

Acharei Mot 5776

Rabbi Yosef Weinstock

“The death of the righteous shall atone.” Does that sound Jewish to you? For some at first glance it may even sound a little Christian. And yet that is the language utilized by the Talmud Yerushalmi to explain the connection between Yom Kippur and the deaths of Nadav and Avihu, both in Parshat Acharei Mot

א"ר חייה בר בא בני אהרן באחד בניסן מתו ולמה הוא מזכיר מיתתן ביום הכיפורים ללמדך שכשם שיום הכיפורים מכפר על ישראל כך מיתתן של צדיקים מכפרת על ישראל

The literal interpretation of this Talmudic phrase did not sit well with Rabbi Baruch Epstein, author of the Torah Temima. He suggests that we understand *Mitatan Shel Tzadikim mechaperet* in light of a story concerning the death of Shaul, the first King of Israel, as described in Shmuel Bet (Chapt 21):

And they buried the bones of Saul and Jonathan his son **in the country of Benjamin in Zela, in the sepulchre of Kish his father; and they did all that the king commanded. And God was entreated for the land after that.**

ידויקברו את עצמות שאול ויהונתן בנו בארץ
בגומן בצלע בקבר קיש אביו ויעשו כל אשר
צוה המלך ויעתר אלהים לארץ אחרי כן:

Rabbi Epstein explains that God showed compassion to the people in response to their appropriately mourning Shaul and appreciating his accomplishments and his legacy. *Mitatan shel Tzadikim Mechaperet* is premised on the obligation we have in this world to be *Makir Tov*: to acknowledge the accomplishments of those who have passed - especially when they died *Al Kiddush Hashem*.

The Torah Temima's explanation is important for us to reflect upon- as we find ourselves on the calendar between Yom Hashoah and Yom Hazikaron, Holocaust Remembrance Day and Israel's Memorial Day for those who have died in defense of Medinat Yisrael. Both of these days mourn the passing of Kedoshim, martyrs, and also Tzadikim- righteous souls.

A student once approached Rav Auerbach and asked for a timeout from his studies so he could travel north to pray at the graves of Tzaddikim. Rabbi Shlomo Zalman looked perplexed but didn't immediately answer. Sensing hesitation from his Rabbi, the student elaborated, explaining he had some personal issues to think through and he felt praying by the righteous would help.

Rabbi Auerbach replied that he fully understood what the student wanted to do and why he wanted to do it, but could not understand why he would travel four hours to pray by the graves of a few Tzaddikim when there were thousands of them buried on Har Herzl, just five minutes from the yeshiva!

Every day, someone would drive Rabbi Auerbach from his home in Sha'arei Chesed to his Yeshiva in Bayit Vegan. The Rabbi would occasionally ask the driver to pull up for a few moments outside Har Herzl, where he would recite Tehillim at kivrei Tzadikim, the graves of the righteous women and men who served and sacrificed on behalf of the State of Israel..

Mitatan shel Tzadikim Mechaperet, the death of these Tzadikim can serve as a source of atonement and spiritual inspiration and growth, but only if we learn the lessons from their lives and the circumstances surrounding their deaths.

First, commemorating the Holocaust can serve as a source of kapara if **we utilize the day to understand the dangers of Anti-Semitism- past present and future**. Once it was expressed in the enmity that Eisav showed Yaakov. Later in history it was the Church that oppressed Jews because of our faith. The honeymoon period when Anti-Semitism was not condoned in polite conversation has ended, just 70 years after the Holocaust. It manifest itself in some familiar ways: such as the conspiracy theories of David Duke (yep-he's back in the news), as well as some new ways, like the Anti-Israel sentiments, such as BDS (Boycott, Divest, Sanction efforts against Israel), that cloak themselves in Israel criticism but are really nothing more than new iterations of the world's oldest hatred.

And as we move from Yom Hashoah, let us learn the lessons that can help us achieve the kapara inherent within Yom Hazikaron. As Rav Soloveitchik put it, the modern state of Israel affords the Jewish People a chance to be actors on the world stage - to be masters of our own destiny and no longer be subjected to the whims of oppressive host nations. Jews now have the opportunity to die Al Kiddush Hashem not merely as a casualty of Anti Semitism, but on behalf of a greater cause- Am Yisrael and Eretz Yisrael (for me one of the most powerful images is that of the Israeli Air Force flying over Auschwitz). **Memorializing the tzadikim on Yom Hazikaron should force to pause consider what causes we can serve that are greater and bigger than ourselves.**

Lastly, **Yom Hazikaron reminds us how interconnected the Jewish people are-** Acheinu Kol Beit Yisrael. Both Israel and the United States observe a Memorial Day in May. For many

people (myself included) Memorial Day in the US is primarily a day for sales and barbecues. In Israel it would be unheard of- even sacrilege- to host a barbecue on Yom Hazikaron. Yet both are Memorial Days. What's the difference? One difference is that in America most of us don't know any US soldiers who have died in service to their country. Many of us are two or three or more steps removed from knowing members of the US Armed forces. We pray for their welfare every Shabbat, but their service and sacrifice is not felt in a personal way. In Israel, everyone has been impacted in a close personal way by the wars that Israel has fought over the first 68 years of her existence, including victims of terrorism.

Although it is still the month of Nisan ie no tachanun (and Shabbat Mevorchim) we nonetheless recited Av Harachmimim this morning. Tradition has it that this prayer was written in memory of the victims of the Crusades, which occurred this time of year- between Pesach and Shavuot. In that prayer we say: *V'Chiper Admato Amo*- God will provide atonement for His People by way of the Land of Israel. As we reflect on Yom Hashoah and prepare for Yom Hazikaron, let us learn the lessons that we must from these important days on the Jewish calendar:

Let us commit to identifying and addressing today's iterations of Antisemitism.

Let us learn what it means to fight for a cause greater than ourselves.

And let us remember just how interconnected Am Yisrael is- *Acheinu Kol Beit Yisrael*.

If we utilize Yom HaShoah and Yom Hazikaron appropriately then not only will *Mitat Tzadikim Mechaperet*, but we will merit the fulfillment of the verse in Av Harachamim- *V'Chiper Admato Amo*; may we be worthy to fully appreciate the gift of the State and Israel and celebrate its birth with full religious passion, as it deserves.