

“MEMAAYAN HACHAIM”

Mussar talks from the Magiach Rabbi Chaim Walkin shlit"a

A. Our Task in Properly Mourning the Churban: Developing the Ability to See the Future Redemption As a Reality in the Present

The gemora (Tractate Makkos 24b) cites a well-known story about Rabbi Akiva and his colleagues:... in another incident, the group was going up to Jerusalem (after the Destruction). When they reached Mount Scopus (and they saw the destroyed area of the Beis HaMikdosh) they tore their garments (as a sign of mourning). When they reached to the Temple Mount, they spied a fox running out of the area which had been the Holy of Holies. At this sight, Rabbi Akiva's colleagues began to sob (with sorrow) and Rabbi Akiva began to laugh (with joy). They asked Rabbi Akiva “Why are you laughing? He said to them, “Why are you crying?” They answered, “A place (i.e. the area of the Holy of Holies) about which is said, 'A non-kohen who comes near should be liable to the death penalty' and now, foxes are roaming in this holy space (and thus, desecrating it) should we not cry?” Rabbi Akiva responded to them, “It is for this very reason I laugh! In the prophecy of Uriah the Navi says, “... therefore because of you, Zion will be plowed over as a farmer's field,” and in the prophecy of Zecharia is stated “... once again elderly men and women will dwell in the streets of Jerusalem.” Until the prophecy of Uriah was fulfilled, I was worried that the prophecy of Zecharia would likewise not be fulfilled. But, now that I see that the prophecy of Uriah has come to pass, I can know for certain that the prophecy of Zecharia will also come of reality.

The conundrum this passage presents is simply this: the Holy Sanctuary, the Temple, lies in ruins before the Sages. Foxes are running free throughout the formerly sacred courtyards, even the Holy of Holies. Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah, and Rabbi Yehoshua are standing of sobbing with grief,

and their colleague, Rabbi Akiva-- is laughing! What's more, he cannot understand the source of their tears! It is incumbent upon us to develop an understanding of the wondrous baffling behaviors of these 2 groups of Sages.

But in truth, we must recognize that through his actions, Rabbi Akiva teaches a lesson to all future generations: What is the true perspective necessary for a Jew to maintain throughout the Exile? It is to see, even within the deepening darkness and destruction the light of the eventual Redemption. For Rabbi Akiva had the ability to see in the present moment the message of tomorrow. Therefore, even when viewing the “ruins of the Beis HaMikdosh and Jerusalem” he could see the Navi's promise “once again elderly men and women will dwell in the streets of Jerusalem”, the sparks of the future Redemption. Indeed, this ability was the secret power evident throughout Rabbi Akiva's life. He always viewed with optimism every situation in his life, no matter what the difficulty or disaster. Hence, the image of foxes running out of the holiest place in the Mikdosh, the Holy of Holies could serve for him as a reason of sadness and grief, but one of joy and laughter, a harbinger of the hoped-for Geulah.

In the mishna in Pesachim (116b), we see this idea clearly in the disagreement of Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarphon concerning the text of the blessing over the second cup of wine at the Pesach seder. “Do we conclude the blessing with a bracha of Geulah? Rabbi Tarphon says, we should use the following text: (we thank you Hashem) who redeemed us and our forefathers from Egypt”, and do not conclude with an additional blessing. Rabbi Akiva disagrees,

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and says, “we should say, 'therefore, Hashem, Our G-d and G-d of our forefathers, please bring us to other holidays and celebrations. And we will eat thence from the future Pesach offerings and other sacrifices.” What is the deeper understanding of Rabbi Tarphon and Rabbi Akiva's disagreement concerning the text of this blessing in the Hagada?

According to our explanation above we can perhaps say that this mishna reflects the same Rabbi Akiva who sees with a prescience the reality of the prophecy of Zecharia, and who therefore enacts a new blessing with a text which recognizes the eventual Redemption at the Passover Seder experience! Even though it is true that in our days, we have no korban Pesach nor any other sacrifice, only a memory of our glorious past-- as Rabbi Tarphon articulates in his opinion (we thank you Hashem who redeemed us and our forefathers from Egypt) in a past tense, in order to enliven those past memories and our yearning for what they were. Nonetheless, Rabbi Akiva sees, in a present reality, the vision of a future Redemption fully developed in his presence now. It is perhaps for this reason that Rabbi Akiva disagrees and adds to Rabbi Tarphon's text and blessing with the request, “therefore, Hashem our G-d, bring us to other holidays and celebrations which we will come to in peace.” To Rabbi Akiva, the conclusion of the blessing is in a language of future optimism. His text is a prayer which reflects a promised future, “joyous with the building of your Sanctuary, happy in Your service, and there we will eat . . . “ Rabbi Akiva learned that one should never be satisfied with nostalgic longing for the past, but in every present moment see the impending, guaranteed future, and to pray and hope for that Redemption's reality.

According to this approach, it is possible that this is the source for the custom to clean the house after noon (chatzos) on Tisha B'av. In this way we show that even when we are amidst a day of mourning over the destruction of the Bais HaMikdosh, specifically then we articulate our hope and longing to see the light of the eventual Redemption!

As we mentioned above, such a point-of-view is evident throughout Rabbi Akiva's life, bringing him to the levels of greatness which he attained. Initially, when he was 40 years old, he went to yeshiva to learn

Alef-Beis, at a time when his eventual colleagues were already accomplished scholars toiling in the depths of the Talmud. The stark reality of his situation did not break him, for he knew in his heart that he was on the path to become a man of great stature! Indeed, as Rabbi Akiva continued to study and grow in Torah knowledge, he became the teacher to 24 thousand students. Suddenly, a great tragedy occurred and all these precious students passed away during a single time—33 days during the omer counting—“and the world was desolate!” Nonetheless, Rabbi Akiva was not overcome with self-pity or a sense of giving up hope. Rather, in the midst of his situation of loss and destruction, he strengthened himself and traveled to “Our teachers in the South” to teach Torah and to once again raise up the destruction, to begin anew to establish the decimated world of Torah. This was Rabbi Akiva's approach always, throughout his life—“to see from within the difficulties and destruction the seeds of hope and redemption”. This gave him the strength to press onward in his teaching, never falling into depression and spiritual loss.

For us, too, this is the secret how to survive and endure this period of our exile: “To see from within the darkness and Exile, the redemption and light.” And how? By developing our ever-increasing desire and passion for the future Redemption and the rebuilding of the Holy Temple.

We must remember this idea always, to constantly seek the rebuilding of the Beis HaMikdosh. As we are told in Shulchan Orech, “All who mourns for Yerushalayim's destruction merits and sees its rebuilding.” Thus, it is imperative to recognize the serious nature of these days, to feel the pain of the memory of the awesome destruction and Exile, and to inculcate these feelings, bit by bit, into our families, into our children. But—together with these emotions of loss, we must hold fast to Rabbi Akiva's secret, to see in the present moment the hope of Zecharia haNavi's prophecy: “Elderly men and women will again dwell in the courtyards of Jerusalem”, the light and redemption to come. In this way, notwithstanding all of the darkness of the Golus, we will not lose hope, always seeking with passionate desires the rebuilding of the Beis HaMikdosh speedily and in our days.



B. Looking Ahead—Striving Not to Have Any Enemies in Life

In Gittin (55b), the section of the Talmud which discusses the destruction of the Beis HaMikdash, we find the following statement: “R’ Yochanan said, ‘What is the meaning of the verse, (Proverbs 28:14) ‘Fortunate is the person who is constantly afraid’? It is a reference to the incident of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza, over which Jerusalem was destroyed.’” Rashi adds in explanation: “‘afraid’—this means to constantly be on alert to be prescient, to see the potential ramifications of events in the future, so to prevent impending disaster.” From his explanation, we see that Rashi understands the incident of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza not to have been an event which was inherently flawed; rather, it is an example of a lack of extra sensitivity, described by R’ Yochanan as the characteristic of being “constantly afraid”. That is, the essence of this incident is an example of the failure of a person to constantly be on the alert for the ramifications of his actions, an aspect not of wickedness or sin, but of a lack of extra piety.

However, according to this analysis, it is quite puzzling—we seem to have to view the event of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza as one devoid of overt wickedness. In other words, this story would seem to be about only a lack of piety, which we would have to learn to try to maintain, in the rubric of “Be constantly afraid”! But, this would seem to be at odds with the obvious nature of the incident. After all, in the apparent retelling of the event of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza, it is rife with tremendous wickedness and corruption. We see this either in the actions of the host of the meal, who with a lack of appropriate sensitivity wanted to throw the unwanted guest, Bar Kamtza out of the hall. Or, we recognize the sinful nature of Bar Kamtza, who, in retaliation of his being humiliated in public by the host, wished to take revenge and bring a false report to the Caesar that the Jewish people were in rebellion! What then, is the understanding of R’ Yochanan’s statement that this incident merely reflects a lack of piety, of the character trait that “one should be constantly afraid” (i.e. always aware of the ramifications of his actions); to whom was R’ Yochanan referring?

Perhaps it is possible to explain that according to the approach we’ve understood from Rashi, R’ Yochanan was referring to the actions of the Sages who were at the party.

However, we might also understand R’ Yochanan’s statement as explained by Rashi as a warning to us to always “be aware”, to develop the trait of seeing the ramifications of one’s actions and the potential future problems they might bring. In this way, he would be teaching a general idea derived from this event and the disaster which came in its wake. The story of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza is an event where one person, had an adversary, Bar Kamtza, and we can see from the story how vital it is for a person to strive that he not be in conflict with anyone. Even if one has a dispute, a disagreement with another, he should endeavor that this situation never become one where they become “enemies”, because as this story illustrates, “hatred perverts the order (of accepted communal norms)”. (Lit. “sina mikalkeles hashura”—Trans.) This, then, is the lesson of R’ Yochanan’s statement—be forever vigilant, for you may not know the terrible outcome what hatred can cause.



C. Where There is Torah, There is No Destruction

No Mourning We find both in the Midrash and in Shulchan Orech, “It is fitting to make a festive meal in commemoration of the conclusion of a course of study of Torah.” (See Kohelles Rabba; this party is known as a Siyum.—Transl.) It is well-known that this is a “yoma tova l’Rabbanan”, a festive day for the scholars, and at this event, there is grounds for a leniency where one may eat meat, even during periods of time when such behavior is normally prohibited due to the recognition of communal pain, such as during the first 9 days of the month of Av. We thought to give a rationale why, at the time of a “gamra shel Torah”, a celebration in commemoration of the conclusion of a course of study of Torah, there is such a leniency to each meat and drink wine even in the Nine Days!

In the Piyut (liturgical poem—trans.) “Remember the Covenant of Abraham” (Zechor Bris Avaham),

we say: “The Holy City and the Precincts were made into a disgrace and a humiliation, and all of their desired objects were buried and hidden. Nothing remained, but this Torah . . . “ (Heb. “ain shiur rak haTorah hazos”) The simply meaning of the Paytan (Poet) is that when confronting the awesome destruction of body and soul of the Jewish people endured by the generation of the Churban, and we recognize the overwhelming destruction of the Holy City and its Precincts—into a disgrace and humiliation—at least there remained for us a singular survivor, the Holy Torah. Even though the Torah was lessened, like everything else as a result of the Churban, nothing else could be considered having survived the disaster, excepting the Torah.

However, we thought to explain this passage in another way. Even though, in truth, “the Holy City and the Precincts were made into a disgrace and a humiliation” as the Almighty, Blessed Be He poured His wrath on wood and stones as He destroyed the Holy Sanctuary, and the Jewish people as a whole was led into subjugation and pain, we still have one single place where the hand of the enemy cannot reach, one place which still remains pure and unsullied, as it was in the time when the Jewish nation dwelled in its land, each man under his vine and under his fig tree. That place? None other than “This Torah”! It is the solitary place which remains pure, where destruction cannot touch at all. At the time of Churban, when everything is thrown down, holy service vessel stolen, taken into captivity, everything disgraced and burned in fire, the Holy Torah remains standing in its place, pristine! It is impossible to denigrate it, to lessen its sanctity; no non-Jewish hand can ever profane it.

Now we can understand a deeper reason for a Siyum. Even in times of mourning we are commanded to eat meat and to be joyous! In a place where the Holy Torah continues to beat in our hearts and bursts forth, there is no Churban, no sadness. Moreover, no

prohibition of eating meat can exist in such a place. Even moreso, in such a place, there is a requirement for joy and anticipation of redemption. Through the learning of Torah, one corrects Churban and can transform it to perfection, to completeness, and lays the foundation for the future Redemption.

It is told about one of the Gedolei Yisrael that while he was learning the Order of Kodashim, the laws of the service in the Temple, he burst out in tears, singing the well-known melody to the song, “. . . So, in the Holy Sanctuary, I will see You!” When one is immersed in the study of the Holy Torah, he can perceive himself as if he is standing in the Temple itself, in its fullest glory and splendor, untouched by any foreign hand, for this is the power of Torah, in which no destruction can touch. Thus, through intense study one can attain the state of complete desire articulated in the words “So, in the Holy Sanctuary, I will see You!”, as if he is in the Bais HaMikdosh with the Almighty Himself.

We must learn from here the secret which will insure that we will not be, G-d forbid, in the danger of causing the Destruction, which is: Learning the Holy Torah! With toil and effort, which corrects and ennobles the heart and soul, the light of which brings one back to his source and can purify and perfect the learner.



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