

Facing Spiritual Bankruptcy

TORAH FOR TISHA B'AV - 5757

CAN WE STILL BENEFIT FROM THE ZECHUS AVOS?

“It is forbidden to learn Torah, *Nevi'im* [Prophets], and *Ksuvim* [Writings](on *Tisha B'av*)...but it is permissible to study the *Midrash* on *Megillas Aicha* [the scroll or Book of Lamentations]...and (also) commentary on *Aicha*” (*Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim*, 554: 1 and 2). Since *Aicha* is one of the several permissible types of learning today, we will focus on a *pasuk* [verse] in this *megilla*.

“**This (ZOS)** I will recall to my mind, therefore I will have hope” (*Aicha, Perek Gimmel, Pasuk Chof Alef* [Lamentations, chapter 3, verse 21]). What is “this”?

There are various interpretations based on the continuity of the *psukim* [verses], but let us refer to the *Meam Loez* for some *Midrashic* explanations. The Torah itself is called “zos”, as you know from *Devarim* [Deuteronomy] 4, 44 - “And THIS (*v'zos*) is the Torah which Moshe set before the *Bnai Yisroel* [the Children of Israel]”. Of course, we say this *pasuk* while *hagba'ah* [raising the *sefer* Torah], is performed in *shul* [synagogue.] Since “zos” hints to the Torah, our *pasuk* in *Aicha* is saying the following: the Torah brings tidings of salvation and comfort. We must take to heart the lessons of optimism in the Torah, since this Torah is all that remains with us in the face of the utter destruction brought about by the *churban* [destruction of the Temple]. As we await redemption in *golus* [exile], we can only look to Torah study for our consolation. This is the meaning of “*Zos* (the existence of Torah) *ashiv el libi, al kain ochil*” - when I realize that we DO have the Torah remaining with us, I can still have some hope.

Here is another interpretation for our *pasuk*, found in the *Meam Loez*. THIS I will answer to my heart - the fact that so much tragedy and destruction has already occurred. In other words, the calamities will not cause me to be more pessimistic. Just the opposite! Since all the devastation and doom predicted by the prophets has come true, it means that salvation is around the corner. The *nevi'im* told us that after the darkness comes much light. Hashem's measure of benevolence is immeasurably greater than His punishments. If so, and all this tragedy has transpired, relief must be imminent. “*Al kain ochil*” - after considering this, I can have some optimism.

Yet a third approach should be looked at, also brought to us by the *Yalkut Meam Loez*. The word “zos” is spelled “*zayin, alef, tof*”. In reality, these three letters stand for a statement of *Chazal* [our Sages], found in the *Gemara Shabbos* 55A. There it says that the merit of the forefathers has run out. In other words, were we to compare their *zechuyos* [collective merits] to funds in a bank account, we can say that the balance is now zero. We can no longer draw from those funds, arousing Hashem's compassion by using the credit the *avos* [forefathers] built up for us with their righteous deeds. That is also the hint in our *pasuk*. The letters “*ז - zayin, א - alef, ט - tof*” stand for “*zechus avos tama*” [the merit of the fathers has been exhausted]. *זאט ZOS* (*zechus avos tama*) I will put to my heart - I will be reminded that the *zechus avos* [merit of the forefathers] has run out. “*Al kain ochil*” (second half of our *pasuk* in *Aicha* which we have been studying) - I will be forced to hope to Hashem for mercy. In addition, this explains the next *pasuk* in *Aicha*. “The kindnesses of Hashem do not cease; His loving-kindnesses do not fail.”

Tosfos on *Shabbos* 55A remarks that although the *zechus avos* has been used up, the *bris avos* [the covenant Hashem made with the forefathers] regarding the destiny of the Jewish people, still remains intact. This can be proven from *Vayikra* [Leviticus] 26, 42, where G-d says He will remember the *bris* [covenant] of the forefathers, and this means even after *golus*. In *davening* [prayer], when we mention Avraham, Yitzchok, and Yaacov, we are not trying to “withdraw money” from the savings account known as *zechus avos*, since no balance remains. We are simply arousing the mercy of Hashem by reminding Him of the *bris avos*. *Tosfos* even entertains the possibility that it is only for *reshaim* [wicked people] that the *zechus avos* is no longer of any benefit. For *tzadikim* [righteous people], it might still be available. Consequently, we mention them in *tefilla* [prayer], relying on the fact that *tzadikim* can still access the account of *zechus avos*.

True, our *pasuk* in *Aicha* might be hinting that the *zechus avos* is used up, like the simple *pschat* [plain meaning] in the *Gemara Shabbos*. Even so, there is room for hopefulness. We need to try with all our might to draw close to Hashem, to stir His mercies whenever we are able.

The presence of the Torah even in *golus* can give us some hope, and we can also be inspired by the fact that the tremendous devastation of *churban* has befallen us already. This makes room for the tidings of salvation to come true. The *zechus avos* might not be available anymore, but we can certainly look to Hashem for encouragement on this tragic day of *Tisha B'av* [historically, a day of mourning].

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