



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

DEVARIM > Devarim

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Devarim

A Time to Cry, A Time to Laugh



Meaningful Sermons *"Words from the Heart Enter the Heart"*

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ABSTRACT

With the recent brutal murders of Leiby Kletzky and Rabbi Elazar Abuchatzera – particularly chilling considering the fact that they were perpetrated by Jew vs. Jew – there doesn't seem much to smile about these days. "What has happened to us?" many are asking? "What else is brewing beneath the surface?"

Crying seems like the appropriate thing to do during this time of the year – the saddest period in the Jewish calendar. At this time, we are keenly aware of the destruction that took place close to 2,000 years ago ... the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem which we remember this Tuesday on *Tisha b'Av* ... the destruction which led to the exile of the Jewish people from the Land of Israel ... the destruction from which we have yet to recover. So it seems that we should cry ...

Or should we?

A famous Talmudic story tells of four rabbis who saw the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple. Three cried, one laughed. What did Rabbi Akiva, the one who laughed, see that the others did not? Can we look through Rabbi Akiva's eyes? Should we be crying today or should we be laughing?

This Shabbat before Tisha b'Av is called Shabbat Chazon, the Shabbat of vision, referring to the vision of Isaiah who saw the destruction coming. But Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev says that on this day we each are shown a vision of the Third Temple. Which one is it: a vision of destruction or one of rebuilding?

This sermon compares the concept of Jewish time as a wave cycle of dips and crests, which a swimmer must learn to navigate properly, lest he drown. As King Solomon so famously said: "There is a time for everything ... a time to cry and a time to laugh." Crying and laughing are part of one cycle called life. If we don't cry when it's time to cry, we won't be able to rejoice when it's time to celebrate. When we are sensitive and weep when the situation calls for it, we will see it through and be sensitive and rejoice when the time comes to laugh. When we navigate the dips, we have the power to ride the crests.

A TIME TO CRY, A TIME TO LAUGH

1. Chassidic Story (Optional)

The two brothers – the famed Rabbi Elimelech of Lyzensk and Rabbi Zushe of Anipol – often wandered about together posing as simple beggars. They would mingle with the masses – listening, teaching, speaking, helping and guiding whomever and whenever they could.

Once while traveling with a group of vagabonds, they were accused of being thieves and thrown together with the whole group into jail. Confident of their innocence and eventual release, the two brothers sat quietly. As the afternoon progressed, Rabbi Elimelech stood up to pray.

"What are you doing?" Rabbi Zushe asked.

"I'm getting ready for *Minchah*," replied Rabbi Elimelech.

But dear brother," advised Rabbi Zushe, "it is forbidden to pray in this cell because there is a pail that serves as a toilet nearby, making the room unfit for prayer."

Dejected, Rabbi Elimelech sat down and began to cry.

"Why are you crying?" asked Rabbi Zushe.

"I cannot pray," answered Rabbi Elimelech.

“But why weep?” asked Rabbi Zushe. “Don’t you know that the same God who commanded you *to pray*, also commanded you *not* to pray when the room is unfit for prayer? By not praying in this room, you have achieved a connection with God by obeying His law. You should be happy.”

“You are right, my brother!” exclaimed Rabbi Elimelech, smiling. He then stood up, took his brother’s arm and began to dance, happy that he had performed the mitzvah of not praying in an inappropriate place.

The guards heard the commotion and came running. Witnessing the two brothers dancing, they asked the other prisoners what had happened. “We have no idea!” they answered mystified. “Those two Jews were discussing the pail in the corner when all of a sudden they began to dance.”

“Is that right?” sneered the guards. “They’re happy because of the pail, are they? We’ll show them!” They promptly removed the pail from the cell.

And the holy brothers then prayed *Minchah* undisturbed.¹

2. A Time to Cry

King Solomon so famously said: “There is a time for everything ... a time to cry and a time to laugh.”²

But sometimes life can be very confusing. And it is hard to know when is the right time for which – when we should cry and when we should laugh.

These days we have much to cry about. Who is not shaken to the core by the recent brutal murders of Leiby Kletzky and Rabbi Elazar Abuchatzera – particularly chilling considering the fact that they were perpetrated by Jew vs. Jew?! “What has happened to us?” many are asking? “What else is brewing beneath the surface?”

¹ “The Joy of a Mitzvah” by Yossy Gordon.

² Ecclesiastes 3:4.

Crying seems like the appropriate thing to do during this time of the year – the saddest period in the Jewish calendar. At this time, we are keenly aware of the destruction that took place close to 2,000 years ago ... the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem which we remember this Tuesday on *Tisha b'Av* ... the destruction which led to the exile of the Jewish people from the Land of Israel ... the destruction from which we have yet to recover. So apparently we should cry ...

Or should we?

3. Rabbi Akiva Laughed

The Talmud tells us³ a story of four great sages who lived in the 2nd century, shortly after the Second Temple was destroyed. These four sages – Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah, Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Akiva – were walking in the hills surrounding Jerusalem. When they reached Mount Scopus – from which they could see the destruction atop Temple Mount – they rent their clothing. When they arrived at the Temple Mount, they saw a fox running out of the barren area where the Holy of Holies had been. Three of them began to cry, but Rabbi Akiva laughed.

They said to him, “Why are you laughing?”

He responded, “Why are you crying?”

They said, “Isn’t it obvious?”

He responded, “For that very reason, I am laughing.”

Rabbi Akiva then explained that Isaiah⁴ links together the prophecy of Uriah who lived in the First Temple period, with the prophecy of Zechariah who lived in the Second Temple, and makes one dependent on the other.

³ Isaiah 8:2.

⁴ Talmud *Makkot* 24b.

Rabbi Akiva then reminded them of the prophecy of Uriah that “Zion will be plowed under like a field.”⁵ And he also reminded them of the prophecy of Zechariah that Jerusalem would yet again be inhabited – with elderly men and women strolling in the streets while children played.⁶

Concluded Rabbi Akiva: “Now that I have seen Uriah’s prophecy fulfilled in every detail, I know that Zechariah’s prophecy will also be fulfilled.”

Hearing that, the others still didn’t laugh, but they said to him, “Akiva, you have comforted us. Akiva, you have comforted us.”

4. To Laugh or to Cry?

So now that Zechariah’s prophecy has *also* been fulfilled – with elderly people strolling the streets of Jerusalem this very day while children play, should we not laugh like Rabbi Akiva? Or should we still cry like the other rabbis, because our people continue to be dispersed, the Land of Israel is under constant threat, and the Temple has yet to be rebuilt?

Yes, we still must cry. And I will give you two reasons why:

First, the loss of the Temple is beyond price or description. The Temple was not a mere piece of real estate. It was a window between heaven and earth. The Temple bridged spirit and matter. Thus, its destruction was not just an isolated historical event, but one with lasting consequences, still reverberating today. As long as tension remains between the physical and the spiritual – between our material and transcendental lives – we are experiencing the loss of the Temple. Which is why our Sages tell us that “a generation that does not rebuild the Temple is considered as if it destroyed it.”⁷

⁵ Micah 3:12.

⁶ Zechariah 8:4-5.

⁷ Jerusalem Talmud, *Yuma* 1:10.

Second, time is not linear but spiral. Events that happen in a particular time of year are related to the energy flow of that respective time. And that energy flow repeats itself each year, as the cycle returns to that point in time. The negative energy that manifested when the Temple was first destroyed repeats itself each year during this period in time. Historical and current events are merely outer manifestations of invisible forces that are always at work behind the scenes.

5. True Rhythm of Life

The Hebrew calendar reflects the true rhythm of life. Life – just like light – is not only comprised of particles but of waves. Like the waves of the sea, life consists of cycles, with dips and crests, lows and highs, some of which may be extreme.

A good swimmer recognizes the dynamic nature of water and adjusts accordingly. In contrast to a flat plateau, which one can traverse without fluctuation, the waves of water require constant vigilance if one is to negotiate the cycles. When a strong wave hits, a proficient swimmer will not resist or fight it, but “go with the flow” and allow the cresting wave to carry him. Any attempt to ignore or battle the wave will quickly deplete the swimmer’s energy and bring with it a risk of drowning. In the case of a severe stormy sea, the need to surrender to the flow of the waves is only amplified.

On the other hand, when the waves are relatively calm, the swimmer uses their energy as a catalyst for forward thrust.

Interestingly, when negotiated properly, both the stormy waves and the calm ones are forms of energy that are all part of the swimming cycle. Indeed, a powerful wave that cannot be fought can be tapped and harnessed to propel the swimmer forward if he submits to its power and allows it to carry him.

6. Wave Cycle of Time

Now back to the wave cycle of time.

Time, too, consists of dips and crests, lows and highs. The Hebrew calendar is a sort of travel guide through time that helps us align ourselves to the inner rhythms of life's cycles.

As the Talmud declares: "Just as when the month of Av arrives decrease joy, so too when the month of Adar arrives increase joy."⁸

Strange statement: Why equate the two periods in time? Why didn't the Talmud simply say: "When Av arrives decrease in joy; when Adar arrives increase in joy." Why *just as*?

The Talmud is telling us that time – life – is a cycle. Av and Adar are not just two unrelated, diametrically opposed, periods in time – one filled with sorrow, the other with joy. They are like the dip and crest of one wave: *Just as* Av brings on a decrease in joy, so too Adar brings on an increase in joy.

7. Secret of Rabbi Akiva's Laugh

And therein lies the secret behind Rabbi Akiva's laugh.

It goes without saying that Rabbi Akiva fasted and grieved on *Tisha B'av*, and certainly shed a tear or two. The Temple's destruction was no less a tragedy for him than it was for his colleagues. *But*, Rabbi Akiva simultaneously recognized the bigger picture. Within the tragedy, he was able to see the end of the story. Within the death, he was able to see the birthing of a better future.

And yet, knowing all that, if Rabbi Akiva were alive today, he would join us in the mourning.

⁸Taanit 29a.

As we mourn, some may be asking: Why we are still crying over a Temple that was destroyed two millennia ago. I mean, how long can one grieve? Is it even healthy to excessively mourn? We are told that it is cruel to sit *shiva* for more than seven days. Over-grieving is as detrimental as under-grieving. And yet, we still do it. We dim lights, sit on low stools and cry for the Temple for close to two thousand years!

A story is told that once, on *Tisha B'Av*, Napoleon was riding in his carriage when he heard many voices crying and lamenting. Perturbed, he sent his secretary to investigate what was going on. It turned out that the crying was coming from a synagogue. "The Jews are lamenting the destruction of their Temple," the secretary reported. "When was it destroyed?" asked Napoleon. "Some 1,700 years ago," came the answer. Impressed, Napoleon said: "A people who care so much will see their Temple rebuilt."

Crying over the loss of the Temple is like riding the difficult waves. It is not an obsession with grief; it is being sensitive to a broken world. The tears become part of the swim, part of the journey that ultimately leads us to our destination. If we forget and get desensitized to the sadness of life, then we become desensitized to the joy as well.

In other words:

If you don't cry when it's time to cry, you won't be able to rejoice when it's time to celebrate. If you are empathetic and cry when the situation calls for it, you will see it through and rejoice when the time comes to laugh. When you navigate the dips you have the power to ride the crests.

8. Shabbat of Vision

This Shabbat preceding Tisha B'av is called Shabbat Chazon, the Shabbat of Vision, for on this day we read the Haftorah which begins "The Vision of Isaiah."

But there is also a deeper significance to the name "Shabbat of Vision," expressed by Chassidic master Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev with the following metaphor:

A father once prepared a beautiful suit of clothes for his son. But the child neglected his father's gift and soon the suit was in tatters. The father gave the child a second suit of clothes; this one, too, was ruined by the child's carelessness. So the father made a third suit. This time, however, he withholds it from his son. Every once in a while, in special and opportune times, he shows the suit to the child, explaining that when the child learns to appreciate and properly care for the gift, it will be given to him. This induces the child to improve his behavior, until it gradually becomes second nature to him—at which time he will be worthy of his father's gift.

On the “Shabbat of Vision,” says Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, each and every one of us is granted a vision of the third and final Temple—a vision that, to paraphrase the Talmud,⁹ “though we do not see ourselves, our souls see.” This vision evokes a profound response in us, even if we are not consciously aware of the cause of our sudden inspiration.

So which one is it: a vision of the destruction or a vision of the future? The answer is both: When we look with our eyes of flesh and blood we may see destruction and we cry. But when we look with the eyes of Rabbi Akiva we see the big picture – the rebuilding of the Temple – and we laugh.

9. Spiral Staircase

To explain the cycles of Jewish history, the Baal Shem Tov – the 18th century founder of the Chassidic Movement – uses an analogy of a spiral staircase. In Yiddish a spiral staircase is called *shvindel trep*, which literally means “swindling steps.” Why? Because when you climb a regular vertical staircase, you see the destination and you see yourself getting closer to it as you climb the stairs. A spiral staircase “swindles” you, because, as you get closer to the destination, you have to turn

⁹ *Megilah* 3a.

completely around 360 degrees, to the point when one cannot see the apex. Indeed, just before you reach the top, you must turn completely around for the last time. When you're still far from the destination you may be able to see it, but just before arriving at the top, you have your back to it.

Rabbi Akiva was able to keep the destination – the big picture – in his mind's eye. He was never swindled by the apparent swirls, dips and crests of life. Therefore he was able to laugh when others cried.

And his vision helps us all see better. It comforts us and helps us smile.

Ironic isn't it that good times can allow us to be trapped in the moment. Sadder times leave us no choice but to recognize the bigger picture.

As Leonard Cohen sings:
There is a crack in everything,
That's how the light gets in.

The tears we have shed over recent events should water the seeds of growth. When we allow these tragedies to propel us to become more sensitive human beings, to increase in our acts of goodness and kindness, we channel their enormous dark energy into formidable forces of light.

But after all is said and done, we have been promised that the worst is over and the best is yet to come. We have had more than our share of dips, and are ready for the ultimate crest. May it come speedily in our days. Amen.