

I will be sanctified by those who are close to me – Parshat Behar Bechukotai

written by Refael Kramer
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This article was written in the shadow of the terrible disaster in Meron, in memory and for the elevation of the soul of a close friend who passed away at the Lag B'Omer celebration, Rabbi Shimon the son of Rabbi Yosef (may he have a long life) Matalon, a Breslover Chasid and a precious soul who greeted everyone with a radiant countenance. He was loved by all, had a sterling character, and was a devoted educator. He said to a friend that he was just leaving for a minute and that he would be right back, but he never returned..

Together with the entire people of Israel, we mourn the tragic death of our brothers—holy Jews who went to participate and

rejoice in the celebration of the *yartzeit* (anniversary of the day of passing) Holy *Tanna* Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai on Lag B'Omer. Our hearts are with the bereaved families and we pray to the Creator that He will put an end to all tragedies.

Lag B'Omer is a holy and sublime day and is also a day of joy. There are two main reasons for being joyous on this day. The first is that this was the day that Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai revealed great secrets of the Torah, right before the time of his death. And the second is that the disciples of Rabbi Akiva stopped dying on this day.

How unfortunate that it was specifically on this day of joy that so many dear Jews died in a such a tragic event.

We do not want to address the circumstances of the disaster, although it is important to do so in order to prevent similar occurrences in the future, G-d forbid. But this can be left for the professionals whose job it is to investigate these matters. Rather, we want to focus on the sadness, sorrow, pain and weeping for those upright Jews who journeyed to Meron to rejoice in the celebration of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai and met their deaths in tragic circumstances leaving behind bereaved parents, widows, and orphaned children.

We do not pretend to understand the balance of the accounting of the Creator, whose abilities are unlimited. The Holy One Blessed be He specifically selected those who would merit to fulfill: "I will sanctify those who are close to me."

We would also like to address the question that many have asked: Rabbi Shimon, after all, was a holy *Tanna* and wanted us to come and rejoice in his celebration, so how could G-d have done such a thing? How could such a terrible catastrophe happen at such a joyous time? Why did the Holy One let such a thing happen that would halt the celebration and turn the festivities into mourning?

Furthermore, we will not take the approach of saying: "We are

guilty," "Things weren't properly organized," or "The writing was on the wall." We will leave it to those responsible for making such an analysis. As far as we are concerned, anything related to these matters should remain in the aspect of "the prudent man keeps silent at that time" (Amos 5:13). Our whole intention is solely to learn a lesson from the difficult and painful event of how to come close to the Holy One and how to move forward from here, in light of what is written in this week's Torah portion.

The *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) was built to atone for the Sin of the Golden Calf. From the day after Yom Kippur until *Rosh Chodesh* (the first day of the month of) Nissan, the entire Nation of Israel was involved in building the *Mishkan*, which began with the individual, heartfelt donations and ended with the completing of the building of the *Mishkan*. On the first day of Nissan the entire Nation of Israel came together with anticipation and excitement for this momentous event: Would the Creator really be reconciled with us and forgive us for the Sin of the Golden Calf, the rebellion against G-d?

Aaron entered the Tent of Meeting, and Moses with him, to pray that the *Shechina* (Divine Presence) should rest upon the *Mishkan*. The entire nation saw the *Shechina* descending: "A fire went out from before G-d and consumed the burnt-offering and the fats upon the Altar. When all the people saw this, they sang praises and fell upon their faces" (Leviticus 9:24). The Midrash relates that that very day "took ten crowns," and there was great joy in all the worlds.

Rabbi Shimon was a holy Tanna and wanted us to come and rejoice in his celebration, so how could G-d have done such a thing? How could such a terrible catastrophe happen at such a joyous time? Why did the Holy One let such a thing happen?

And it was precisely then, at the height of joy, excitement, and spiritual elevation, that a terrible disaster happened!

Nadav and Avihu—lofty tzaddikim, sons of the *Kohen Gadol* in whose merit and in their uncle Moshe's merit the *Shechina* rested upon the Nation of Israel—died because they offered up an unauthorized incense offering, even though it was done with the best intentions and supreme devotion. In a split second everything was turned upside down, and their joy was transformed into bereavement and sorrow. The Nation of Israel was in total shock and mourned the disaster: “And the whole House of Israel shall bewail the conflagration that G-d had kindled” (Leviticus 10:6).

The sorrow was unbearable, and it was precisely in the midst of such a tragedy that the glory and greatness Aaron the Kohen was revealed: “And Aaron was silent.” He did not say a word. He did not ask any questions. He simply accepted the truth of the Heavenly decree. He did not ask: How is it possible that at a time of such a revelation of G-d's glory and in such a holy place, that the Creator seems to have alienated us by permitting such a catastrophe to occur? Why did it happen now in the middle of such joy rather than at another time?

“Moses said to Aaron, “This is what G-d was referring to when He said, ‘I will be sanctified through those who are close to Me, and I will be glorified before all the people.’ And Aaron was silent.” (Leviticus 10:3).

It is hard to say anything—including even condolences—to the grieving and bereaved families who are trying to grapple with unbelievable heartache and mourning which is almost beyond comprehension. The entire nation mourns together with the families.

And at this time, one must praise them, for despite the harsh reality, despite the deep and appalling sorrow, there has never been such a high level of acceptance of the harsh judgment that we have seen during these days. This is without precedent, in the aspect of “And Aaron was silent.”

How does one move forward after a disaster like this?

This week's Torah portions are *Behar* and *Bechukotai* (two portions which read together on one Shabbat.) In *parshat Bechukotai*, the Torah warns that if we distance ourselves from G-d and His Torah, we will be exposed, G-d forbid, to misfortune and suffering. Despite everything, at the end of the rebuke the Torah writes, "Despite all this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not despise them or detest them to the point of destroying them and breaking My covenant with them. For I am G-d their Lord" (Leviticus 26:44).

These things are said in relation to the nations of the world—regarding their attempts to prevent us, either through force or temptation, from fulfilling the commandments and being close to G-d. And they have been partially successful as seen in the destruction of the Temple, assimilation of Jews with the nations, and our copying their behaviors. This is in addition to the troubles and suffering which is intensifying generally and individually with each day that passes, reaching unbearable levels, as if we were almost without hope, as our sages described it: "Each day is more cursed than the previous day." And in spite of everything, the Nation of Israel anticipates and yearns for the day it will come close to the Creator.



Our love for the Creator of the world is greater than all the temptations in the world!

The holy Zohar points out that word “*l’calotam*” (to wipe them out), which was written missing the letter vav, comes from the word “*caleh*.” Rabbi Natan compares it to the words: “*caltanafshi*,” meaning “My soul yearns” (Psalms 84:3) which is an expression of commitment and longing. He explains the verse as follows: “Do not be fed up.” The Holy One, blessed be He, is not fed up with His people, that he would “*l’calotam*” (wipe them out)—in the merit of their desire to draw close to the Creator even to the point that they must give up their lives for it. As it is written, “And I said, ‘Lost is my strength and my expectation from G-d...Yet this I bear in mind; therefore I still hope: G-d’s kindness surely has not ended, nor are His mercies exhausted” (Lamentations 3:18, 20-21).

This is essentially the only hope we have left in this bitter exile: our commitment and yearning to return to the Creator with all our being. We all long for and hope to return to the Creator, to our country and the Holy Torah, despite all the difficulties and suffering that we all have, and that the People of Israel experience as a nation in general—the social

riffs, the distance from the Creator, and the tragic events that each and every one of the members of *Am Yisrael* goes through privately.

These things are also hinted at in The Song of Songs: "I adjure you, nations destined to ascend to Jerusalem" (2:7). Rashi explains that the verse describes a monologue between *Am Yisrael* and the nations of the world: What purpose do you have in trying to separate us from our Creator, even though you succeeded in destroying the Temple. "If you dare provoke G-d to hate me or disturb His love for me while He still desires it ('*shetechpatz*')" (8:4). The word "*shetechpatz*" (desires it) is the language of "*tachpotz*" which is "*ratzon*" or will or determination. That is, what benefit will you have from such emotional manipulations as if we were assimilated into your Western culture and we no longer had any hope. In the end, you will not be able to distance us from the Creator, because our desire to return to the Creator is stronger than all temptations and manipulations in the world.

Similarly, despite the suffering that the Nation of Israel is going through, especially now when the disaster in Meron has shocked the entire Nation of Israel, we are all still all full of hope and faith in the Creator. It is precisely this faith which is the aspect of "until our soul departs," which will speed up and bring redemption, despite all the difficult events that we are going through.

May the Master of Consolation comfort the bereaved families that they should not have any further pain and suffering, and He should swallow up of death forever, and not allow tears to continue flowing down anyone's cheeks.

May G-d have mercy on the remnants of His people, and may He speedily send balm for the wounded and all the sick of his people Israel who will soon rise from sickness to a good life, so that soon we will merit to see and rejoice in the redemption of *Am Yisrael* and the resurrection and the building

of the Temple in our days, Amen!