

Pikudei: Four Testimonies

Moshe Taragin

The mishkan was an ambitious project designed to craft a house of Hashem on Earth. The mishkan hosted daily korbanot, was the scene of national assembly, and was the epicenter for the devar Hashem and divine communication.

It also voiced a testimony. The Torah designates the mishkan as a mishkan ha'eidut, or a house of testimony. Beyond enabling religious rites, it testified to truths which, previously, had been unclear or under dispute.

We were selected by Hashem to represent Him in a dark and confused world. After two centuries of brutal slavery and merciless persecution we were liberated through supernatural miracles. A few weeks later, we stood beneath a blazing mountain, receiving His word, and pledged to live by His will.

Shockingly, just a few weeks later we betrayed our faith and fashioned an egel. After months of tefillah and teshuvah Hashem forgave us and requisitioned the construction of His house. The mishkan testified to the possibility of forgiveness. We take this concept for granted, but ancient Man could not imagine divine forgiveness. The sanctuary confirmed that Hashem desired penitence and accepts human apology. It testified to Mankind that Hashem would forgive their failures.

Furthermore, the mishkan produced testimony about Jewish history. It announced that Hashem had not forsaken His people and that we were still chosen, despite our horrible misconduct. The mishkan testified that Jewish selection is enduring and capable of outlasting our moral betrayals.

Historical Testimony

Often, epic events reshape the arc of history, irreversibly affecting the human condition. Some events, however, aren't just dramatic and historically impactful but are also testimonial. These moments don't just relandscape history but also message humanity and message history. They aren't merely historical shifts but are historical testimonies which discredit popular perspectives and introduce new paradigms.

Legal testimony is registered in court and alters our prior perceptions of innocence or guilt. Historical testimony is registered in the human imagination and refutes faulty historical assumptions. At several crucial junctures, events in Jewish history testified against preconceived ideas. The sanctuary was the first historical testimony and it signaled that even after moral collapse we were still chosen.

The Second Testimony

950 years later the Purim episode provided a second historical testimony. A student of history, Haman understood that we were chosen by Hashem and had been privileged to extraordinary divine providence. He took a brave gamble, though, wagering that, after our first exile, we had forfeited that chosen status and were now similar to other nations. As he described it: [The Jews are] a nation "scattered and divided", living *amongst* other nations. His genocidal plan fed off the popular conception that the Jews had surrendered their chosen status and had abandoned their destiny. Yerushalayim had been ransacked, the Mikdash had been incinerated, and we had been exiled from the land. Haman assumed that, at his stage of history, we had been discarded by Hashem and had become just as vulnerable as any other nation. With enough hatred and enough money, we could be erased from the map of humanity.

The Purim miracle debunked his malicious assumptions. Not only were we *once* chosen but we were *still* chosen. Despite our severe moral breakdowns and despite the trauma of being evicted from our homeland, Jewish destiny was still intact. Our chosen status could not only outlast *sin*, but could also survive *exile*.

The Third Testimony

Twenty-five hundred years later a third testimony became necessary. The holocaust was the most horrific atrocity in history. Never before had genocide been launched against an entire nation. Tragically, wars and natural disasters often devastated local populations, but never before was there a concerted and wholesale attempt to eradicate an entire race of people living in different countries and of vastly different ideological opinions. By launching his genocide, Hitler declared that the Jewish people didn't have the right to inhabit this Earth. Two millennia of Jewish

suffering coupled with contemporary social and racial theories, appeared to support his murderous claim.

In the dismal aftermath of the Holocaust Jewish future seemed bleak. The Holocaust accredited the contention that we were a forsaken people condemned to slowly disappear or to gradually become assimilated into the general population. The Holocaust raised severe existential questions for which many people had no answers. After a lengthy exile and unspeakable suffering during the Holocaust, it appeared that Jewish history was cursed.

A few years later these gloomy predictions were rebutted. Our return to Israel and to Jewish sovereignty repudiated any notions that Jewish history had ended. Despite the confusion of exile and the chaos of the Holocaust, it was obvious that Hashem still cared for us, and that His ancient promises hadn't expired. In 1965, the Church officially reconciled with Judaism, recognizing us as the people of G-d and condemning any form of anti-Semitism. After thousands of years of persecution and after the disaster of the Holocaust, our return to Israel testified to our fiercest enemies that our people had an enduring role in the fate of Mankind. Not only would Jews survive but they would continue to shape civilization.

The Fourth Testimony

75 years after the third testimony, we are listening to the sound of the gradually emerging fourth testimony. It is obvious that this war is much more than a local geopolitical skirmish. It is also painfully obvious that the war isn't just being waged with a terrorist group or with a seething Arab world. A broad coalition of Israel haters lines up to protest our just and moral war. Many of these fuming protesters are just anti-Semitic opportunists using the current conflict as an excuse to spew hatred and death threats at us. Many are even explicit about their desire to rid the world of our people. They still haven't "received the message" of previous testimonies.

Many of the anti-Israel protestors though, do not contest our rights as a people, but are staunchly opposed to our rights to our land. To them this country never belonged to us, and we are nothing more than exploitative colonial invaders. The current cultural environment which has broadly condemned colonialism and has championed the rights of the oppressed appears to lend credibility to Israel haters. They naively and simplistically apply policies and viewpoints to our struggle to live peacefully in our homeland.

This is the first time since the formation of Israel that its right to exist is being broadly challenged. The phrase "from the River to the Sea" explicitly denies us any rights to our ancient homeland. Of course, the claim that Jews have the right to exist, but the state of Israel does not, is disingenuous. History has proven that without a Jewish homeland Jewish survival is tenuous, at best. However, Israel has the right to exist independent of its role in preserving Jewish survival. This is our ancient homeland which Hashem delivered to us. We are not exploitative colonizers but a peaceful nation returning home, seeking goodwill, and aspiring to share prosperity with our neighbors.

This outcome of this struggle will provide the fourth testimony of history. The mishkan testimony reaffirmed Jewish selection even after our national sin. The Purim testimony reinforced Jewish selection even after exile. The State of Israel testimony verified Jewish destiny even after it had appeared to have faded through time and violently wrecked during the holocaust. The fourth testimony will affirm that not only are we Hashem's chosen, and not only is our destiny eternal, but that we have the right to live in our ancient homeland awarded to us by Hashem. The fourth testimony, like previous testimonies, will be entered into the annals of history. Like previous testimonies it will be violently opposed, until its opponents fade away and it enters collective human consciousness.

The writer is a rabbi at Yeshivat Har Etzion/Gush, a hesder yeshiva. He has smicha and a BA in computer science from Yeshiva University as well as a masters degree in English literature from the City University of New York.