

TISHA B'AV

Rav Moshe Dov Chait, ZTz"l – Yet Another Reason to Mourn

2009 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz



Tisha B'Av is a time of great sadness for our People. It is a day when the entire Nation of Israel sits Shiva. We sit on the floor like mourners and bemoan the destructions of both Temples and all of the tragedies that have befallen our People throughout the ages.

Tisha B'Av is a day that challenges our emotions. It is not always easy for us to feel the acute pain of a mourner. The Temple was destroyed almost 2000 years ago; it is not a simple matter to relate to such an abstract idea as the destruction of a Temple that I never knew. It is hard to cry over a loss that I can't personally feel.

No, it is not always easy to be sad on Tisha B'Av. But today, as I write these words on the morning of Tisha B'Av, it is all too easy to be sad. You see, I lost my Rebbe yesterday.

35 years ago, a young kid left for a year-long visit to Israel. Fresh out of high school, he decided to take a year off to study full time in a Yeshiva before going on to college.

The young man decided to attend the Chofetz Chaim Yeshiva in Jerusalem. At Chofetz Chaim he was exposed to the intricate in-depth study of Talmud that the Yeshiva is famous for. He also studied Mussar. (Loose translation -- Ethical Development) And every Wednesday evening, he listened to "*Shmuessen*" ("Ethical Discourses") delivered by the Rosh Yeshiva, the Dean, Rabbi Moshe Chait.

Those weekly Torah Talks changed my life. (My one-year stay in the Yeshiva lasted seven years. That transfer to college hasn't happened yet!!) Every week Rebbe used to speak to us, usually on the Weekly Torah Portion. We would listen as he wove a tapestry of ethical lessons designed to encourage us to

reach our potential. He would point out the inherent G-dliness in every human being and how that G-dliness enables us – no, **REQUIRES** us – to reach for the stars. He taught us that a Ben Torah – a Torah personality – must carry himself with self-confidence and self-respect, all the while taking care to avoid arrogance and other negative character traits.

I still remember the first *Shmuess* I heard. Rebbe quoted someone named "Alter." I didn't know who that was, but I quickly scribbled it down in my notes, and figured that it would probably be a good idea to find out.

Rebbe was a student of Rav Dovid Leibowitz, who was, in turn, a student of "The Alter," or, "The Elder," of Slabodka, Rabbi Nosson Tzvi Finkel. One of the Alter's many contributions to the Torah World was the concept of "Gadlus HaAdam," the Greatness of Man. The Alter inculcated into his students the idea that G-d created man in His Image and that requires us to recognize our own greatness and the greatness of those around us.

Rav Dovid Leibowitz learned these lessons from the Alter, and young Moshe Chait learned these lessons from Rav Dovid. Rabbi Chait, as the next link in a chain going all the way back to Mount Sinai, taught the Alter's lessons to us.

There are three expressions that reverberate in my mind. He spoke about his teachers with reverence. When he said the word "Rebbe" or "Rav Dovid" he said it with a feeling of awe. He said "The Alter" the same way. You see, although Rebbe never saw the Alter, he saw the Alter's reflection in his own Rebbe, Rav Dovid. And, as such, the Alter was his Rebbe as well.

In the same way, Rebbe endeavored to make Rav Dovid and the Alter our teachers. Did he succeed? Well, let me put it this way. My oldest son, Nosson Tzvi Hirsch, is named after the Alter (Nosson Tzvi) and my father (Tzvi Hirsch).

Rebbe's love for Torah and for G-d and His children permeated everything he did. He greeted every person with his captivating smile. He could look at you and offer an encouraging word that made you feel on top of the world. I remember one time watching Rebbe sitting in the Yeshiva studying. It was Mussar Seder, the time for studying ethics, and he was deeply engrossed in the book he was studying. He didn't look well; he looked tired and weak. (He had had a heart condition for as long as I had known him.) Someone came up to speak to him. The moment Rebbe noticed him, his face lit up with that endearing smile, almost as if to say, "You've made my day! Thank you so much for stopping by to chat!"

Rebbe made himself available to give advice. If you had a problem, Rebbe always knew exactly how to cut away the fat and get directly to the meat of the issue. With his keen insight and brilliant observation he analyzed the situation like a page of Talmud and managed to provide an answer. You didn't always get the answer you were looking for, but you always knew that you got the right answer.

The last few years have been very difficult for Rebbe. This dynamic speaker found his ability to communicate drastically curtailed. His voice was weak and he said very little. It wasn't always clear that he recognized people.

Last winter I decided to visit Rebbe in Israel. I didn't know if he would know who I was. His wife, may she live and be well, told him I was there. He smiled. That million dollar smile! He shook my hand. Then he smiled and shook my hand again! He remembered!

I visited Rebbe several times during my brief visit to Israel. We walked together as I told him about my family and my career. I repeated to him some of the lessons he had taught us, and how much they meant to me. One time we sat in his living room and sang together, an emotional reminder of the old days. I will always treasure that memory. On my last visit, I told him how much I love him and appreciate him. I blessed him and he whispered "*Omain*." I asked him for a blessing. "Can you wish me *Hatzlocha* (success), Rebbe?" He whispered, "*Hatzlocha*."

As I hugged Rebbe and turned to leave, I suspected that it was quite possible that that was to be our final good-bye. But, the fact is, that as recently as yesterday morning I was thinking about my next visit.

The day before yesterday Rebbe had hip surgery. The surgery went well, but I received a text message asking that we continue to pray for Rebbe's well being.

Yesterday morning I did a Bris. It is said that when a baby cries during his Bris, it is a special time of Divine compassion; the Gates of Heaven are open and G-d is especially receptive of our prayers. I said a prayer for Rebbe. I asked G-d to send him a Refuah Sheleima, a complete recovery. A few hours later, G-d answered my prayer. The answer was "No."

The days leading up to Tisha B'Av are a time of mourning. During the nine days up to and including Tisha B'Av, you are not supposed to wear your nicest clothes. Some people don't even wear their Shabbos clothes on Shabbos. There is a special dispensation at a Bris. Even during the Nine Days, the Mohel, the Sandak, and the parents are permitted to wear Shabbos clothes to the Bris. The festive nature of the Bris mitigates, somewhat, the mourning for the Temple.

Yesterday morning, after the Bris, I headed home. I was wearing a Shabbos shirt with a nice pair of cufflinks and a nice suit. I decided that once I got home, I would change. After all, the Bris was over, and it was Erev Tisha B'Av.

By the time I reached home, I was no longer in a hurry to change my clothes. The text message had come in -- Rebbe was gone! Instead of removing my Shabbos shirt and suit, I tore them. I cut kria for my Rebbe, and sat down and cried. This year, mourning on Tisha B'Av would be easy.

There was a telephone hook-up to the funeral in Israel. I sat at my kitchen table and cried as I listened to Rebbe's sons and son-in-law and Rav Avraham Kanarek eulogize Rebbe. (Three of those speakers had, at various times, been my teachers as well.)

When I went to Israel last year, I walked into the Bais Medrash, the study hall, with my son. I was overwhelmed with feelings of nostalgia. This is where I grew up! This is where Rebbe taught us! This is where I became who I am. Now, in that same room, on Tisha B'Av night, the students sat on the floor and cried over the loss of our beloved Rebbe.

Last night, once again, the streets of our holy city of Jerusalem resounded with Tisha B'Av sorrow as a great Torah Sage and Tzaddik was laid to rest.

This pain and anguish that I feel is being experienced all over the world. Thousands of lives were influenced by this giant of a man. It is not only his direct students that were inspired and uplifted by Rebbe's teaching. It is the families of those students; it is the students of those students. I told my son-in-law that his wife is who she is in part because of what Rebbe taught me. If I have made an imprint of any kind as a rabbi and a teacher, then those who have learned from me are Rebbe's students as well.

Rebbe was not a young man when he died; he was 87. But the tragedy of his death was that there was so much more he could have given. When he lost his ability to communicate easily, Israel lost a great teacher. No one I knew could speak the way he could. (Although I think I've heard a few imitators!)

How many more lives could have been uplifted? How many more students could have benefitted from his wisdom, from his sharp Talmudic analysis, from his ability to take a statement of the Sages and make it into a life-altering lesson?

On the other hand, there is much that we can learn from his infirmity. He was weak, yet that never stopped him from giving his all. Even when he was so incapacitated by his illness, he was a lesson in human greatness and dignity. He carried himself like a student of Slabodka. He dressed impeccably. You knew you were in the presence of a great man. Even his Filipino aid called him "Rebbe." He was everybody's Rebbe.

That, perhaps is the most important lesson we can learn from Rabbi Chait. Every one of us, 24/7/365, is a teacher. People look at us and learn from us. We can show people how to be petty and small and arrogant. Or we can learn from Rebbe, and show the world around us what a person can accomplish when he remembers that he is created in the Image of G-d.

The Medrash states that every person is supposed to ask himself when his actions will reach the level of the actions of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Of course, that can never happen, but that doesn't exempt us from setting for ourselves that lofty goal. Rebbe once mentioned on Rav Dovid Leibowitz's Yahrzeit, I believe it was the 40th Yahrzeit, that a day never went by that he didn't think about Rav Dovid's profound influence on his life. That is an important lesson for me and all who knew him. We his students, and his students' students, will do well if we gauge our actions by asking ourselves, "What would Rabbi Chait do?"

That Bracha, that last blessing I gave to Rebbe before we parted. I blessed him that he should merit to greet the Messiah in the near future. Let us all pray that we will soon see the end of all sorrow. May we see the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy: *He will eliminate death forever. And G-d will erase tears from all faces; he will remove the shame of His nation from upon the entire earth, for G-d has spoken.* (Isaiah, 25:8)

May G-d console Rebbe's widow and his children, and all of us, his students, among all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.

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