

TORAT HAR SHIMUEL

PARSHA

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THE HOLOCAUST WITHIN THE CON- TEXT OF HISTORY

By
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There is a school of thought known as the lachrymose conception of Jewish history. It's a philosophy that portrays the history of our people as mostly filled with tears with interspersed periods of joy and accomplishment. (Lachrymal glands produce tears.) In my opinion, what marks the uniqueness of our people is not that the bad times throughout our history are more significant than the good. It's that our people have lived at the extremes of both. The good times have been remarkably good, disproportionate to the quality of our life circumstance and the population of our people. The bad times have been far more horrific than any nation has to endure in the recorded history of mankind.

Reflecting on those times when whatever form of government in power tolerated our presence and permitted us to live our lives, we generally achieved beyond the general population's expectations. Society benefitted by our presence and accomplishments. Be it medicine, business and finance, trade, the sciences, literature, Jews have always been at the forefront of charting new territory. The Rambam was not just a Talmudic – Torah scholar par excel lance, but was regarded as the leading physician of his day. The four hundred years that made up the golden age of Spain were filled with accomplishments. Today, the list of Jewish Nobel Prize laureates is totally disproportionate to our population.

Unfortunately, what balances this is the catastrophic nature of the anti-Semitic violence leveled against us. The crusades, the pogroms, the ridiculous blood libels, the random attacks are incomprehensible. The only thing more insane than the violence is the premise upon which the entity attacking us based it on. What exasperated all of this was the fact that our enemies could not do away with us. Babylonia, Greece, Rome, the Catholic Church, the Nazis were incapable of bringing an end to our people. The Nazis referred to the genocide of the Jews as "the final solution" for a reason. "Final" infers the last of a series.

The word "Holocaust" has never been used when referring to a nation other than the Jewish people. Although it is defined as referring to the period between 1939 and 1945 when six million Jews (one quarter of which were children under the age of 12) were murdered, the historical reality is that it was preceded by two events of equal negative magnitude, both of which qualifying to be referred to as "Holocausts".

In 1648-1649 Bogdan Chmielnicki and his Cossack followers wiped out one third of the world's Jewish population, all located in Poland. Commonly referred to as "Gezarus tach v'tat", the impact this had on our people was devastating, setting the stage for the false messiah, Shabbtai Tzvi, to be able to raise a portion of the remaining population to renewed heights and once again cast them into the pit of spiritual darkness and communal depression when he was discovered to be a fraud. Due to the lack of organized records it is impossible to determine how many Jews were slaughtered. Jewish chronicles of the day mention that one hundred thousand Jews living in three hundred communities were massacred.

The earliest "Holocaust" in the history of our people was the culmination of the Bar Kochba rebellion and the destruction of Beitar. To understand this fully, let's digress for a bit and address something that has bothered me for years. The fourth blessing in the Birkat HaMazon (Grace after Meals) is Ha'Tov V'ha'Metiv. It is a blessing that acknowledges the great goodness of Hashem that, following the last stand of the Bar Kochba rebellion and the destruction of the city of Beitar, those who were killed by the Romans did not decompose until they were permitted to be buried two years later. The Gemara in Brachot (48b) states that we acknowledge Hashem's "Tov" – goodness, that they did not decompose, and Hashem as a "Metiv" precipitator of goodness, that they were eventually worthy of burial.

The fact that we dedicate a full blessing to this has always left me confused and uncomfortable. My feelings can be explained by something that happened a few months ago. I left the house one morning for

Minyan at my usual departure time of 7:20 AM. I looked next door and was surprised to find my neighbors car standing on four cinder blocks, the wheels having been stolen. When I returned home, I knocked on the door and said good morning to what were two very frustrated and angry people. I knew from the start that the last thing they wanted to hear was "Better they should take the wheels than the entire car". Every situation does have its upside. Recognizing the upside is as important as knowing when to express it.

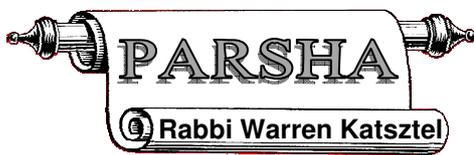
This analogy is what has me questioning the blessing of Ha'Tov v'ha'Metiv. Between the years 132 and 135, Bar Kochba and his followers barricaded themselves in Beitar. They held off the Romans to the point where they were seriously considering giving up and going back home. Hunger and disease had broken out in the Roman camp and they were on the verge of concluding that the defeat of Beitar was simply not worth it anymore. Rabbi Akiva backed Bar Kochba until he insisted on making a pact with the Samaritans, something that Rabbi Akiva staunchly opposed. Indeed, it was "Ephraim", a turncoat Samaritan that gave the Romans access to the fortress through a hidden tunnel that lead to the slaughter of the city's ±580,000 inhabitants. There was no mercy and there were no prisoners taken. Every man, woman and child fought valiantly but were eventually overwhelmed and killed by the Roman army under the personal leadership of Rome's Emperor, Hadrian. It is fair to say that the Romans were the first nation to precipitate a Holocaust upon our people.

For me, the question that arises from this is how do we overlook a slaughter of this magnitude and *celebrate* in Birkat HaMazon the fact that they did not decompose before burial was permitted years later? Referring to what I mentioned above, it's like saying, "thank G-d they only took the wheels and not the entire car". What comfort is there in that reality when you're looking at your car perched on four cinder blocks? How much can one appreciate the miracle that they didn't decompose until they were buried when balanced with the reality that about 600,000 Jews were slaughtered by an army of blood thirsty savages? What accentuates the question today is that if you ask the average person what this blessing is all about, the vast majority of people who know what the blessing addresses have little to no idea of what really happened in Beitar. Those who I have spoken with about this are shocked when they hear how many died, after which they validate this question.

While in Chicago, I posed this question to HaRav Gedaliah Schwartz, the Av Bais Din of the RCA. This great man provided me with an answer which gave me the missing pieces needed to understand this. Rov Schwartz is not only a high character, brilliant Talmid Chochoch, but a first class historian. He explained to me that it was common practice during this era of history for the conquering army to forbid the remaining population to bury those who were killed. Not only did the Romans impose this upon the Jews, Phillip II of Macedonia demanded the same of the remaining Greek population after he conquered Greece. Between the vision of their dead and the putrid odor that filled the air, the psychological impact this had removed any thoughts of rebellion or hope for those who remained alive. They were prisoners of war physically and psychologically.

Let's go back to the destruction of Beitar. Thousands of Roman soldiers were perched outside the walls of Beitar incapable of getting in. They were situated there for years, frustrated by a band of religious zealots. They finally break through and decimate the entire population. The problem is that there are Jews in other areas of Israel, and they feel compelled to get a message out to them. They know that their first reaction will be to bury their dead. By outlawing this, they draw the entire Jewish population into the conflict and send the message that as a nation, they have no future, no hope. Within days the odor of over a half million corpses will permeate the land, serving as a constant reminder of the massacre that just occurred.

Here is where history takes a remarkable turn in favor of the conquered. There is no decomposition, there is no odor, and the message the Romans are trying to convey to the rest of the population not only fails, but is replaced by a **public** message from none other than Hashem Himself. Hashem's message is multi-dimensional, addressed to the na-



tion of Israel AND to the Romans. Rome thought they had the ability to write history, to determine in place of Hashem who would live and who would die, who

would be left helpless and who would endure. What Hashem was telling them right out in the open for everyone to witness first hand is that for now, Rome may be a world power, but eventually they will fall like the Babylonians, the Persians and Greeks before them. The decisions of Hashem's heavenly court in consonance with free will tolerates the power structure of the day playing itself out. Nonetheless, the direction it will turn, how history ultimately unfolds is designed and executed exclusively by Hashem, not mankind.

Israel's comfort was in the message Hashem conveyed to Rome, the strength of which had to be catastrophic to the Roman psyche. They had no choice but to acknowledge that this was a miracle wrought by the True G-d of Israel on behalf of His chosen nation. The proof is extraordinarily simple. The armed resistance of everyone that fought in Beitar resulted in the death of thousands of Roman soldiers. The reason we acknowledge the *miraculous* nature of this time is not only because the Jewish dead did not decompose, but also because the Romans who died did. One cannot attribute to "nature" the ability to differentiate between Jew and Roman. There is no discernment within the natural process because the rules are consistent across the board. The Romans therefore knew they had no chance. All of them were intellectually forced to acknowledge that the Hand of G-d was on the side of Israel. What really freaked them out is that this phenomenon did not last for a week or a month, but for *years!* To them, it was a constant reminder that there was no reality to the gods of Roman mythology, and that Hashem manifested His glory on the people they just slaughtered. Despite their military victory, the Romans had been defeated.

This was not Rome's first introduction to the G-d of Israel. There is a famous Gemara, (Sanhedrin 108b & 109a), the shares an event that occurred decades before the Bar Kochba rebellion. Nachum Ish Gamzu, the first teacher of Rabbi Akiva, lead a delegation of leaders of the Jewish community to Rome to present a gift to the Emperor Domitian. They brought a treasure chest of wealth collected from the Jewish community in Israel. They lodged at a hotel in Rome and placed the chest in the hotel "safe" for the night. The owners of the inn rummaged through their belonging and when they came upon the contents of the chest, they took everything for themselves and filled it with dirt. The next day, the delegation proceeded to Rome and presented the emperor with their gift. When he opened it and discovered there was dirt inside, Domitian was obviously insulted and condemned Rav Nachum to death. The Gemara relates that Eliyahu disguised as a Roman appeared and suggested to the emperor that this may be the "dirt" that was transformed into arrows and swords for Avrohom when he conquered the four kingdoms and rescued his nephew, Lot. Up until now, Domitian had never won a battle nor enjoyed the lavish celebration associated with a military victory. Rav Nachum and his delegation were required to remain in Rome while the "dirt" was tested. Domitian returned from battle victorious specifically because of the "dirt" and rewarded the Jewish delegation with a chest full of gold. They were blessed with the ability to witness firsthand the wonders of the G-d of Israel, and had to acknowledge His reality and ability to interact directly with our world as He pleases. This Chesed was amazing, as Hashem revealed Himself directly to Rome first in a positive capacity, while, following Beitar, in a manner that clearly foretold their impending doom.

Although this miracle did not have a long term, positive impact on Domitian (he acted horrifically toward the Jews), many Romans converted to Judaism realizing its inherent Truth especially in contrast to the folly of the Roman multi-god system. Relatives of emperors were among the converts, including Onkelos, the nephew of Hadrian, as well as Rufina, the wife of Turnus Rufus who oversaw the martyrdom of Rabbi Akiva. Rufina infuriated Turnus Rufus because she divorced him, converted to Judaism and became Rabbi Akiva's second wife. She died "al Kiddush Hashem" (9 Tishrei, 135 CE), one day before Rabbi Akiva was martyred. Many Roman converts died a similar death.

The message to Israel following Beitar was one of consolation, despite the fact that this was a horrific period in our history. The Romans set their eyes on the Torah true Jewish population, and with greater brutality made a spectacle of the death sentences imposed on the Torah scholars, the ten martyrs who led the community. When all seemed lost following what may very well be termed the first Holocaust, Hashem manifested His Presence publically for Jew and Roman to witness firsthand, and protected the dignity of those who fell in Beitar. The message was both simple and remarkably powerful. No matter how dark the night may be, there will always be a morning, a new dawn. The fact that Hashem is with us is our license to always have hope, faith in the future irrespective of how difficult the present may be. The miracle Hashem blessed them with clearly demonstrated that He was still with them. Not

even Rome could extinguish the flame of Hashem's nation and bring an end to the Torah learning that endured under such challenging conditions. The era of prophecy may have come to an end, but a miracle of this caliber that lasted as long as it did was prophetic in nature. Hashem's Divine Presence manifested itself in full glory while the first Bais HaMikdash existed. Those were memories worthy of celebration, while these times were probably the lowest the Jewish people had experienced to date. Nonetheless, for those who chose to view life through Torah oriented, spiritual eyes, Hashem's Presence was prophetically visible in this miracle, a vision that every survivor was worthy of seeing.

On a more subtle level, there is the Gemara (Kiddushin 72b) that lists numerous people who were born on the same day that someone of great stature died. Reb Yehuda HaNasi who compiled the Mishna was born on the same Yom Kippur day that Rabbi Akiva was martyred. We must take note of the relationship he developed with Antoninus, the Roman emperor following the death of Hadrian that permitted the slain of Beitar to be buried in 138. The two enjoyed a warm relationship founded on mutual respect, paving the way for renewed Jewish observance and public Torah learning. There is the type of Divine Intervention that manifests itself for everyone to see while it is occurring. This Hashgocho Protis is the type that is recognized not at the moment but retroactively, when all realize that as one window closes, Hashem opens another.

So how is one to explain the Holocaust of almost eighty years ago? There are those who say that the State of Israel is a divine consequence of the immense suffering our people endured between 1939 and 1945. The only people qualified to comment on this are those who survived Nazi Europe, and with every passing day, their numbers become less and less. I don't know how much comfort any survivor would have knowing that because their loved ones were killed, we now have a Jewish homeland. I don't know Hashem Yisborach well enough to say this is the way he operates. Some things are beyond human comprehension, and better left to the realm of silence than to comment upon them.

Aharon, the brother of Moshe and the first Kohen Gadol was best known for being an "Ohev Shalom V'Rodef Shalom", "A lover of peace and a pursuer of peace". This accolade testifies to the reality that he must have been a first class conversationalist. He was able to make peace between people wrapped in conflict, without violating the rules of what qualifies as appropriate conversation. Nonetheless, the Torah clearly states that when his two sons, Nadav and Avihu, lost their lives, "Vayeedom Aharon", "And Aharon was silent", (Vayikra 10:3). The sadness and despair of the moment left the master of conversation speechless. In my opinion, more is conveyed in Aharon's silence than anything he could have possibly said. At the end of the day, he knew his place and his limitations, both of which were best served through the expression on his face and the silence of his voice.

About five years ago, I gave a shiur that addressed why, if one's income is determined by Hashem Yisborach on Rosh Hashana – Yom Kippur, is it necessary for us to have to work? After reviewing some of the more esoteric philosophical parameters of the question and elderly gentleman identified himself as a Holocaust survivor. He explained that although he found my words most appealing, he could not wrap his head around them, "Because I witnessed a good portion of six million Jews dying in the camps". At that moment, I sensed that Hashem Yisborach was with me, because my response was one that I never said before, and precipitated a reaction from this gentleman that caused him to smile. As expressed above, I disqualified myself from being able to comment on his life circumstances and/or judge them because I was not there and am incapable of fully comprehending what he experienced. Nonetheless, I asked him to consider the following correction to the statement quoted above. "I acknowledge with my entire being that six million Jews were killed. But not one died!!" I went on to explain that we cannot fathom the grand nature of the reward waiting for them in Olom Haba, for each one left this world as a "Kodosh" – a holy soul martyred by a modern day manifestation of Amalek. Indeed, whether we're speaking of Beitar, the Chmielnicki massacres, the Nazi Holocaust, crusades, pogroms, blood libels or today's terrorist attacks, the reality is that Jews do not die. We relocate!! All too often within our history, that passage has been violent. Nonetheless, the reality remains the same, that being that a special place is reserved in Hashem's World To Come for souls whose passing testify to the reality that we are Hashem's children and refuse to give that up, even at the expense of our lives in this world.

So the next time you recite Birkat HaMazon, the grace after meals, remember that the fourth paragraph may reflect on the slaughter that occurred at Beitar, the first Holocaust our people endured. Of greater importance is the fact that in the aftermath, Hashem Yisborach manifested Himself in a manner that permitted every surviving Jew to have hope and remain steadfast in their Emunah in Hashem and the observance and learning of His Torah. Of equal grandeur is the fact that everyone from Beitar to Rome and throughout the empire witnessed the manifestation of Hashem's ruler ship over nature and history as the Roman dead, lying next to the Jews, decomposed, while our deceased appeared asleep.