WORD STUDY – CUP OF TREMBLING

Isaiah 51:13, 17. “And forgettest the Lord they maker, that hath stretched forth the heavens, and laid the foundations of the earth; and hast feared continually every day because of the fury of the oppressor, as if he were ready to destroy and where is the fury of the oppressor?” 17. Awake, awake, stand up, O Jerusalem, which hast drunk at the hand of the LORD the cup of his fury; thou hast drunken the dregs of the cup of trembling, [and] wrung [them] out.

Note that the fury of the oppressor has not touched Israel. But the threat is out there and they are afraid. It is interesting that the word for fear here is not one of your ra words. This word is pached. This is a different fear. This fear is one that is eating away at you. It is a subtle fear, a dread. A fear that destroys any attempt to enjoy life. You can’t eat, you can’t sleep, and all you can think about is this dread. The sages like to use the word dread for pached. I think this is the closest we can get in English. This word is found in this verse in a Piel form so in this case it is more than a constant dread, it is a constant terror. Have you ever lived in terror for some threat that hangs over your head. You hear layoffs are coming and you are convinced you are on the list. Maybe it is a life threatening medical report that will require extended treatment that may or may not work. You worry, you fret, and you just cannot enjoy anything. That is pached. Isaiah takes it further. This pached is tamid which means it is always and continually before you.

So what is this dread in Isaiah 51:13? It is for the fury of the oppressor. This is a little difficult to translate,
particularly since the word *oppressor* is a participle, *hamesik*. This is *distressing news*, or a *distressing situation*. It does not necessarily mean a person. The word for *fury* is *chamath*. This means *hot, burning, too hot to handle*. The people were paralyzed with fear over a distressing situation that has not even come upon them yet. It was so *hot* they did not want to touch it; they were so paralyzed by their fear they could not even prepare to defend themselves.

The best example I can think of is a doctor telling a patient that a small tumor has been found and a biopsy must be made. The person is so paralyzed by fear and what may be found he makes his biggest mistake by not having the biopsy.

Why are the people of God so paralyzed by a fear of something that has not even touched them yet? It is because they have *forgotten* the Lord. They have *shakach* the Lord. This is more than just forgetting, it has the *idea of a failure to obtain something*.

Here’s the punch line. By failing to seek the Lord as their source, they were in constant terror of some threatening situation. Yet the passage ends by asking: “*Where is the fury of the oppressor?*” The interrogative ‘ayah (*where*) has a paragogic Hei. This means you intensify the interrogative. How do you intensify the word *where*? You can’t do it in English, but you can get the gist of what Isaiah is saying. “This distressing situation that has you trembling, that takes all your joy and peace away…it just ain’t there.”

Note verse 17, this situation in verse 13 is called a *cup of*
trembling. In verse 23 God promises to take that cup of trembling and put it in the hands of those afflicting Israel.

That is an interesting expression, cup of trembling. Trembling has an article in front of it so it is cup of the trembling. The word tremble that is used here in the Hebrew is the word ‘ayan which is a word used for a person who is intoxicated and is shaking from being under the influence. He is literally losing control over his ability to function physically. The word cup in Hebrew is kus which, in its Semitic root has the idea of nurturing as a mother caring for its young.

The cup of trembling is an old Akkadian idiomatic expression used by the Assyrians. The Assyrians were a warrior class people. They looked upon fear as the worst characteristic a person could have. They would use the term cup of trembling to describe a person who just lets his fear nurture or rule his life such that he cannot think or act rationally. The stronger would use this to their advantage because such a person will eventually let that fear cause him to do something that would allow him to fall prey to the stronger. It is like drinking too much wine from a cup to the point where you lose all your senses and you begin to say and do things that you later regret as many an alcoholic can testify. It has the idea of letting fear rule you.

Fear as a cup of trembling will cause you to do things that a rational person would not do, such as not get that biopsy, not look at that bank statement, or open that letter from the IRS.

Do you have a cup of trembling? Do you have a situation, person, or circumstance that has you trembling, living in
constant fear and terror? Is it causing you to do things or act in ways that you would not normally behave? God is telling you in Isaiah 51 that He wants to be your source and He wants to be your cup (Psalms 16:5), He wants to be the one to warp you in His arms and nurture you, not let fear wrap you in its arms and nurture you. In fact He wants to take that cup of trembling from you and put it into the hands of the one bringing that affliction upon you.