

One inauspicious day in the year 1096, a young Jewish mother named Rachel saw to the slaughter of her own four children. Fearful of the children's conversion by Christian crusaders, the mother erupted in tears, beat her face, brashly accused God of withholding His love, and then unflinchingly carried out the gruesome slaying, even as her little son cried out "My mother, my mother, do not slay me." Carefully arranging the bodies of her dead children in her arms, the mother then waited to meet her own death at the hands of the crusaders.

This gut-wrenching story of child martyrdom, and others like it, appears in medieval Jewish descriptions about the violence perpetrated against the Jews during the First Crusade.¹ Rife with similar accounts, Jewish Crusade literature glorifies child martyrdom, describing children making grand sacrificial gestures, such as preparing knives and positioning their bodies for slaughter, mothers killing their nursing infants, "eating their own fruit, their newborn babes," and escorting their children to execution "as if to a beautiful bridal canopy."²

Although these texts are painful to read, the Crusades, and specifically the slaughter of children, have become focal points of our commemoration and grief on Tisha B'Av. In the first *kinnah* (elegiac poem) explicitly not about the destruction of the *Beit Hamikdash* (Temple), Tisha B'Av is described as a day for recalling Crusade martyrs, including children:

... I shall arouse the bitter of heart, the confounded one, to weep with me, over the beautiful maidens and the tender lads, wrapped in their scrolls and dragged to the slaughter... Please take to your hearts to compose a bitter eulogy, because their massacre is deserving of mourning and rolling in dust as was the burning of the House of our God, its Hall, and its Palace. However, [we] cannot add a [new] day [of mourning] over ruin and conflagration, nor may [we] mourn any earlier—only later. Instead, today [on Tisha B'Av], I will arouse my sorrowful wailing, and I will eulogize and wail with a bitter soul, and my groans are heavy from morning until evening. Over the House of Israel and over the nation of Hashem, because they have fallen by the sword...

Kinnot for Tisha B'Av (Artscroll Translation pp. 270, 275)

ואבכה עמי מרי לבב הנבוכים,
 על בתולות היפות וילדים הרכים,
 בספריהם נכרכים ולטבה נמשכים
 ...
 שימו נא על לבבכם מספד מר
 לקשרה, כי שקולה הריגתם
 להתאבל ולהתעפרה, כשרפת בית
 א-לקינו האולם והבירה, וכי אין
 להוסיף מועד שבר ותבערה, ואין
 להקדים זולתי לאחרה, תחת כן
 היום לויית אעוררה, ואספדה
 ואילילה ואבכה בנפש מרה, ואנחתי
 כבדה מבקר ועד ערב, על בית
 ישראל ועל עם ה' כי נפלו בחרב.
 קינות לתשעה באב, מי יתן ראשי
 מים (קינה כה)

According to this *kinnah*, Tisha B'Av functions as a day that encompasses all tragedies that have befallen the Jewish people through its history. Rejecting the notion that individual tragedies maintain their distinctiveness, we are taught that all of them stem from one tragic source—the destruction of the *Beit Hamikdash*. Like the *Churban* (destruction of the Temple), which

¹ This story is presented in two of the three Hebrew Crusade Chronicles, namely the Mainz Anonymous and Solomon bar Samson chronicles, as well as in a medieval *piyyut* (liturgical poem) included in the standard Ashkenazi corpus of *Kinnot*. See the chronicles in Chazan, Robert. *European Jewry and the First Crusade* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) 238 and 258. For the *piyyut*, see Artscroll *Kinnot*, 294.

² See Habermann, A. *Gezerot Ashkenaz ye-Tsarfat*. (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1945) 224, Chazan, Robert, 272, Bernfeld, Simon. *Sefer Hademaot*. vol. I. (Berlin: Eshkol, 1923) 198, and Carmi, T. *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1981) 375.

resulted in the loss of the Jewish people's religious, political, social, economic, and legal epicenter, the Crusades brought about an utter de-centering and destabilization of the medieval Jewish communities of Germany. Repeatedly called upon by the literature to recall and re-envision the slaughter of children, we may ask: How did child martyrdom, specifically, come to epitomize the turmoil experienced by Jews as a result of the Crusades?

Understanding how children were perceived in medieval Ashkenaz, under normal circumstances, may provide insight into the meaning of child martyrdom. A window into Ashkenazic perceptions of children may be found in a unique child-centered ceremony created by Jews during the Middle Ages, and aimed at initiating male children into the world of Torah study. This dramatic ceremony, which took place annually on Shavuot, generally involved wrapping five-year-old boys in *tallitot* (prayer shawls), escorting them into the lap of a teacher at the synagogue, introducing them to the letters of the *alef-bet* and the book of *Vayikra* (Leviticus) and, in some cases, engaging them in a peculiar riverbank ritual. The author of the definitive study on this subject, Ivan Marcus, notes that the texts describing the ceremony draw two major implications about children.³ Firstly, they indicate that children, during the initiation, become equated, through verbiage and symbolism, with the *Bnei Israel* (children of Israel) at Mount Sinai. In this view, the child's separation from home, transition to synagogue, initiation into education and, sometimes, post-initiation riverbank excursion, was seen as mimicking the journey from Egypt, to desert, to Sinai, to incorporation into the world of nations at the banks of the River Jordan.⁴

Secondly, the texts imply that children became synonymous with the text itself, with Torah. Wrapped protectively in a *tallit*, escorted by scholars into the synagogue with fanfare, literally ingesting words of Scripture inscribed onto cakes and eggs, and being metaphorically linked to symbols such as flour, honey, milk, and water, the child was seen as simultaneously entering the Torah as the Torah entered the child. From this perspective, the child and Torah became one.⁵

According to Marcus, the most unique aspect of this rite of medieval Jewish passage was not the metaphorical association of children with the *Bnei Israel* or with Torah, metaphors that could claim a history in ancient Judaism, but rather the ritualization, the performance, and the acting out of the metaphors that took place.⁶ Taking the metaphors out of the theoretical realm of literature and playing them out in real life, Jews of medieval Ashkenaz, on a practical level, relived Sinai through the revelation experienced by their children on Shavuot and through their children's incorporation into a homogenous community of Jews.

We may see in the Jewish Crusade literature that the acting-out of these metaphors was extended by medieval Jews to times of crisis as well. Looking at the texts, including some of the *kinnot* we recite on Tisha B'Av, we may discern the same metaphorical associations of children-as-nation and children-as-Torah that are implicit in the Jewish initiation ceremony. Firstly, we can see that Jewish writers repeatedly point to male children, specifically, as undergoing some kind of initiation

³ Marcus, Ivan G. *Rituals of childhood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

⁴ Marcus, 79-80.

⁵ Marcus 53-60.

⁶ Marcus, 6-7, 56-58, 74.

process through their slaughter, resulting in a new level of intimacy or encounter with God as well as their incorporation into a homogenous “new” community of Jews residing in Paradise (the platonic Jewish community, so to speak). Asked, at the crucial moment before martyrdom, questions like “Do you wish to exchange your God for a wretched idol?” “Do you wish to enter into hell or paradise?”, and “Do you wish to receive the countenance of the Divine presence?”, boys are invited to join the community of martyrs and usually accept the invitation.⁷ The moment of martyrdom, then, was seen as a rite of passage, wherein the child became part of the Jewish nation. The unification of disparate parts of the Jewish people is a theme that recurs in the Jewish literature, in phrases such as “They sacrificed each other until the blood flowed together,” and “The blood of husbands mingled with that of their wives, the blood of parents with that of their children, the blood of brothers with that of their sisters, the blood of teachers with that of their students ... the blood of infants and sucklings with that of their mothers.”⁸ Through child martyrdom, a new unified nation of martyrs was seen as having been created.

Secondly, we may discern the equation of children with Torah in the Jewish crusade literature.

Recalling *Kinnah* 25, which states “... the tender lads wrapped in their scrolls and dragged to the slaughter,” we may note that, indeed, much of this *kinnah* is devoted to mourning over the Torah, Torah scholars, and children, as if they are one and the same. The Jewish reports on the Crusade are even more explicit:

*There was a Torah scroll there in the chamber. The crusaders came into the chamber, found it, and tore it to shreds. When the saintly and pious women, the daughters of kings, saw the Torah had been torn, they called out loudly to their husbands: “Behold, behold the holy Torah, for the enemy is tearing it.” The women said all together “Woe for the holy Torah, ‘perfect in beauty,’ ‘the delight of our eyes.’ We would bow down to it in the synagogue and our little children kissed it. We honored it, yet how has it fallen into hands of these uncircumcised and impure.”*⁹

Just as mothers describe children as having kissed the Torah in this passage, *Kinnah* 22 asks the Torah to mourn for children who died during the Crusade: “Torah, O Torah, gird yourself in sackcloth and roll yourself in ashes, make yourself mourn for your only son ...” Thus, the literature seems to point to a reciprocal relationship between children and Torah. Furthermore, this passage describes the Torah as “the delight of our eyes,” a phrase that is derived from Ezekiel 24:16, 21, and 25. In the book of Ezekiel, the prophet speaks to the Israelite community, warning them to accept their fate and not to mourn when God strikes “the delight of your eyes,” which Ezekiel explicitly explains twice, as a reference to “sons and daughters.” It would appear, then, that the same phrase used by the *navi* (prophet) to refer to children is applied by the Jewish Crusade writers to Torah. Perhaps, most importantly, this passage pits the “holiness,” “beauty,” and “honor” of the Torah against the status of the “uncircumcised” and “impure” Christians. Taking the contrast between Torah and Christians to its logical conclusion, the Torah can be seen as synonymous with “circumcised” and “pure,” two qualities seen as ontological to the Jewish child.

⁷ Chazan, 230, 240, 260, 291.

⁸ Chazan, 255.

⁹ Chazan, 240, 260.

In a sense, then, child martyrdom functioned for medieval Jews as a rite of passage akin to that of the Child Initiation ceremony. During a period of tremendous religious upheaval, in which the threat of the forced conversion of children loomed large, Jews assured children's incorporation into the community and unity with Torah through the act of child martyrdom. At a time of destabilization, similar to the *Churban*, in which a fully spiritual Jewish life could not proceed as usual and religious identity lay in the balance, child martyrdom served as a ritual that helped to fortify the sanctity of Jewish children and, thereby, the Jewish community as a whole. In lieu of positive rituals such as the Child Initiation ceremony, Jews created a new, simultaneously tragic and regenerative space, in which the child and community could achieve its greatest spiritual potential. *Kinnah 22* describes this exchange of the life ritual for the death ritual:

Neither a man nor a woman showed weakening pity for the [children whose] faces were like a splendid tiara. Instead they girded themselves with abnormal courage to smash the head and sever the spine. Then they addressed them with these words, 'We merited not to raise you in the Torah['s ways], let us bring you nearer [to God], like burnt-offering and incense.'

Kinnot for Tisha B'Av (Artscroll Translation pg. 257)

ולא חסו גבר וגבירה, על בנים
 צפירת תפארה, אבל אזרו גבורה
 יתרה, להלום ראש ולקרוץ שדרה,
 ואלו דברי באמירה, לא זכינו
 לגדלכם לתורה, נקריבכם כעולה
 והקטרה.
 קינות לתשעה באב, החרישו
 (קינה כב)

While Jews in the Middle Ages had all the same hopes that we do, encompassed by the blessing "*L'Torah, L'chuppah, u-l'maasim tovim* (the blessing recited at the time of circumcision, lit. To Torah, to wedding canopy, to good deeds)," they ultimately saw their children achieve those blessings via *Kiddush Hashem* (martyrdom, lit. sanctifying the Name of God). Thank God, today, we have the ability to see our children as small community members and embodiments of Torah, in a positive way. As the wife of a community rabbi, I had the rare opportunity of reintroducing the medieval Jewish Child Initiation Ceremony, with all its implications regarding children, to my *shul*, on the occasion of my son's birthday. In addition, on Simkhat Torah, I often find myself "acting out" the metaphor of children-as-Torah by dancing with the children of our *shul*. However, on Tisha B'Av, as I recall all the tragedies that have struck the Jewish community throughout the ages, I am reminded of the precariousness of this stability and the painful ways that Jews throughout history have tried to preserve their sanctity in the darkest of ways. Every generation finds its own sacred space, language, and way of getting close to God. May we all find our own unique ways of holiness and see the rebuilding of the *Beit Hamikdash*.