

The Rambam in Hilchos Taanis writes that the reason we fast on a taanis is to give the tzibbur an opportunity to introspect. Among the calamities which call for taanis as a response is a plague – this should be an impetus this year to make a serious cheshbon hanefesh. We have a serious makkas dever sweeping the entire world for months now – causing unbelievable suffering, sickness and death and economic ruin. It demands a cheshbon hanefesh. Especially as we are approaching a taanis, we need to take the Rambam's words seriously.

He writes that it is a mitzvas asei to scream out to Hashem for every great disaster that befalls us. How often have people davened to Hashem to end the current crisis we are living through?

The crying out to Hashem is an aspect of darkei teshuvoh. People will know that the calamity is coming about as punishment for our aveiros. The current situation – the likes of which have not been seen since the mabul – are ample grounds to make a taanis. I don't know why a taanis hasn't been announced for Klal Yisroel world-wide about the corona virus. Half-day fasts on Erev Rosh Chodesh – Yom Kippur koton – don't adequately get the message across.

What about the other fast days we observe throughout the year?

The Rambam writes that all fast days in the Jewish calendar are to arouse feelings of teshuvoh. Why? He explains that if we are still suffering from the tzoros which were brought about through the failings of our ancestors, it means we haven't corrected those problems. The tzoros of golus and churbon can only continue to our times because we are perpetuating the same failures of previous generations. We are still on the same path.

There is the necessary response of teshuvoh to a taanis, and there is aveilus over churbon.

Tisha B'Av is not just mourning for the second beis hamikdosh. We also mourn for the first, whose level of Shechinoh was not recovered with the building of the second. There is a whole discussion about whether there was still aveilus for the first beis hamikdosh even after the second beis hamikdosh was built.

Let us try to understand what this aveilus over churbon means to us in our situation. There are two gemaras. One gemara says the reason for the churbon was because of the three averios chamuros – avodo zoro, gilui arayos and shefichas domim. In fact, when you look at the pesukim in Nach, you see the Nevi'im are constantly warning Klal Yisroel of the calamity that will come if they don't stop committing these three serious aveiros. But, then we have a second gemara which says the cause of the churbon was bittul Torah! It is based on a single posuk, and Chazal interpret it as a neglect of making birkas haTorah. The people trivialized limud haTorah, which is a form of bittul of Torah's significance and importance.

So which was it? Avodo zoro, gilui arayos and shefichas domim – or bittul Torah?

The answer is very simple. There was in fact enough avodo zoro, gilui arayos and shefichas domim to warrant the destruction of the beis hamikdosh. But Hashem has various cheshbonos before making a decree to punish us for our aveiros. He weighs various mitzvos against our aveiros to see if the decree can be pushed off. One of the most powerful mitzvos that exist that can protect us from punishment is limud haTorah. Don't ever forget this. The zechus of Torah can stand up and protect us from the punishment for the most serious of aveiros like avodo zoro, gilui arayos and shefichas domim and keep the Beis Hamikdosh standing.

We experienced a gezeiroh min hashomayim in Chodesh Adar. The yeshivos were closed. Some yeshivos are open now in Eretz Yisroel on a very tenuous basis. Some have been closed again. There are roshei

yeshivos I know of who are literally broken from anguish over the situation. It is a decree that only Hashem in His infinite wisdom understands why it was necessary. By closing our yeshivos and shuls, He is telling us that there is a major problem in the Jewish world. Until now, it has been so easy for a bochor to just coast along with the frum social trends. Of course you go to yeshiva. Your whole chevra is going, otherwise you are going to stand out. Which self-respecting frum boy doesn't go to yeshiva today?

But does learning Torah really mean the world to us?

Hashem wants us to demonstrate how seriously we actually take our learning. Do we really appreciate the power of our learning? The importance of learning? Chazal say it is more valuable than pearls – peninim. It is more important than the Kohen Gadol in the Kodosh HaKodoshim on Yom Kippur.

Do we really believe that?

How many people go running to the Kosel on Hoshana Rabba and Shavuos to daven there at sunrise? Thousands. If we had the opportunity to see the avoda of the Kohen Godol, wouldn't we drop everything and run with all our might to go? Chazal say learning one Rabbi Akiva Eiger, Rav Chaim, Ketzos and Nesivos is worth more than that. Imagine you own a bunch of office buildings in the most valuable areas of real estate throughout the world. It all isn't worth what Torah is worth.

You have to understand the value of Torah and the impact learning Torah has on the world.

Hashem told us that He wants to see how seriously we take His Torah. A mabul of dever is sweeping the world. But the Torah protects. It doesn't mean it protects any specific individual who is learning. That is a superficial understanding. It means it protects the world generally. It protects society at large.

We have had the zechus to show Hashem over the past three months, how much limud haTorah has meant to us. We may have been stuck in our homes – stuck in our rooms – feeling tremendously isolated and with no firm framework for serious learning. But we still managed to make sure to have three sedorim a day and learn on a very serious level. Torah is tremendously important to us. It is the most powerful form of connection to Hashem. Chazal tell us that if Klal Yisroel would have been connected to Hashem through Torah at the time of the churbon, there would never have been a churbon. Once that protective shield was removed, the beis hamikdosh was destroyed by our aveiros. You have to appreciate how valuable your Torah learning is to the safety of Klal Yisroel.

This was the cause behind the churbon of the first beis hamikdosh.

Regarding the second beis hamikdosh, Chazal tell us that it was the aveiroh of sinas chinoh which destroyed it. Even with the zechus of Torah, mitzvos, and gemilus chasodim, it was not enough to forestall the churbon. But why not? The Netziv asks, if they were such tzaddikim, why did they deserve churbon? He answers that it was all "leshem shomayim" – the talmidei chachomim and tzaddikim used their Torah and their tzidkus as a weapon to put down other people. They were so prideful in their own derech halimud and derech avodoh that they couldn't see the value of anyone who had a different derech.

To be able to appreciate the value and sincerity in every Jew is of utmost importance. We always discuss during sefiroh that the talmidim of Rabbi Akiva had this issue of putting down one another. Hashem said He isn't interested in their Torah. They were not just arguing "leshem shomayim". Unfortunately, it isn't hard today to imagine living in those times – seeing Rabbi Akiva's yeshiva of 24,000 talmidim close down. They all died in a period of weeks. Rabbi Akiva had to start over from scratch. We remember

this every year in our aveilus during sefirah.

Tisha B'Av also commemorates the sin of the meraglim. The Rambam tells us that the fact that we are still suffering the consequences of that incident means we have not yet corrected it. Why not? The sin of the meraglim is the sin of 98% of Orthodox Jews today. Many people can only see Hashem in miracles – in big supernatural events that really stand out. They can't see Hashem directing their lives on a daily basis. The sin of the meraglim was based on the attitude that once we are on a lower level and we no longer have Hashem doing open miracles, we are all on our own. They mistakenly thought there was no hashgocho altogether – so it is all up to us. We have to take all possible measures to succeed according to the laws of nature. This means we need the best military strategy, the best trained soldiers, the best weapons, etc. to win the upcoming war. And once they looked at the other side and all their military might, they gave up all hope. They refused to acknowledge that Hashem could help them win all their battles while working within nature.

We have a similar problem in the frum world – where we look to all the experts and analysts and scientists to explain whatever is happening in the world, and we do not recognize that Hashem's hashgocho is behind everything that happens. When we start a successful business or make a profitable business deal, we like to take full credit for it and we don't want to recognize that Hashem gives people wisdom and insight to be successful in life. Until we recognize that Hashem is the only One who is responsible for everything that happens, directing the direction of the world hands-on, we are perpetuating the sin of the meraglim.

We learn from the story of the talmidim of Rabbi Akiva that ahava for another Jew has to start with the people you interact with regularly – your chavrusa, your neighbor. You don't start with ahava for total strangers whom you never met!

Don't you see Hashem running the world today? For three months we have constantly been talking about being mekabel ol malchus shomayim – Hashem is the only cause of everything. That means everything that I have and what happens to me – my successes and my failures – comes directly from Hashem's reward and punishment. We have all these laboratories all over the world scrambling to develop a vaccine for the COVID-19 coronavirus. Whether they'll find it tomorrow, a month from now, or a year from now, it is entire up to Hashem. We have to believe completely that Hashem will decide when this makkas dever will finally come to an end. The scientists and doctors and governments don't have any power to fight this virus – it is completely in Hashem's hands alone. They don't have any independent power to save us – Hashem works through them as His tools. Unless we understand this, we will be perpetuating the sin of the meraglim. This is one thing to think about this Tisha B'Av.

Another thing to think about is the aspect of aveilus over the churbon. Aveilus means appreciating what we lost. What did we lose? The Beis Hamikdosh. Do we really miss it? After all, we have the Kosel, we have Yerushalayim, Eretz Yisroel. What are we really missing? We are missing the closeness of the Shechinoh that can only fully manifest itself with the Beis Hamikdosh and the avodah and the Sanhedrin. We had nevuah, ruach hakodesh, Urim VeTumim. We only had that close connection with Hashem in the first Beis Hamikdosh that wasn't recovered with the second. We mourn over the distance that exists between us and Hashem. The relationship we have with Hashem is a dynamic. When we move closer to Hashem, he moves closer to us. But we can't go to a novi today to get direct instructions from Hashem. The major ways of relating to Hashem have been removed by the churbon.

Chazal tell us that before they built the second Beis Hamikdosh, Anshei Knesses Hagedolah insisted that Hashem first reveal to them the secrets of Torah Shebaal Peh. The masses only understood the connection to Hashem through the open, tangible forms of communication with Hashem, through

the Beis Hamikdosh. Those forms would be largely missing in the second Beis Hamikdosh – no nevuah, no ruach hakodesh, no Urim VeTumim. So the Anshei Knesses Hagedolah said we will not lay down one stone until Hashem gives us the insights necessary to spread the depth of Torah Shebaal Peh to the masses. We need another avenue to become close to Hashem before we build the second Beis Hamikdosh.

What is our aveilus today? We mourn the fact that we lost that intimate bond with Hashem. Who has the power to get it back? Not those nutcases whose try to storm Har Habayis every Erev Pesach to try to bring a korbon Pesach – not the institute in the Old City which is practicing by building exact replicas of the keilim of the Beis Hamikdosh and the bigdei kehunoh. That is not what it is all about.

The Beis Hamikdosh will be rebuilt when we deserve it. We will deserve it when we make the effort to rise in our level and connect to Him again. Right now, the tool we have is limud haTorah. We can connect to Him again by showing a mesirus nefesh for limud haTorah that we never had before. Hashem is putting us against the wall. Hashem is challenging us: how much does limud haTorah mean to you? How much difficulty are we willing to overcome to keep growing in learning despite all the obstacles? That is our test and that is the avodoh we have in these days.

Someone once came to Reb Shlomo Zalman Auerbach and asked for all kinds of kulos to alleviate the difficulties of the restrictions of the nine days. He remarked that no one asks him for kulos when it comes to aveilus over a parent – even though the halacha is to be meikel in aveilus. Why? Because we have a close bond to our lost relatives. Well, the Beis Hamikdosh was the mother and father of all of us. But we don't feel that.

After every Shmoneh Esrei, we daven that Hashem build the Beis Hamikdosh and give us our portion in Torah. What is the connection?

Chazal understood that without a deep understanding of the Torah, the masses won't be able to create that deep bond with Hashem – even with the Beis Hamikdosh. Understanding Hashem's Torah opens every other form of connection with Hashem and amplifies it.

The Midrash says Yirmiyahu Hanovi was sitting and crying over the churbon and a Greek philosopher passed by and asked him: you taught me so much wisdom, you are obviously so intelligent; so why are you mourning over a mere structure of wood and stone? Yirmiyahu responded that all the wisdom that you have and I have all came from that structure that I am mourning over. The Shechinoh that dwelled in the Beis Hamikdosh was the source of all material brocho and all true wisdom in the world – which was lost with the churbon.

When there is a Beis Hamikdosh, there is a vehicle for closeness to Hashem. We are in aveilus because the Shechinoh is in golus and there is tremendous distance between us and Hashem.

There is aveilus and there is taanis.

Taanis is about making a cheshbon hanefesh about the root causes of tragedy and trying to rectify those causes. We need to take our limud haTorah very seriously. We need to believe deeply in Hashem's hashgocho over our lives. We need to worry about preserving the kovod of the people we live with and interact with daily – not to worry about people you never met.

The world has changed. It is a different world and it gives us a new opportunity to make a change for the better. It is in our hands. But not how people think – by using political and military force. No – it is in our hands in the way the Rambam said: by building our level up in our limud haTorah, a recognition of hashgocho protis and building back our close, intimate relationship with Hashem. We should be deserving to build the third Beis Hamikdosh very soon.