

Churban and Geulah

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There are many sad sounds we hear during the Nine Days, from the mournful melody of Eicha to the scraping of a chair being turned over on Tisha B'Av. There is also the sound of silence we encounter when music would otherwise be playing, when we would have been attending a simcha or gathering at a barbecue or another happy occasion that is put on hold until the Nine Days have ended.

The saddest sound, however, is one we have almost stopped hearing altogether. It is the sound of another Jew slipping away.

Every year, as Tisha B'Av approaches, we mourn the destruction of the Bais Hamikdosh. We remember the flames that consumed Yerushalayim, the blood that flowed through its streets, and the millions of Jews who were killed, exiled, enslaved, and scattered.

We cry over a churban that occurred nearly two thousand years ago, and Chazal taught us that it has never really ended. Every generation in which the Bais Hamikdosh is not rebuilt is considered as if it was destroyed.

The churban is not only past history. It is also present tense.

Today, Jews once again live under physical threat. Our brothers and sisters in Eretz Yisroel endure terrorism, rockets, and war. Around the world, antisemitism has emerged from the shadows with a brazenness few imagined possible just a few years ago. Jewish schools require guards. Shuls require security. Jews are attacked in the streets of Europe and America simply because they are Jews. Politicians openly mock and criticize us.

Physical danger has returned.

But there is another tragedy unfolding, quieter than war and less visible than terrorism, yet in many ways no less devastating. It is the disappearance of Jews.

Last week, much attention was given to a poll that purported to show that New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani enjoys greater approval among American Jews than Israeli Prime Minister Binyomin Netanyahu. The numbers themselves are startling. Even more startling were the accompanying findings, which showed that substantial numbers of American Jews believe that the United States is too supportive of Israel, and many describe Israel's actions in Gaza in the harshest possible terms.

The poll indicated that the antisemitic Mamdani has a 44% approval rating among U.S. Jews, while only 32% approve of Netanyahu. The Associated Press survey also found that 38% of Jews say the United States is being too supportive of Israel, and 30% say that Israel's actions in Gaza are genocide.

People argue over what the poll means politically.

Perhaps we should ask what it means spiritually.

My late uncle, Rav Berel Wein, had a way of reducing complicated sociological questions to a simple truth. He would often remark that it should not surprise anyone that Jews who eat from McDonald's eventually lose their Jewish feeling.

It is not really about hamburgers. It is about assimilation.

When Jewish life becomes little more than an ethnic memory, when Torah is replaced by culture and mitzvos by nostalgia, Jewish identity eventually becomes so diluted that it loses its very foundation.

This did not happen overnight.

For decades, millions of American Jews convinced themselves that identity could survive without Torah. They thought that Chanukah candles, a Pesach Seder, a bar mitzvah, a few Yiddish expressions, bagels, lox, brisket, and nostalgic memories would somehow be enough. They are not.

Children were taught to be good people, but not necessarily good Jews.

They learned every fashionable ideology of the day but little about Avrohom Avinu, Har Sinai, the churban, or the return to Eretz Yisroel. They could speak fluently about oppression and colonialism, but had never studied why the Jewish people have davened toward Yerushalayim for over three thousand years.

When October 7 arrived, it did not create this crisis. It exposed it.

Many young Jews had never been given the tools to understand why Israel exists, why Jews have returned to their ancient homeland, or why Jewish survival has always depended upon remaining faithful to who we are.

A vacuum never remains empty.

If parents, schools, and communities do not fill Jewish hearts with Torah, emunah, history, and pride, someone else will fill them with other ideas.

And they have.

This, too, is churban.

So, on Tisha B'Av, as we mourn the millions who died al kiddush Hashem throughout the generations, we also weep for the millions who have been lost to intermarriage, assimilation, and indifference – Jews whose names remain Jewish, while their children and grandchildren may never know what it means to say Shema Yisroel.

Their loss is not marked by a yahrtzeit.

No Kaddish is recited. No shivah is observed.

Yet, Klal Yisroel is diminished all the same.

In Eretz Yisroel today, we are witnessing firsthand how devastating the loss of Yiddishkeit can be for the Jewish people. What we see taking place is not merely a political disagreement or a debate over public policy. It is a kulturkampf, a struggle over the soul and character of the Jewish state, the likes of which many of us have never experienced.

Jews whose grandparents lived lives of Torah and mitzvos are at the forefront of efforts to reshape the spiritual identity of the country. The painful irony is impossible to ignore. Descendants of those who once davened in shtieblach, learned in yeshivos and botei medrash, and sacrificed everything for Yiddishkeit are now leading campaigns against many of the very institutions that ensured the survival of Torah after the Holocaust and remain at the heart of what being a Jew is all about.

Make no mistake about it: What is going on now is far more than a dispute over the military draft of yeshiva bochurim.

That issue is merely the symbol of a much broader struggle.

Rabbi Wein, whose final book, *A Life of Learning*, was recently published ahead of his upcoming first yahrtzeit, recounts there the first time he encountered the Ponovezher Rov.

It was 1947. Rabbi Wein was not yet bar mitzvah. The Ponovezher Rov had already become a legendary figure, and when he arrived in Chicago, the city's rabbonim, roshei yeshiva, and approximately 250 yeshiva talmidim gathered to hear him.

"We all sensed his aristocratic bearing," Rabbi Wein writes. "The Torah shone from him."

The bais medrash was overflowing. The Ponovezher Rov first delivered a brilliant shiur and then turned to the future of Eretz Yisroel.

Rabbi Wein recalls his astonishing prediction: "He predicted that a Jewish state would be established, but that it could very well be that the Jewish government would put a person in jail just for being a shomer Shabbos.... That was my first exposure to the Ponovezher Rov. I had never heard words like that before.... I went home with my father.... When we came home, my mother asked, 'So what did he say?' and my father told her [about his prediction]."

Those words must have sounded almost unimaginable to the audience in Chicago at the time. Yet, history unfolded much as the Ponovezher Rov foresaw. The State of Israel was established, and while Jews are, boruch Hashem, not imprisoned simply for being shomrei Shabbos, we are witnessing something that would have been equally difficult to imagine: Thousands of bnei Torah, whose lives are devoted to limud haTorah, are being treated as enemies of the state, facing arrests, threats, and relentless efforts to dismantle the Torah world. Alongside this has emerged a painful and dangerous rift among Jews, one that many believe is unlike anything experienced since the founding of the state.

The Ponovezher Rov foresaw the great challenge that the Jewish people would face from Jews who no longer understood what Torah is, what a ben Torah represents, and why the Torah itself is the heartbeat of Klal Yisroel.

And now, seventy-eight years later, just a couple of weeks ago, senior Israeli roshei yeshiva traveled to Chicago, among other places, to present their case and raise desperately needed funds to sustain the Israeli yeshivos and yungeleit, who are being squeezed financially by anti-Torah state forces engaged in this battle.

The battle extends far beyond yeshivos and yungeleit. It also encompasses Chinuch Atzmai, the independent Torah school system founded with extraordinary mesirus nefesh by Rav Aharon Kotler, the Chazon Ish, Rav Zalman Sorotzkin, and the gedolei hador, who understood that without authentic Torah education, there would be no future for Klal Yisroel. It includes repeated efforts to weaken the autonomy of Torah institutions, reduce funding for yeshivos, alter the religious character of the public sphere, challenge the sanctity of Shabbos, and erode the kedusha of the Kosel, Eretz Yisroel, and Am Yisroel.

Each controversy may appear to stand on its own, but all are expressions of the same underlying conflict: What should a Jewish state look like? Should it be guided by the eternal values of Torah or should it resemble every other modern Western democracy, with Judaism relegated to little more than a cultural artifact?

This is the tragedy of spiritual distance. When Torah is no longer the lens through which a Jew sees the world, even the institutions that preserved the Jewish people for thousands of years can come to be viewed as obstacles rather than treasures. The yeshiva, once the pride of the Jewish people, becomes a target of resentment. The Kosel, once the symbol of every Jewish heart's longing, becomes just another public site to be redefined. Shabbos, the gift that has sustained us, becomes an inconvenience to be accommodated rather than a covenant to be cherished. The holy city of Yerushalayim becomes a battleground over whether stores should remain closed on Shabbos.

The greatest sadness is that so many of those fighting these battles are our own brothers and sisters.

Had they been raised to appreciate the beauty of Torah, the sacrifice of previous generations, and the miracle of the Torah world rebuilt after the churban of Europe, they might see these institutions not as relics of the past, but as the very heartbeat of the Jewish future.

That, too, is part of the churban we mourn during these days.

Not only the stones that were burned, but the hearts that have grown distant.

During these Nine Days, we refrain from music and limit our joy because our nation's heart remains broken.

Perhaps we should also allow ourselves to mourn the brothers and sisters who are still alive but are disappearing from our people.

The Gemara teaches that the second Bais Hamikdosh was destroyed because of sinas chinom. It will be rebuilt through ahavas Yisroel. Love means more than merely embracing another Yid. It means seeking to bring him home.

The answer to assimilation is not better politics. It is not better messaging. It is not cute slogans or social media campaigns.

It is Torah.

It is parents who teach their children that being Jewish is not simply an ancestry, but a destiny.

It is schools that fill young hearts with pride in Hashem, His Torah, and His people.

It is communities that understand that every Jewish child who grows up loving Torah is another stone laid in the rebuilding of the Bais Hamikdosh.

The enemies of the Jewish people seek to destroy our bodies. Assimilation destroys our souls. During these Nine Days, we mourn both.

And perhaps, if our mourning is sincere enough – for the Jews we have lost, for those we are still losing, and for those who can yet be found – it will help bring the day when mourning itself will disappear and the words of the novi Zechariah (8:19) will finally be fulfilled: “The fast of the fourth (17th of Tammuz), the fast of the fifth (Tisha B’Av) ... shall become days of joy and gladness.”

Chazal tell us that Moshiach was born on Tisha B’Av. The Nine Days are not only about mourning. They are also about rebuilding. Every Jewish child who learns the Alef-Bais, every Jew who puts on tefillin, every family that begins keeping Shabbos, every baal teshuvah, and every person who begins learning Torah is another brick in the rebuilding of the Bais Hamikdosh.

Perhaps this is the cry of the Nine Days for our generation. We mourn a Bais Hamikdosh that was destroyed because Jews became distant from one another and from our Father in Heaven. We must mourn every Jewish soul that has drifted away and believe that every soul can return. The same Jewish spark that burned in Avrohom Avinu, in the kedoshim of Europe, and in the builders of Torah in Eretz Yisroel after the churban still burns somewhere within every Jew. Sometimes it is very deep, very hidden, and very small, but it is there. Our task is not only to mourn what was lost. It is also to dedicate ourselves to bringing home what was lost.

My dear friend, Rav Eliezer Sorotzkin, who for many years led Lev L’Achim and today heads Chinuch Atzmai, was in the United States last week and shared with me a remarkable story that offers a perspective we would do well to remember.

Eighty years ago, the parent committee of the Shearis Yisroel cheder discovered that the father of two boys attending the school traveled to the beach on Shabbos, Rachmana litzlan. The committee members were aghast. They concluded that the boys could no longer remain in the cheder.

The renowned chareidi writer Rav Moshe Schonfeld was involved with the school and suggested that before taking any action, they should discuss the matter with the Chazon Ish.

The situation was presented to the Chazon Ish, and he listened carefully as the parents spoke. Then, instead of responding immediately, as was his usual practice, he sat in silence.

Five long minutes of deep concentration passed.

Finally, he lifted his eyes and quietly said, "I searched through the entire Torah. I carefully examined all the punishments prescribed for a mechallel Shabbos, and I did not find anywhere that it is forbidden to teach Torah to his sons."

This is not to say that we should begin admitting the children of mechallelei Shabbos into our schools. Rather, the lesson is that perhaps we should look at those Jewish children in the United States and Eretz Yisroel who have wandered so far from the path of their ancestors with sadness and compassion, and ask whether there is some way we can reach them, inspire them, help bring them home, and support worthy organizations such as Lev L'Achim, Shuvu, and Oorah, which engage in this holy work.

The Kuzari, (5:27), the Maharal in Netzach Yisroel (Perek 23) and many other seforim teach us that appreciating the loss of the Bais Hamikdosh and mourning the churban bring us closer to its rebuilding. Grieving over what we have lost arouses Heavenly mercy and hastens the geulah.

May we merit to see the fulfillment of "Kol hamisabel al Yerushalayim zoche vero'eh b'simchasa," that all those who mourn Yerushalayim will merit to witness her consolation bekarov.

During these Nine Days of mourning, let us daven that we merit to see the day when the Bais Hamikdosh will be rebuilt, when every neshomah that has become distant returns, and when we will merit the ultimate geulah, speedily in our days.