YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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In memory of VBM author Rabbanit Dr. Avigail Rock z"l,

on the occasion of her sheloshim

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In memory of Esther Leah Cymbalista z"l
Niftera 7 B'Av 5766.
Dedicated by her family.

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IN LOVING MEMORY OF

Jeffrey Paul Friedman z"l

August 15, 1968 – July 29, 2012

לע"נ

יהודה פנחס בן הרב שרגא פייוועל ז"ל

כ"ב אב תשכ"ח – י' אב תשע"ב

ת.נ.צ.ב.ה.

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[**The Seed of Consolation in the Destruction**](https://www.etzion.org.il/en/seed-consolation-destruction)

**Rav Shmuel David**[[1]](#footnote-1)

**The Mashiach was Born on Tisha Be-Av**

 *Chazal* tell us that at the very time of the Temple's destruction – on the day of Tisha Be-Av – the *Mashiach* was born:

But this is not trouble, but joy, for on that very day, Menachem [the Comforter = the *Mashiach*] was born and Israel received full payment for all their sins. For R. Shemuel said: Israel received full payment for their sins when the Temple was destroyed, as it is written: "The punishment of your iniquity is accomplished, O daughter of Zion" (*Eikha* 4:22). (*Peticha* to *Esther Rabba* 12)

The *Etz Yosef* and *Matanot Kehuna* explain:

For were it not for the destruction of the Temple, no remnant of Israel would have been left, God forbid. As it is stated: "A psalm of Asaf. O God, the heathen are come into your inheritance" (*Tehillim* 79:1). It should have said: "A lamentation of Asaf"! Rather, he recited a psalm that He cast His anger on wood and stone, for were it not for that, no remnant would have been left.

Indeed, it seems rather difficult to recite a psalm over the destruction of the Temple and the killing of tens of thousands in the war with the Romans!

We learn further in the *midrash*:

It happened that a man was plowing when one of his oxen lowed. A passing Arab asked him: “Who are you?” The man answered: “I am a Jew.” The Arab said: “Detach you ox and untie your plow.” “Why?” asked the Jew. “Because the Temple of the Jews is [to be] destroyed!” “How do you know this?” “Because of the lowing of your ox.” While he was saying this, the ox lowed again. The Arab then said: “Harness your ox and tie up your plow, because the deliverer of the Jews is born!” “What is his name?” “Menachem [= the Comforter].” “What is his father's name?” “Chizkiyahu”….

R. Abun said: Why should I learn this from an Arab when there is an explicit text that states: "And Lebanon [i.e., the Temple] shall fall by a mighty hand" (*Yeshayahu* 10:34); and afterwards it is written: "And there shall come forth a shoot out of the stock of Yishai and a twig shall grow forth out of his roots" (*Yeshayahu* 11:1). (*Eikha Rabba* 1:3. The source of this Aggada is the *Yerushalmi*, *Berakhot* 2:4)

 The notion that the *Mashiach* was born on Tisha Be-Av, on the same day that the Temple was destroyed, is not simply an Aggada. This idea that affected the halakhic practice of various communities on Tisha Be-Av, as we find in *Sefer Kolbo* (cited in the *Beit Yosef*):

Any washing performed for the sake of pleasure is forbidden all day long, whether washing one's entire body or washing one's face, hands, or feet. One who is lenient and washes from the time of the afternoon service and on violates the words of the Sages. There is, however, an ancient custom that women wash themselves from the time of the afternoon service on the day of Tisha Be-Av. The early authorities instituted this, and their intentions were good. They brought support for this from that which is stated in the Aggada that the *Mashiach* was born on the day of Tisha Be-Av. Just as we make a reminder of the destruction and the mourning, so must we make a reminder for the [coming of the] Redeemer and the Comforter, so that people not despair of redemption.

 The Aggada regarding the birth of the *Mashiach* on Tisha Be-Av came into being in order to strengthen the people's faith in the redemption. In order to anchor this faith in the practices of the day, it became the customary practice in various communities to wash from the time of the afternoon service on the day of Tisha Be-Av. Furthermore, it is the universal practice not to sit on the ground at the afternoon service, as well as to recite at the end of that service verses of consolation – even though the sun has not yet set.

**Mo’ed – An Appointed Season**

 The *Shulchan Arukh* rules:

*Tachanun* is not recited on Tisha be-Av, and we do not fall on our faces, because the day is called a *mo'ed* ("an appointed season"). (*Shulchan Arukh*, *Orach Chayyim* 559:4)

 This *halakha* requires further clarification, for the verse does not call this day a *mo'ed* in the sense of a happy occasion; on the contrary, it says about this day: "He has called a solemn assembly [*mo'ed*] against me to crush my young men" (*Eikha* 3:15) – referring to an assembly that meets for an evil purpose. How, then, can we learn from here that the day is considered a "*mo'ed*," on which *Tachanun* is not recited?

**“With Their Faces One to Another”**

 The *gemara* in *Bava Batra* discusses the faces of the *keruvim*:

"With their faces one to another." But surely it is written: "And their faces were inward"! There is no difficulty: The former was at a time when Israel obeyed the will of God; the latter was at a time when Israel did not obey the will of God. (*Bava Batra* 99a)

When Israel obeys the will of God, the *keruvim* face each other, as lovers who gaze one at the other. On the other hand, when Israel do not obey the will of God, the *keruvim* are turned away from each other.

 We further learn in the *gemara* in *Yoma*:

R. Katina said: Whenever Israel would come up to the Festival, the curtain would be removed for them and they were shown the *keruvim*, whose bodies were intertwisted with one another, and they would be thus addressed: “Look! You are beloved before God as the love between man and woman.” (*Yoma* 54a)

Not only were the faces of the *keruvim* turned towards each other when Israel obeyed, but the bodies of the *keruvim* themselves were intertwisted with one another.

Accordingly, the following passage is somewhat surprising:

Resh Lakish said: When the heathens entered the Temple and saw the *keruvim*,whose bodies were intertwisted with one another, they carried them out and said: “These Israelites, whose blessing is a blessing and whose curse is a curse, occupy themselves with such things!” And immediately they despised them, as it is said: "All that honored her, despised her, because they have seen her nakedness" (*Eikha* 1:8). (*Yoma* 54b)

Resh Lakish explains the words "because they have seen her nakedness" in their plain sense: They saw the *keruvim* intertwisted one with the other. This led to contempt for the Jewish People, who direct their eyes to the Holy of Holies, and there they see, as it were, a lewd act.

But how it is possible that at the time of the destruction, when God was angry with the people of Israel, that the *keruvim* could be intertwisted one with the other? The *keruvim's* being intertwisted symbolizes Israel's performance of God's will. Did Israel do God's will at the time of the destruction of the Temple?

 It is generally explained that while the destruction of the Temple was caused by the fact that Israel did not do God's will, at the moment that Israel was punished, the moment that the Temple was destroyed and they received their punishment, God's anger waned. This is also alluded to by the *midrash* cited earlier, which states that Israel achieved atonement when the Temple was destroyed.

**Punishment and Revenge**

 Perhaps we can offer a different explanation. There are two types of blows: One is given as revenge; the other is given as punishment.

Punishment is always proportionate to the offense, for the goal of punishment is educational. Thus, room must be left for the punished party to learn his lesson. Punishment is always administered out of love and out of the desire that the punished party will better his ways.

When the Temple was destroyed, when so many Jews were killed and the survivors were led out into exile, it might have appeared to an outside observer that this was not a punishment, but rather a dreadful act of revenge. Therefore, the *midrash* teaches us that the destruction of the Temple, despite all its dreaded features, was a form of punishment. It was not an act of revenge that destroys everything – for on the very same day, the *Mashiach* was born. The groundwork was laid for repair and restoration. The *keruvim* were intertwisted one with the other, even though this was not a time of good favor, in order to teach us that there is no revenge here. Even when God's anger reaches its climax, it comes from a heart that is filled with love, and not with revenge.

At the height of the fast and mourning of Tisha Be-Av, we go to clean ourselves, to organize matters in anticipation of the *Mashiach*, in order to instill in the hearts of even the simplest people that repair is possible. "He has called a solemn assembly against me" – this was an assembly "to crush my young men." But this was only a temporary assembly, not an eternal blow. We are confident in our faith in redemption, and thus this is good news; this is a *mo'ed* on which *Tachanun* is not recited and there is no falling on our faces. "For your work shall be rewarded, says the Lord; and they shall come back from the land of the enemy. And there is hope for your future, says the Lord; and your children shall return to their own border" (*Yirmeyahu* 31:15-16).

**Akiva You Have Comforted Us**

 This is also the way to understand two Aggadic stories found at the end of tractate *Makkot*:

Long ago, as R. Gamaliel, R. Elazar b. Azarya, R. Yehoshua, and R. Akiva were walking on the road, they heard the noise of the crowds at Rome [on travelling] from Puteoli, a hundred and twenty miles away. They all fell a-weeping, but R. Akiva seemed merry. They said to him: “Why are you merry?” He said to them: “Why are you weeping?” They said: “These heathens who bow down to images and burn incense to idols live in safety and ease, whereas our Temple, the footstool of our God, is burnt down by fire, and should we then not weep?!” He replied: “Therefore, I am merry. If they that offend Him fare thus, how much better shall fare they that do obey Him!”

Once again they were coming up to Jerusalem together, and just as they came to Mount Scopus, they saw a fox emerging from the Holy of Holies. They fell a-weeping, but R. Akiva seemed merry. They said to him: “Why are you merry?” He said: “Why are you weeping?” They said to him: “A place of which it was once said: ‘And the common man that draws near shall be put to death’ (*Bemidbar* 1:51) is now become the haunt of foxes, and should we not weep?!” He said to them: “Therefore, I am merry; for it is written: ‘And I will take to Me faithful witnesses to record, Uriya the priest and Zecharya the son of Yeberachya; (*Yeshayahu* 8:2). Now what connection has this Uriya the priest with Zecharya? Uriya lived during the times of the first Temple, while Zecharya lived [and prophesied] during the second Temple; but Scripture linked the [later] prophecy of Zecharya with the [earlier] prophecy of Uriya. In the [earlier] prophecy [in the days] of Uriya it is written: ‘Therefore shall Zion for your sake be plowed as a field’ (*Mikha* 3:12). In Zecharya it is written: ‘Thus says the Lord of Hosts: There shall yet old men and old women sit in the broad places of Jerusalem’ (*Zekharya* 8:4). So long as Uriya's [threatening] prophecy had not had its fulfillment, I had misgivings lest Zecharya's prophecy might not be fulfilled; now that Uriya's prophecy has been [literally] fulfilled, it is quite certain that Zecharya's prophecy also is to find its literal fulfillment.” They said to him: “Akiva, you have comforted us! Akiva, you have comforted us!” (*Makkot* 24a-b).

 It was possible to see the ascent of Rome and the destruction of the Temple and the Jewish kingdom as signs that God was exacting revenge from the people of Israel, and that perhaps, God forbid, they would have no possibility of renewal. This is the reason that the Sages of the Sanhedrin wept. R. Akiva, however, teaches that the destruction of the Temple was not an act of revenge, but rather a punishment, and "if they that offend Him fare thus, how much better shall fare they that do obey Him!" The punishment is temporary, and the moment we repair our deeds, we will grow and be many times louder than the crowds at Rome.

 The matter did not necessarily have to be understood in the way that it was understood by R. Akiva. Therefore, it was important for the Sages to say to him: "Akiva, you have comforted us." Seeing the destruction of the Temple as a punishment stemming from love, the role of which is to teach, and therefore that destruction will never be absolute and that if we learn our lesson, redemption will arrive – this is the comfort and consolation.

To understand the destruction as a punishment means to understand and that within the destruction lie the seeds of redemption.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. R. Shemuel David is an alumnus of the Yeshiva (class 7) and Chief Rabbi of the city of Afula. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)