

PARSHAS CHUKAS

תשפ"ג

This Thursday was the 3rd of Tammuz. For those who are not aware, it is a very infamous date in the Jewish calendar – along with the 20th of Sivan.

In the year 1243, the King of France ordered all the copies of Shas in France to be brought to the city square in Paris, in front of the Notre Dame church, and be burned. At the time, the center of Torah in Europe was in France. The Baalei Hatosfos learned in the yeshivos in France. It was Erev Shabbos, on the 3rd of Tammuz on Parshas Chukas. It was a gezeirah against the Torah. The era of Baalei Tosfos in France was over and it moved to Germany.

Standing there at the sreifas haTalmud was Rav Yechiel MiPariz who was the Rosh Yeshiva of the highest yeshiva in France of the Baalei Tosfos. Together with him was Rabbeinu Yonah who then returned to his hometown in Spain, and the Maharam MiRuttenburg who then returned to his hometown in Germany.

This was a very disturbing event which shook Klal Yisroel. In those days, Klal Yisroel always made a cheshbon hanefesh when disaster happens. Nowadays some think we aren't allowed to ask why tragedy happens. But this goes against our mesorah. The Rambam says in Hilchos Taanis that when disaster happens to a Jewish community, that community has to make a cheshbon hanefesh to ascertain why it happened. To act as though it was a mere random event with no spiritual cause is an act of cruelty. Because if we ignore the tragedy and do not try to interpret it as a message being sent from Hashem to do teshuvah, then it guarantees that Hashem will keep sending more tragedies until we do get the message.

Rabbeinu Yonah was there in Paris. He had gone to France from Spain together with his cousin the Ramban, to learn in the yeshiva in Ivrah – in northwestern France. The Ramban was there for three years and returned to Spain, and Rabbeinu Yonah went on to learn under Rav Yechiel in Paris which was like a finishing school.

Rabbeinu Yonah made a deep cheshbon hanefesh to discover why Hashem decided to end the Torah center of France. The decision to make a cheshbon hanefesh was made throughout our history.

When the Ukrainians revolted against their Polish masters in the gezeirah of Tach v'Tat and slaughtered between one and two million Jews, there was a cheshbon hanefesh to ask what we did to deserve it.

This doesn't take away the guilt of the Ukrainians who have traditionally been the worst anti-Semites in Europe. Hashem will certainly give them what they deserve as well. But there are two separate issues. One is the cause, the spiritual failing which explains why Hashem let these tragedies happen to us, and then there is the judgment of those who perpetrated the evil. Our blame doesn't cancel out the actions of those who carried out Hashem's gezeirah.

The events of 1648-49 don't just happen. You can't just explain that the Ukrainians were fed up with the Polish noblemen who oppressed them, and since the Jews were helping the Polish masters, the Ukrainians took their anger and frustration out on the Jews. The gedolei Yisroel did not look at history like that.

In 1492 when the Jews were expelled from Spain, the Jews made a cheshbon hanefesh to explain why it happened. The main rov at the time was the Chossid Yaavetz who identified the spiritual failing of Spanish Jewry which he felt was the cause of the tragedy.

With every churbon, Klal Yisroel looks back to reflect what the aveiroh could be that caused it.

So too, in 1243, when every copy of Shas in France was burned, they didn't give any kind of historical explanation – the king, the church, etc. They made a cheshbon hanefesh. The result of Rabbeinu Yonah's cheshbon hanefesh was the sefer Shaarei Teshuvah. He identified the

cause of the tragedy as being that one group of Baalei Tosfos in France had burned copies of the Rambam's Sefer Hamadiah because they accused him of kefirah. It was middoh k'negged middoh for degrading the kovod of the Rambam.

In 1648, between one and two million Jews were killed, and at that point in history, the governing body of the Jewish community was called the Vaad Arbah Aratzos. It was headed by the Tosfos Yom Tov. He said the reason was that they talked d'varim b'teilim in Shul. It would seem small and trivial to us. But, it was severe enough to cause this massive churbon.

The Chossid Yaavetz said the reason for the expulsion from Spain was the Jewish educational system in his time. The boys would learn Torah until age 21 or 22, and then they would learn secular studies and leave the Torah behind. It was neglected. Hashem said such a community cannot continue.

Let us try to understand what these gedolim were saying. They weren't blaming the non-frum Jews who were doing the most horrible aveiros imaginable. They were blaming the frum community for not taking their Yiddishkeit seriously enough.

There is a famous story about an exchange between Rav Amram Blau and the Brisker Rav in the early years of the State of Israel. It contains a deep message. One year on Yom Kippur, during the break between Mincha and Neiloh, Rav Amram Blau came before the Brisker Rav greatly distressed and agitated about what the Zionists were doing. They are destroying the whole country with their aveiros! The Brisker Rav responded that we are the ones who are destroying the country. What do you mean? We are the yerei'im v'shleimim!

The Brisker Rav explained that we just finished reading the Sefer Yonah in Maftir of Mincha. It tells us about a ship full of idol worshippers who were praying to their idols to be saved from drowning at sea, and there is one Jew who is running away from Hashem's mission. Who is the real cause for the whole dangerous situation Hashem is making for them? It is that one Jew who is not doing his job – not all the other idol worshippers who are praying to their false gods.

When we daven mussaf, we express that we are now in golus and we don't have a Beis Hamikdash any more to bring the korbonos in. And we point the finger of blame at ourselves.

So let us understand these three tragic events in our history, the reasons given for them, and try to see where they are relevant to us today.

Limud Torah is not a minor part of our lives. On the posuk in this week's parsha, זאת התורה אדם כי ימות באוהל, Chazal say the Torah won't survive without people who are giving their lives over entirely to Torah.

People go through different stages in life. All bochurim learn Torah in yeshiva. But the question is, who is going to make Torah central to their lives till the end, and sacrifice all other considerations to live a Torah life? It is very frustrating to constantly hear what kinds of frivolous considerations bochurim have in choosing a yeshiva. Is it choshuv? Is it popular? Is the food and accommodations on a high level? But this means they aren't taking their Torah learning seriously. They aren't taking their growth seriously. They aren't willing to give up anything for Torah and make it a priority in life.

The Chossid Yaavetz said the mistake of Spanish Jewry was thinking that Torah learning is something you do when you are young and then you move on to more important things when you grow up, and you can leave Torah behind. But this is completely wrong. Ki heim chayeinu. Every night, we finish the day by saying Torah is our life – it is not incidental to life.

There is an important machlokes between the Ran in Nedarim and the Rambam, in defining the extent of the chiyuv of mitzvas Talmud Torah. The Ran says the mitzvah is constant and ongoing. Yes, of course you

have to sleep, and you have to eat, etc. So there are heterim to interrupt learning in order to take care of essential needs of life. But then the chiyuv to learn comes right back, and there is an aveiroh of bitul Torah if you don't have a good reason to interrupt it. Any extra time has to be devoted to learning.

The Rambam has a different approach. The mitzvah is only to establish a daily segment of time to learn day and night. But then, where is the aveiroh of bitul Torah? The Rambam elsewhere says if you have an extra hour of time, and you can choose to learn Torah or do something else like watch a movie, and you decide to watch that movie for that hour, you are deciding to make that movie a higher priority and learning Torah a lower priority. This is much worse than a bitul asei like the shitas haRan. It is an insult to the honor of the Torah to demote it as secondary to any other activity, and it is a very severe aveiroh of "d'var Hashem bozoh" which is koreis!

Time is a gift Hashem gave you. The question is how you are going to use the time given to you on this planet. It is limited and you need to prioritize and maximize it to the fullest. You can't squander it on trivial pastimes. You can't say you are finished with learning for the day and now you can just do other things. This is what the Chossid Yaavetz said. You can't just say you are finished the basic Torah curriculum and now you can move on to other intellectual pursuits.

The Tosfos Yom Tov composed a special Mi Shebeirach to be announced for those who refrain from talking d'vorim b'teilim in shul. It is still printed in some siddurim. He was the posek of his generation, wrote countless seforim, and a leader of all Klal Yisroel in Europe. The question is simple: what did the Tosfos Yom Tov see as so severe in talking in shul?

It means we are lacking the sensitivity we need to have to the specialness of a mokom Torah and mokom tefillah – where we connect to Hashem on the deepest levels of our being. Torah is the d'var Hashem, and Hashem is enabling us to connect to Him through learning His Torah. Certain places are designated to remove ourselves from the mundane secular world and immerse ourselves in avodas Hashem whether by davening or learning. And what do we do? We treat it like an ordinary social gathering. We talk about all the things going on in the outside world – who won the world series, who won the world cup, etc. and completely lose focus on where we are and what we are supposed to be doing there. You don't understand what it means to serve and connect to Hashem in this place. You treat it like nothing.

There is a very important Rambam at the end of Hilchos Meiloh. He says you need to contemplate each mitzvah. There are deep lessons contained in every single one. He gives an example from the concept of Meiloh. One can take sticks and stones and dedicate it to the bais hamikdash and it then becomes kodosh. If you then use it for some mundane purpose, since this object was sanctified and you treat it as mundane, you did a serious aveiroh and you have to bring a korban, etc.

All the more so is it a serious aveiroh when you take the Torah of Hashem and His mitzvos which express His thoughts and His will, and you treat it like any other secular wisdom. Can you imagine how much more serious this degrading behavior is than misusing something that was made kodosh by human beings?

A beis midrash is a mokom kodosh. Torah is the d'var Hashem. Why are we learning Torah? Do we really want to grow in Torah? Do we treat it as the d'var Hashem?

What the Tosfos Yom Tov was referring to is that his community didn't understand the place they were standing in. Showing a lack of sensitivity to a mokom Torah or a mokom tefillah is extremely serious. It is enough to justify the destruction of between one and two million Jews!

Then we have Rabbeinu Yonah's explanation for the sreifas haTalmud. A talmid chochom has to be shown the respect he deserves. The Rambam had command of the entire Torah. His Pirush Hamishnayos and Mishnah Torah were unfathomable achievements. He said he worked the most on Pirush Hamishnayos – more than Mishnah Torah! Then there is the Moreh Hanevuchim. The Rambam was in total control of every aspect of Torah. To treat a talmid chochom of this caliber with such disrespect – like a regular guy – means you don't respect the Torah or any talmid chochom.

The gemara in Perek Chelek in Sanhedrin defines an apikores as anyone

who says what you read in the newspaper today – those who dedicate their lives to learning don't produce anything for society. If you don't have the respect for a regular talmid chochom, it means you won't show respect for top talmidei chachomim who have mastered the Torah. It means you don't respect the Torah itself.

There was something else that bothered Rabbeinu Yonah. Although it was only a small group who burned the seforim of the Rambam, the rest of the Torah community stayed silent. Their lack of protest was enough for Hashem to decide that He doesn't want the Torah of France to continue.

This happened on the 3rd of Tammuz, 1243. Hashem has an infinite amount of time to pay back those who were involved in carrying out the actual tragedy. There was a fire a few years ago which burned down the Notre Dame church. At the time I thought this was payback for the burning of the Talmud, centuries earlier. People asked me what I thought of all the death and destruction of the war in Ukraine, and I said that Hashem felt the time has come to judge the most vicious anti-Semitic nation historically in Europe for all their murderous destruction of Jews. This is not to say who is in the right and who is in the wrong in this war. That is a separate issue.

If you look for a common theme between Rabbeinu Yonah, the Chossid Yaavetz and Tosfos Yom Tov, you see that it is about taking the Torah extremely seriously.

To what degree do we take the Torah seriously? When we make decisions in life, do we ask what is best for my Torah?

How much does Torah play a role in your career decisions? In where to live? Do you ask if this career choice is serving the best interest of my Torah or not? Is this place the best place to raise my family in a Torah environment? There are many decisions we make throughout our lives. Not treating Torah as a number one priority, is what the Rambam defines as bitul Torah. The Chossid Yaavetz said the same: not treating Torah as a number one priority was the problem for Spanish Jewry. Rabbeinu Yonah said not respecting talmidei chachomim – including the lomdei Torah who disagree with you – is a serious failing. You don't value his Torah and his knowledge of Torah just because he disagrees with you? He doesn't fit in to your narrow understanding of Torah so you degrade it? That is disrespecting the Torah itself.

Do you ignore the place designated for avodas Hashem and you just use it for nothing?

The Rambam said that sticks and stones that you attach Hashem's name to must be treated with utmost respect. If you treat it as a mundane object, it is a serious aveiroh. All the more so treating Torah callously and as something inconsequential to our lives is extremely disrespectful.

When people talk to me about their future plans and all their cheshbonos, it shocks me how few people take into consideration what their plans mean for their Torah's future.

There are careers that potentially involve serious issurim because they explicitly involve geneivas daas. But very few lawyers have called me up with halachic dilemmas about various cases they take on. It is assur for a kohen to become a doctor because of tumas meis. This is very obvious. But certain issues are much more subtle. People look for heterim in the most severe areas of retzichah like abortion, and gezeiloh in certain businesses.

And then there is the type of career that is all-consuming and won't leave any room for serious limud Torah in your life. The Torah has to be the focus of every decision you make in life and this is expressed in two ways: Is it mutar or am I bending the rules? And what impact will it have on my overall dedication to learning?

Career choices, all life choices – Torah has to be the central focus of everything. This is what all these gedolim throughout history are telling us.

Zos chukas haTorah. The Torah is sustained by those who make sacrifices for it – who prioritize it over everything else. This is why I always felt that these historic tragedies occurred by Parshas Chukas.