

## **Lament, Loss, and Lesson (Hopefully) Learned**

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**March 12, 2008**

Even though almost a week has passed, the horror of the terrorist attack at Yeshivat Merkaz HaRav still lingers in my broken heart.

The stories. The names. The pictures.

It's all just too much to bear.

The thought – which try as I might, I cannot get out of my mind – of yeshiva students sitting in front of their seforim, studying, “talking in learning,” and celebrating the onset of Chodesh Adar when the terrorist attacked is just so painful to think about.

The fact that this evil was perpetrated in a yeshiva, of all places, which is supposed to serve as an oasis of kedushah magnifies and exacerbates the tragedy. It is reminiscent – in a sense – of the powerful depictions of our enemies, during the Churban, entering the holiest of places to perpetrate the most sinful of acts. It's not just what happened, but where it happened that makes it so horrific.

And yet.

And yet there are glimmers of inspiration emerging, slowly but surely, from the families and friends of the latest kedoshim. I never cease to be amazed at the heights which some people are able reach – especially, it seems, in Israel – in the most trying of circumstances.

The most salient question for the rest of us, however, is what we will take away from this latest episode in our blood stained history. It's not enough to lament or even to cry. We must find meaning even amidst the madness. As the Rambam (Laws of Fasts 1:1-3) famously comments, our charge is to respond to tragedy by searching for lessons to be learned and ways in which we can better ourselves.

But what message can be taken from such misery?

Perhaps it is the following:

Parshat Pikudei begins by declaring that “These are the accountings of the Mishkan, the Mishkan of Testimony which were counted by the word of Moshe” (38:21).

Rashi, in a well-known comment, cites the teaching of the Midrash Tanchuma (#5) that suggests that the repetition of the word “Mishkan” is in fact a play on words and can be vocalized as “mashkon,” or collateral. The double reference is thus a subtle allusion to the two Batei Mikdash, two Temples (Mishkan), which God had taken from us as a form of collateral (mashkon).

In other words, our sins have created a debt that we owe to HaKadosh Baruch Hu, the repayment of which must come in the form of teshuvah, repentance and spiritual rehabilitation. As a guarantee that we, as a people, will do our part, God has “taken” the Temples as collateral to be returned (i.e, the Third Temple) only after we repay our debt.

Rav Zalmele Volozhiner (brother of the legendary Rav Chaim) raised a very basic problem with this homiletical comment of the Midrash.

When discussing the laws of loaning money on collateral (Shemos 22:25-26) the Torah admonishes the creditor not to hold on to the debtor’s personal effects at times when those items are essential. The famous example given (see Rashi’s comments to the verse as well as the more extended discussion in Bava Metzia 114b) is when night clothing or bedding is used as collateral and the ruling is that such items must be returned to debtor at nightfall.

In light of this ruling, wonders R. Zalmele, why hasn’t God “returned” the Beis HaMikdash? After all, if the collateral must be returned when it is needed – even if the debt has not yet been repaid – then certainly He should have given us the Temple which we so obviously need.

R. Zalmele powerfully answers that the secret is found in the Torah text itself which explains why the creditor must return the collateral: “so it shall be that if he cries out to Me, I shall listen, for I am compassionate” (v. 26). Because the absence of the collateral is so painful to the debtor that he cries out in distress, there is a moral imperative to return it – if only until daybreak.

The reason that HaKadosh Baruch Hu has not seen fit to rebuild the Beis HaMikdash and “return” our collateral therefore must be, says R. Zalmele, that we are obviously not in anguish over its absence and we have not cried out for its return. Were we to “cry out to (God)” over the Churban HaBayis and would we viscerally and truly feel that there is something missing in our lives without the Beis HaMikdash, then God most certainly would have responded – “I shall listen, for I am compassionate.”

Put simply, if Hashem hasn’t yet given us the Beis HaMikdash the reason is only because we don’t want it badly enough.

When reflecting on this unimaginable tragedy and the subsequent events of the last few days, I am struck by the outpouring of grief that I have seen, heard, and read about. There is something – perhaps what I alluded to above – about this terrorist attack that touched more people more deeply than other attacks. It’s as if the collective heart of the Jewish people has been ripped in half.

While the family and friends of the kedoshim, hy”d, feel this pain most intensively, it is clear that the “circle of sorrow” is spread wide and far. As one yeshiva student from England wrote to the families – who are all strangers to him – “your pain is my pain and your loss is my loss.” I believe that this expresses the feelings of most Jews.

But here is the rub.

We all feel this way now but what about when our memory of this tragedy inevitably fades, will we still feel a sense of loss?

When an attack of these proportions occurs it's a reminder – even to the most Zionist among us – of just how inadequate our current situation is and of just how incomplete our “return to Zion” is at this moment.

The modern miracle of the return of Jewish sovereignty to our ancestral homeland is an unqualified blessing. But the many wonderful benefits of contemporary Israel can lull us into forgetting that, fundamentally, as long as the Beis HaMikdash is not yet rebuilt and until the Melech HaMoshiach is enthroned in Yerushalayim, we are in a state of national churban.

This was the essence of Rav Soloveitchik's adamant refusal to alter the “Nachem” prayer even in the glowing aftermath of the Six Day War and it remains as tragically true now as it was at that time and it will remain true until we herald the final and complete redemption.

The massacre at Mercaz has graphically reminded us of this truth. There is a palpable – even if unarticulated – sense of churban and there is a collective yearning for geulah. This is the awareness that R. Zalmele was referring to and these are the feelings that he correctly diagnosed as being typically absent from the Jewish people. .

We have the understanding now. The question is, what next?

If we go forward with a renewed and reinforced awareness of our galus and the incalculable loss of the Beis HaMikdash, then maybe – just maybe – we will have responded correctly to this tragedy and in so doing be one step – hopefully not a small one – closer to the geulah.

May we soon merit the complete fulfillment of Zachariah's prophecy (8:4-5):

Old men and old women will once again sit in the streets of Jerusalem . . . and the streets of the city will be filled with boys and girls playing in the streets.