

# Collected Insights into the Tisha B'av Kinnot

## The Lesson of the Forgotten Churban

קינה ו' – שבת

Rabbi Yonah Gross

Young Israel of Phoenix, Phoenix, AZ

In lamenting the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash, Rabbi Eliezer HaKalir invokes the memory of the destruction of the earlier Temple when it resided in Shiloh. The Kinnah laments that even though Yirmiyahu used Shiloh as an example of destruction coming as a punishment for sins (see Yirmiyahu 7:12) the warning was not heeded.

But *pachad chet Shilo* (the fear of the sin of Shilo) invokes something more. What about Shilo are we to fear? Rav Soloveichik explained that unlike the Beis Hamikdash which was endowed with *Kedusha L'Atid Lavo* (sanctity for all times), Shilo had only been granted temporary holiness. The fear described was about the time after Shilo's destruction where we don't know where the Temple in Shilo stood or what it looked like. The fear was whether in future the Beis Hamikdash would actually be remembered, or would it be like Shilo, a story with no remnants, monuments or memory.

The Kinnah may also be invoking fear as to our understanding of why the Temple in Shilo was destroyed. God announced to the Prophet Samuel that the destruction was punishment for the sins of the children of Eli, and for Eli's inability to censure his children (Samuel I 3:11-14). What had they done? Among other inappropriate acts, Samuel proclaims that they had "slept with the women who congregated at the door of the Tent of Meeting." That certainly sounds like a harsh sin deserving of an extremely harsh punishment.

The Talmud (Shabbos 56a) however claims that "whoever says that the sons of Eli sinned is simply mistaken." The Talmud then goes on to explain that their only sin was having delayed by a day bird offerings that women brought, thereby requiring them to abstain from their husbands an extra night. But if that was their sin why not say so? That same Gemara in Shabbos talks about difficult stories in the life of other biblical heroes (Reuven, David, Shlomo etc.) and explains away the simple meaning of the texts with various technical loopholes that exempt the perpetrator from all wrongdoing. Why does Tanach make accusations against prominent Biblical characters that really weren't true?

Tanach may be teaching an important lesson. While the things done may be defensible, it certainly looked bad in the eyes of the people. While the sons of Eli could give many reasons as to why the sacrifices couldn't be brought that day, it was still a miserable experience for the women that wanted to be with their husbands that night.

That is the fear invoked by the memory of Shilo in that first *Kinna*; that living a life of sanctity is not merely following the laws and commandments in such a way that we can defend our actions. That's not enough. Rather, a life of sanctity is a life that can be held up as an example through which every person, both learned and ignorant, can recognize as a life of holiness and piety, without a need for a defense.

## Speaking of the Loss

קינה ז' – איכה אצת באפך

Rabbi Chaim Poupko

Congregation Ahavath Torah - Englewood, NJ

A simple literary device helps this *kinnah* overcome the challenge that plagues many of the *kinnos*. The irony is often noted that while our experience of *Tisha B'Av* can be largely determined by the recitation of the *kinnos*, their complex Hebrew poetry and style, their sophisticated Hebrew language, and their subtle referencing of passages from *Tanach* and Rabbinic literature leaves them difficult to understand. Indeed, Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik saw the recitation of *kinnos* as something akin to a defining *mitzvas ha-yom*. The Rav notes that *mitzvos* in general aren't just ceremonies or rituals to be performed. Rather, they reflect critical themes and ideas that we internalize as we experience them. For holidays specifically, the *mitzvos ha-yom* particular to each one are designed to set the tone of our experience of these special days of the year. These holiday *mitzvos* teach us what the holiday is all about and help us to experience that theme. While on *Tisha B'Av* there are no actual positive commandments, the recitation of the *kinnos* are a positive activity which is meant to deepen our understanding of what we are mourning for like the *mitzvos* that characterize the other holidays. Therein lies the frustrating irony of the *kinnos*. While their recitation is critical to our experience of *Tisha B'Av*, that very experience is difficult to achieve with their recitation.

The second *kinnah* for the daytime stands out as an exception to this rule. This *kinnah* features a simple literary device we have all learned in elementary school which serves to highlight a collective emotion and theme of *Tisha B'Av*. The repeated alliteration found on each line of the *kinnah* is a verbal punctuation. Rabbi Elazar ha-Kalir, the composer of the *kinnah*, must have intended for it to be read with a strong verbal emphasis on the repeated sound – **EIcha ATZta be-APecha** and so on. Read it out loud to yourself in this way and you will find that the recitation of the *kinnah* takes on a staccato rhythm – one that reflects an aggressive sense of frustration and alienation that the Jewish people feel after the destruction of the Temples and the subsequent exile. The Jewish people are left feeling alienated from a G-d they had previously felt so close to. Feeling this emotion, we turn to G-d in this *kinnah* and ask how He could have meted out such terrible punishments and not remember particular moments of closeness and shared experiences in our history. This type of questioning is unique to *Tisha B'Av*. Rav Soloveitchik observed that

this is the one day a year in which we feel a sense of anger towards G-d and express questions of G-d, often beginning with the refrain *Eicha*, “oh how,” as in this *kinnah*. And so the first stanza asks, how did You rush in Your fury to destroy those who had faith in You by the hands of the Edomites? Why did You not remember the covenant between the parts with which You chose those whom You tested? The second stanza asks how G-d could detest us so and not recall the *דלגת זלוג זרך*, the accelerated skipping of the flags of the various tribes of Israel during our miraculous march through the desert to the land of Canaan. The fourth stanza asks how could G-d have abandoned us in rage and not remember *חתון חוקי חורב* – our marriage at Mount Chorev by the laws that were given on it.

## Honoring the Questions

קינה י"ט – לך ה' הצדקה

Rabbi Moshe Rosenberg

Congregation Etz Chaim - Kew Gardens Hills, NY

*V'ata Amarta... V'lama? Lekha, Hashem Ha-tzedaka*

These two dirges of couplets are complementary: The first asks the unanswerable question of why G-d forsook all His promises of benevolence to unleash forces of destruction on His people, and the second, foreshadowed in the concluding lines of the first, gives a traditional response— G-d is righteous and our actions have been our undoing. Looking back over the parallel *kinot*, it seems roundabout--even wasteful--to have asked the question so many times when the answer was just around the corner. But this perception dissipates when we realize that the *kinot*, like *Tisha B'Av* itself, are about the deep psychological work of processing tragedy, and not merely the application of pat answers to unready souls.

It is said that a when a scholar would ask Rav Chaim Brisker a question and receive an answer, both questioner and responder would emerge dissatisfied. The nature of the *lomdus* employed by Rav Chaim made it clear that there had never been a question in the first place. Thus the questioner felt he'd never really had a real challenge to the text, and Rav Chaim felt that he had not come up with a real *terutz*, but merely cleared away the underbrush of confusion. To appreciate an answer, there has to be a recognition that there truly was a question.

When future Ambassador of Israel, Naftali Lavie, was a teenager newly liberated from Auschwitz, he could not, at first, bring himself to pray with the other freed inmates who made a minyan. Having successfully sheltered his little brother, who would be the future Chief Rabbi of Israel, Yisrael Meir Lau, but lost his parents and entire community, the young Lavie had too many unanswered questions to form the words of the prayers. One his first visits was to the Grand Rabbi of Ger, and his recollection of that visit was that the wise Rebbe, aware of his *emunah* issues, never once raised with him the topic of faith. He understood that there must be a time for questions, before there can be fertile ground for answers to take hold.

Perhaps the Gerrer Rebbe took his cue from G-d Himself. In the Midrashic debate between Moshe *Rabbenu* and G-d, during which Moshe pleads to live and to enter Israel, G-d informs

Moshe that he must die because "he has partaken of the cup of the first man." This reference to universal mortality is misconstrued by Moshe as a direct comparison to Adam himself, and therefore he responds: "Adam sinned, but what sin have I committed?" Rather than correct Moshe's misapprehension, G-d continues the discussion on Moshe's terms, comparing his sins with those of Adam and the forefathers, until finally, when Moshe will not yield, G-d, as it were, bangs a fist on the table with the phrase "Rav Lakh!." This is beyond you, at the moment, Moshe, and this is where the discussion must stop, until you have had more time to process.

I remember how, in the aftermath of a miscarriage exacerbated by an insensitive Ob/Gyn, my wife and I went to interview a prospective new doctor. This gynecologist had a ready answer to all of our questions. He'd seen every situation, solved every problem before it occurred. He absolutely radiated competence. We disqualified him, because our recent painful experience made us yearn for a doctor who didn't have all the answers, but honored the questions. We wanted a human doctor who knew that, no matter how trained and prepared he was, there would situations and questions would always arise that are unexpected and unanswerable. Before we could accept his answers, he had to legitimate our questions.

That's why the *Kina* of *V'ata amarta* is not repetitious. The *Kinot* give us a chance to repeat and process the questions, before suggesting the breath of an answer. *Tisha B'Av* itself is not a time of wallowing in tragedy, but of processing it. It is a necessary stage, the spiritual crouch that presages a rise towards redemption. May we experience it as such.

## Message of the Martyrs

קינה כ"א – ארזי הלבנון

Rabbi Yaacov Feit

New York City, NY

The horrific description of the execution of the ten martyrs, as described in Arzei Halevanon, makes one shudder. Yet underlying this kinnah is also a message of hope and a lesson in emunah. When describing the unspeakable death of Rebbe Akiva, the kinnah refers to Rebbe Akiva's dramatic recitation of *Shema Yisroel* as he suffered the unimaginable – "יצתה נשמתו באהד" – His soul departed as he recited [God is] One. However, the Talmud adds one strange nuance.

*When Rebbe Akiva was taken out to be killed it was the time of the recital of Keriyas Shema.*

**Berachos 61b**

בשעה שהוציאו את רבי עקיבא להריגה  
זמן קריאת שמע היה  
מסכת ברכות סא:

This addition is seemingly superfluous. Moreover, it doesn't make sense! In the very same passage Rebbe Akiva passionately describes how he was waiting his whole life for the opportunity to die while sanctifying Hashem's name. Why then does it matter that it was in the morning? Wouldn't Rebbe Akiva have been equally eager to sanctify Hashem's name in the afternoon? What message are these words teaching us?

Rav Moshe Shapiro explains that the declaration that Hashem is One means that everything and every event, no matter how difficult to comprehend, somehow fits into a larger picture.

Everything is part of the great puzzle that is being pieced together by the Creator since the beginning of time. Everything is One.

The Chassidic Masters teach that by covering our eyes during Keriya Shema we affirm that we may not understand everything that occurs in this world but we recognize that it is because we are blind. It is because we can't see. But everything fits together.

Times of great confusion demand this affirmation more than ever. Rebbe Akiva was not necessarily taken out during shacharis. But it was the most inexplicable moment of his life. It was the ultimate *zman kria shema*; a moment so incomprehensible that the only response was to recognize that this somehow fits into Hashem's master plan.

The version of this kinnah recited on Yom Kippur describes the angels' passionate protest to Hashem in response to the ten martyrs - Is this the reward for Torah? The response is a seeming threat that they remain silent lest the world be returned to nothingness.

Rav Shlomo Kluger, puzzled by an ostensibly unfair response to a good question, offers an explanation with a parable. A king hires the most talented tailor in his kingdom to customize a golden suit and supplied him with an exact number of threads. The other tailors in the kingdom, jealous that they were not chosen, inform the king that his tailor of choice stole some golden threads. Upon presentation of the final product, the king accuses the tailor of stealing his precious threads. The tailor responds that the only way to prove his innocence would be to rip up the garment and count it thread by thread.

This was Hashem's response to the angels. It was not a threat. Hashem was explaining that the only way to explain such unfathomable occurrences would be by returning the world to the beginning. Only then could Hashem demonstrate, step by step, that everything comes together to form the magnificent tapestry that is being woven and will only be revealed at the end of time.

Perhaps this can explain the kinnah's similar description of Rav Elazar ben Shamua's death while reciting the words *ברא אלקים* during Friday night Kiddush. The kinnah is reminding us that as tragic as these events may seem they somehow fit into a much larger picture that has been in motion since the creation of the world.

The kinnah, on the one hand is too tragic to bear. Yet its underlying message is that in the greatest moments of darkness it is our lack of vision which does not allow us to see the light.

## The Meaning of Martyrdom

קינה כ"א – ארזי הלבנון

Rabbi Asher Oser

Congregation Beth Sholom - Providence, RI

On the 26th of Nissan 5415 (May 3rd, 1655), Abraham Nunez Bernal was burned alive in Cordoba, Spain. At the age of forty-three, this father and son could still not reconcile himself to the Roman Catholic faith and so his sojourn in this world ended on a fiery pyre before a heated

and ecstatic crowd. When the Spanish-Portuguese community of Amsterdam learned the news of his martyrdom they must have been devastated. Another member of their community had died al kiddush Hashem. He was not the first, nor would he be the last, but each one dealt a blow to the morale of the dignified Spanish-Portuguese Jews. They had all paid a heavy price to live as Jews in cities, like Amsterdam, in which they had taken refuge but many of those whom they left behind paid for Judaism with their lives.

On Shabbat, some nine days later (Shabbat, 6th of Iyyar 5415), Rabbi Isaac Aboab De Fonesca alighted the bima to give words of consolation and comfort to his flock and to eulogize the kadosh, Bernal. (The hesped can be found in the Kitve Rabbeinu Yitzhaq Aboab (De Fonesca): Hakhmei Recife ve-Amsterdam published by Machon Yerushalayim). It is not surprising that in the midst of his eulogy he mentioned the kinnah “arzei halevanon” about the asarah harugei malkhiyot, the lamentation about the ten martyrs that we read on Tisha B’av.

He quotes Mehnahot 29b where Moshe Rabbeinu seeing the future Torah greatness of Rabbi Akiva, exclaims “Hashem, you’ve shown me his Torah – show me his reward” and Hashem responds by showing him the martyrdom of Rabbi Akiva whose flesh was peeled off. Moshe then asks “This is Torah and its reward?” to which Hashem replies “Silence, for this is the thought that arose before Me.” Rabbi Aboab asks the following question. Moshe requested to see the reward of Rabbi Akiva and instead he was shown his death. What kind of a response is this? Do we not believe in an afterworld? Do we not have a concept of reward and punishment? Could it be that one gives up his life al Kiddush HaShem and that’s where it all ends?

These were questions that animated the theological background of Spanish-Portuguese Jewry. For centuries some of them had paid a very high price in this world for any small semblance of Jewishness and inflections of the question, is it all really worth it, must have crept into their minds. Rabbi Aboab movingly describes the scene of Bernal’s martyrdom in Cordoba: his mother begging him for her son, his wife begging him for her protector and his children begging him not to be left an orphan. Not only did he need to find the religious fortitude to be consumed by the flames he also had to find the emotional steadfastness to be deaf to the pleas of those whom he loved. How different this martyrdom was, remarks Rabbi Aboab, from the martyrdom of Hannah’s seven sons whose mother had encouraged their willingness to die al Kiddush Hashem. Thus, the Jews who heard of Bernal’s martyrdom may have wondered: what could the reward possibly be for such a Jew?

Rabbi Aboab explains that Hashem was imparting a teaching about martyrdom to Moshe. The reward of one who gives up their life al Kiddush Hashem can not be comprehended. By showing Moshe the death of Rabbi Akiva, he was letting him know that he, Moshe, would not fully understand the reward that awaited Rabbi Akiva because Rabbi Akiva was a martyr. On that Shabbat morning in Amsterdam, Rabbi Aboab had the same message for his flock. The reward that awaited their beloved Bernal was too great for any of them to comprehend for he too had been killed al Kiddush Hashem.

# Following Our Forefathers

קינה כ"ו – אז בהלוך ירמיהו

Rabbi Uri Pilichowski

Beth Jacob Congregation – Beverly Hills, CA

*Like parents who invest so much into their children's future, only to see it destroyed by chance, our forefathers complain to Hashem about His derailing their descendants' growth by exiling them.*

This kinnah, written like many others by R' Elazar HaKalir, poetically tells of Jeremiah admonishing our forefathers, "How can you lie still, your sons have been exiled and their homes destroyed?" The Avot, along with Moshe and Leah, protest God's exiling the Jewish people. Each protest claims a self sacrifice, wailing 'what was it all for?' After each protest God answers, first directly responding to the objection of the claimant, and then further articulating the sins of the Jewish people.

Kinnah 26 tells the story of a people, blessed with great ancestors who taught them valuable lessons and set the foundations of a providential relationship between God and the Jewish people, and how these same Jewish people rejected these lessons and were disallowed the benefits of the providential relationship. The poet quotes the people asking, "Where is [God's] assurance, 'And I shall remember for their sake the covenant of the ancients?'"

As in all parables, the author is teaching a lesson with his story. The parable centers on a philosophical challenge; how could God abandon a people that He promised would be protected by the merit of their ancestors?

Avraham reminds God of the ten tests he faced, asking "Was it for nothing I was tested for their sake?" God responds that Avraham's descendants fell to idol worship. Yitzchak screams, "Was it for nothing that I was willing to be slaughtered?" Hashem responds that the same mountain upon which Yitzchak was willing to be sacrificed was defiled by the Jewish people. Yaakov protests that the pain he went in rearing his children, Yosef's sale, Dina's rape, Shimon and Levi's war with Shechem, was it for naught? Moshe complains about "The lambs nursed at his bosom... cut off before their time." The kinnah ends with Leah and Rachel weeping for their children.

In the back and forth between our ancestors and God the kinnah teaches a fundamental tenant of our faith. We are told that our ancestors' actions were so great that God promised eternal protection to their descendants. It would seem, and this is the line of reasoning taken in our kinnah, that merely being the descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov and Moshe was sufficient merit for the Jewish people to be protected forever.

The thought of automatic eternal protection was shattered with the destruction of the first Beit Hamikdash and exile to Babylonia. No longer was that guaranteed protection readily apparent. In having our ancestors protest, the kinnah is expressing the shock the people of this time must have felt at feeling the wrath of an attack so harsh it seemed almost impossible to bounce back from.

In Hashem's answers to the forefathers, R' Elazar HaKalir beautifully expresses the proper notion of zechus avos, or the merit of our forefathers. The promises to our forefathers were not

automatic guarantees of protection, but rather conditional assurances that if the Jewish people followed in the ways of their ancestors then they would merit divine protection. If the Jewish people abandoned the lessons taught by their forefathers, then they would lose their divine protection and their fate would be left to any and all enemies that attacked. At the time of the destruction of the first Beit Hamikdash the Jewish people had left the ways of their forefathers, and the results were tragic.

This lesson extends past the times of the first exile to some 2,000 years later, today. We cannot rely on the merit of our forefathers to protect us if we do not follow in their path. There is no *protectsiah* in God's court; one receives what they've earned. This idea is articulated in the last line of the kinnah, seemingly God addresses the forefathers, "Return wholesome ones to your place of rest, I shall surely fulfill all of your requests, I shall return your children from exile." May we merit to see the fulfillment of this promise this year.

## In the Blink of an Eye

קינה ל"א – בצאתי ממצרים בצאתי מירושלים

Rabbi Aryeh Lebowitz

Beis Haknesses of North Woodmere - North Woodmere, NY

This kina contrasts the jubilant and spiritually charged atmosphere of our departure from Egypt, with the depressing atmosphere of our departure from Yerushalayim. The duality of the kina is reflected in the tune that we sing it. The high notes of B'tzeiti MiMitzrayim, our voices brimming with excitement and pride, followed by the low notes of B'tzeiti MiYerushalayim - a weak and dejected tone. The kina underscores the ability of the Jewish people to reach the greatest heights and to sink to the lowest depths. Rarely are we mediocre.

One unusual aspect of this kina is the fact that the focus is not on where we are going, but where we are coming from. We speak of our departure from Egypt, not of our arrival in Eretz Yisroel. We speak of our departure from Yerushalayim rather than our arrival into exile.

The author of this kina, whose name is not known to us, is trying to teach us something very important about Jewish History and Jewish Destiny. We read Megilat Eicha shortly after reading Moshe Rabbeinu's plea in Parshat Devarim of "*Eicha Esa Levadi*". The usage of the word *eicha* on the Shabbat before Tisha b'Av is the subject of much discussion. Moshe was speaking within the context of the rapid growth of the Jewish people. A slave nation had grown to the point, physically and spiritually, that Moshe could not handle them alone. When feeling totally overwhelmed by how quickly the nation had become a powerhouse, Moshe wonders "*Eicha Esa Levadi*". It is upon being overwhelmed by the rapid growth and success of the nation that he says *eicha*.

Yirmiyahu, on the other hand, after seeing what he lived for go up in smoke cries out *eicha*. He too is overwhelmed - by how quickly things can fall apart. The word *eicha* represents to us that in the Jewish world our entire lives can turn on a dime. It does not have to follow a logical pattern, or even a natural steady progression. A nation bereft of spirituality can grow into an exalted nation almost overnight. The stories of rags to riches normally reserved for the movies can

happen to a nation. Conversely, a nation living in its own secure borders with a Beit HaMikdash at its center can see total ruin and destruction in just as short a period.

This is why the author of this kina focuses on where we came from and not where we were going to. Look how quickly we went from the slavery of Egypt to *Kriat Yam Suf*. Look how quickly we went from Yerushalayim to *Vayikonenu Yirmiyah* and *V'cherev letusha v'latevach netusha*. This outlook makes the aveilut so much more poignant. We are a people of enormous potential, and look at the spiritual ruins we currently live in.

But this kina also carries with it a profound message of hope and comfort. In difficult times, when we see an enormous amount of spiritual and physical destruction, we are reminded how quickly things may change. We don't know how, and unfortunately we don't know how soon, but in a blink of an eye the salvation may be at hand.

## **Destruction and Rebirth**

קינה מ"א – שאלי שרופה באש

Rabbi Yaakov Bieler

Kemp Mill Synagogue - Silver Spring MD

The famous Ba'al Tosafot, R. Meir of Routenberg (1215 to 1293), was certainly well-aware of the notorious public burning of twenty-four carriage-loads of the Talmud that took place in Paris on the 9<sup>th</sup> of Tammuz 5002 (June 17<sup>th</sup>, 1242.) The destruction of the Talmud had been ordered by Louis IX after a disputation between Christian and Jewish clergy, and tragically marked the first of many such incidents. The anniversary of the Paris Talmud burning was not only marked by Ashkenazic Jews during the Middle Ages by a communal fast day on Erev Shabbat, Parashat Chukat, but also by the recitation of an elegy composed by the MaHaRaM and incorporated into the Tisha B'Av kinot, beginning with the words "*Sha'ali Serufa BaEish, LeShalom Aveilayich*" (Tora, that has been consumed by fire, seek the welfare of those who mourn for you.)

In his poem, R. Meir notes the ironic symmetry that the same Tora that was given to the Jewish people within a context of Heavenly Fire, an allusion to the description of the Revelation at Har Sinai, (Shemot 19:18) "And Mt. Sinai was completely enveloped in smoke because God had Descended upon it in fire, and its smoke rose up like the smoke of a furnace, and the entire mountain shook exceedingly," is now destroyed by man-made fire without apparent consequence to those responsible for the conflagration. The author recoils at the suggestion that the Tora's fiery beginning was a precursor to its ultimate destruction, and instead expects there to be Divine Retribution, not only against those who directly were involved with the burning of our holy books, but also those who persecute and destroy teachers, students and followers of HaShem's Will who have dedicated their lives to contemplating and understanding the contents of the volumes that have now been reduced to ashes.

The author, who has taken all this in, admits to his lack of comprehension of God's Ways. R. Meir fears that the Tora's destruction, as well as the massacre of those who embodied its teachings, is tantamount to Divine Abandonment of the Jewish people that remain behind, and that they will now be all that much more vulnerable to attack and persecution. "*Lakach Tzeror*

*Kaspo, Halach BaDerech LeMerachok VeImo, HaLo Nasu Tzelolaich*” (He Took His Treasure with Him, and when He Went far away, did not your Protecting Shade Vanish?)

But rather than giving in to gloom and depression, the MaHaRaM ends this Kina on an optimistic note, as so many other Kinot notably and counter-intuitively seem to end, imagining the Tora eventually reborn and restored to its past glory, a kind of *techiyat hameitim* (resurrection of the dead) in a Simchat Tora context, as the most precious and holy artifact of the Jewish people. “*Od Ta’adi VaAdi Shani, VeTof Tikchi, Teilchi VeMachol VeTzahali BiMecholayich*” (You will again adorn yourself with ornaments of scarlet; You will take up the timbrel and lead the circling dance and rejoice in all your revels.)

Only when HaShem “Returns,” and allows the Tora once again to be very much with us, both as a *cheftza shel mitzva* (an object by which commandments are performed) as well as the focus of attention of the lives of the Jewish people, will sadness be finally banished and we will bask in the Divine Light, in contrast to the darkness of evil and depression. “*Yarum Levavi BeEit Ya’ihr Lecha Tzur, VeYagiha LeChashcheich VeYa’ihru Afeilayich*” (Then shall my heart be uplifted, at that time when your Creator will Afford you light, will Brighten your darkness and Illuminate your gloom.)

## Burning Books

קינה מ"א – שאלי שרופה באש

Rabbi Ariel Rackovsky

The Jewish Center - New York City, NY

Last year, shortly before Tisha B’Av, I had the privilege of meeting Mrs. Rivka Moriah, the mother of Avraham David Moses hy”d, one of the holy young men murdered in Yeshivat Merkaz HaRav. I asked her to tell me about her son, and she began to speak about his exceptionally refined nature. But it was not only his character that stood out, she said. It was his remarkable diligence, with powers of concentration and retention far surpassing those of an average sixteen year-old. Indeed, every other line in the Merkaz HaRav library checklist had the name “Avraham David Moses” on it. He read remarkably quickly and remembered everything he read, and there were many notebooks filled with his comments and insights. As our conversation concluded, Mrs. Moriah took out a pen to write down some contact information that I was about to give her. A chill ran up my spine as I saw that the pen had a strip of paper taped to it, identifying the owner as Avraham David Moses. It hit me that this was one of the pens he used to record his Torah thoughts. Who knows how many Torah thoughts will never be written with that pen and how many original ideas from this prodigious intellect will never be shared?

This kinnah was composed by the Maharam, Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg (1215-1293). He was a student of Rabbi Yechiel ben Joseph of Paris, who defended the Talmud during the reign of Louis IX. On Friday, June 17, 1244, twenty four cartloads of the Talmud were burnt in the Place de Greve in Paris, and Rabbi Meir was witness to this destruction. We take for granted the availability of volumes of the Talmud, but to give a sense of the enormity of the tragedy, it is important to remember that the first set of Talmud was only printed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by Daniel Bomberg,

nearly 300 years after this event, and each incinerated tome represented months or years of painstaking effort. The manuscripts that were burnt, and the attendant commentary on those passages that would never be produced, could have changed the way we understand various passages of Talmud. Indeed, the Maharam viewed it as appropriate that this event took place on the eve of Parshas Chukkas, which opens with the words *זאת חקת התורה*; this is the law of the Torah. Onkelos translates this phrase as *דא גזירת אורייתא*; this is the decree of G-d. While the verse refers to the commandment of the ritual of the red heifer, the Maharam interpreted it homiletically to refer to the burning that he witnessed. This kinnah represents the Maharam's confrontation with the divine decree leading to the incalculable destruction of Torah scholarship.

But this Kinnah is not simply about lost books; it is about lost people. Indeed, the poetry in the Kinnah reflects this idea when the Maharam laments the loss of those who were *המתאווים שכון זבולידך בחצר*, those who desired to dwell in the courtyard of Your palace. It is about people as well- the Torah scholars who died before their time, and still do. It might be those who were killed in the Crusades, those who lost their lives- or their faith- in the Holocaust, those killed in terrorist attacks in Israel, or those who are cut down due to illness or in tragic circumstances. It might be those who had the potential to become great Torah scholars yet never did, either because of abuse, lack of inspiration or misplaced priorities.