the similarity to the fifteenth of Av. A careful reading of the Gemora (Bava Basra 121b) reveals that it is not the fact that no more Jews died after the fifteenth of Av that we celebrate, but the fact that Hashem reestablished open communication with Moshe. As the Tosafos (*ibid*, 121a) explain, Hashem does not shine His Presence on those in a state of sadness; so only after the end of the protracted sorrow associated with the passing away of the desert Jews did Moshe once again enjoy full communication from Hashem. It is this renewed Divine communication that we celebrate.

This week's parsha begins with Moshe's recounting of how he asked Hashem, again, to allow him to enter the Land of Israel. *And I implored Hashem at that time...* Rashi explains that "that time" means after Moshe was granted entry into the land of Sichon and Og, which was part of the land given to the Jews. Thus, Moshe's entry into this land could have been taken as a sign that he would, in fact, be allowed into Eretz Yisroel proper, as well.

The Pnei Yehoshua (Commentary to Gemora Berachos 32a, s.v. darash) gives a deeper insight into this matter. He says that "at that time" refers to the fifteenth of Av. Since the Gemora tells us that Moshe's words in last week's parsha were spoken when the Divine Presence was brought back to him, this means that the time Moshe refers to in his continued monologue in our parsha is that date, as well.

(It seems to me that this might be the reason for the Gemora's special directive relating to

the fifteenth of Av. Although the Gemora gives us no special observance or ceremony relating to this holiday, there is one statement about a proper change in behavior. The Gemora says that from this date onward, one must increase the time he spends studying Torah. Although the simple reason for this is because the nights start to get longer, offering more "quiet time" for learning, perhaps at a deeper level the notion of increasing Torah study on the fifteenth of Av has its root in the fact that Moshe's communication from Hashem was increased on this date.)

The end of the mournful period in the desert brought about greater Divine communication. Moshe's reaction to this development was *Va'eschanan* -- increased prayer. Just as Hashem communicated more fully with him, Moshe hoped that he would be granted the right to communicate more fully with Hashem, as well. Although Moshe's request was not granted, perhaps the fact that Moshe tells us the reason for his increased prayer efforts means that this lesson will have value in the future.

When the month of Av begins, joy is reduced (Gemora Taanis 26). According to some, this inauspicious period ends with the fifteenth of Av. The end of the mourning period in the desert brought about greater Divine Presence which, in turn, elicited greater prayer from Moshe. We too, should take advantage of the end of the mournful period to enjoy greater study of the word of G-d, as well as to increase the effort we put into our prayers. If Moshe's prayers for Eretz Yisroel were not answered, perhaps ours will be. Now, as much as ever, the Jewish People need the help of Hashem. Let us take advantage of this post Tisha B'Av season to hear and be heard by HaKaddosh Baruch Hu.

May it be a true Shabbos Nachamu.