YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Halakha and Jewish History**

**Rav Aviad Tabory**

**Shiur #03:**

**The Crusades**

**May 1096**

**Part III:**

**Religious Practices Commemorating the Crusades**

The horrific massacres of the Crusades, which took place during the 11th century in Europe, left the Jewish communities there in shambles. Over the years, certain customs and prayers were added for the commemoration of those who were killed.

These practices were introduced in the Ashkenazic communities and not in the Sephardic ones, as these atrocities occurred mainly in Germany.

Historically, these practices have great value, as they serve as precedents for introducing and creating new prayers and customs, as was the case in the 20th century, when Jewish communities were exploring ways to memorialize those who perished in the Holocaust.

In today’s *shiur* we will learn about the various ways in which the Jewish people commemorate the massacres which took place during the Crusades. They are the following:

* The special poem *Av Ha-rachamim;*
* Additional *kinot* (dirges or elegies) which are recited on Tisha Be-Av; and
* The customs of mourning (*minhagei aveilut*) during the months of Iyar and Sivan.

***Av Ha-rachamim***

It seems that there was an early custom to mention the names of the dead on Shabbat and festivals.

Rav Tzidkiyahu ben Avraham Anav (Rome, 1210 – c. 1280), quoting his brother Rav Binyamin the doctor, explains that this custom takes place after the reading of the Haftara. The reason is because Shabbat, being a day of rest, is a reflection of *Olam Ha-ba* (the World to Come) and therefore a day on which the dead also rest and are not judged.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Based on this, nowadays the custom in Ashkenazic communities is to recite *Yizkor*, a prayer for the dead (including one’s own loved ones, regardless of the circumstances of their deaths), on Yom Kippur, as well as the final days of Sukkot, Pesach and Shavuot.

Similarly, a communal prayer was written to remember those who perished during the Crusades.

This poem, beginning with the words *Av Ha-rachamim* (Father of Mercy, referring to God), has become part of the *Musaf* service of Shabbat.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In this poem, not only do we mention “*kehillot ha-kodesh (*the holy communities) who sacrificed themselves to sanctify the name of God,” we also ask God to avenge their deaths.

The poem is printed in the classic Ashkenazic prayer-book; however, there are various customs as to when the prayer is recited.

In some communities, the prayer is recited every Shabbat, expect *Shabbat Mevarkhim,* the Shabbat on which we celebrate the coming new moon; however, it is always recited approaching the months of Iyar and Sivan,[[3]](#footnote-3) the months in which the massacres of the Crusades occurred.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Others say it exclusively before Shavuot and before Tisha Be-Av.

***Kinot***

*Kinot* are recited on Tisha Be-Av, primarily in the morning. Although the day is primarily focused on the destruction of both Temples and Jerusalem (first by Babylonia, then by Rome), other tragedies are also commemorated.

Thus, rabbis and poets (*paytanim* in Hebrew, singular: *paytan*) have written *kinot* about the massacres during the Crusades as well as other tragedies that took place in the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries. One *kina*, *Sha’ali Serufa Ba-eish*, written by the Maharam of Rothenberg, tells of the tragedy of the burning of the Talmud in Paris on June 17, 1242.

When the question arose about commemorating the Holocaust, some suggested writing new *kinot*.[[5]](#footnote-5) Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik voiced his opinion against this proposal.

His main argument is that nowadays there are no people worthy of writing an elegy that can do justice to the tragedies of the Shoah:

When I read the lamentations on the destruction and the dead of the German communities of Shapira, Worms and Magenza I think of Warsaw, Vilna and Kovna… there is no need to compose new poems and lamentations or prayers. Who would dare today to compose new prayers? Our *tefilat amida* was written by Ezra and 120 elders of the great Knesset. Amongst them prophets. Even the later poems were written by great sages who were part of the mesorah…[[6]](#footnote-6)

**Mourning at the Seder?**

Others went further, suggesting that we should include the Holocaust as part of our most joyous observances, such as the Seder on the night of Pesach.

Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik took particular issue with this latter idea:

Jewish tradition had introduced a separate memorial service for the deceased on the three pilgrim festivals and on *Yom Kippur*, which in its initial phase was probably confined to commemoration of those who incurred a martyr's death. (It apparently came to existence in the period following the Crusades. The recital of the *Av ha-Rahamim* prayer as a continuation of the memorial service and its place in the regular Sabbath service corroborate this point). There is no reason why we should add a new memorial for the martyrs of the most recent catastrophe as a part of the *Seder* service, which has been dedicated to the great miracle of the Jewish redemption and survival. The superhuman historical experience of Jewish martyrdom has found other media of expression and manifestation not connected with the epic of the exodus. Neither the scholars who survived the Bar Kokhba debacle nor the generation of the Crusades nor the contemporaries of the Spanish Inquisition nor those at the time of the horrible Cossack pogroms of 1648 found it necessary to mar the joyous spirit of the holy night by commemorating the sad experience they lived through.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**A Special Fast-Day?**

Still others suggested to set a day aside to remember the Holocaust, as we do today. The Rav disagreed. He argued that Tisha Be-Av is a day on which all tragedies are remembered, and thus there is no room for a special day to commemorate the Shoah.

In an article dealing with this matter, the Rav explains (emphasis mine):

The same consideration holds for a special fast-day for the Holocaust. In Eretz Yisrael they tried to establish a new fast-day for those who were killed by the Nazis. They said there should be a separate fast-day to commemorate the deaths of six million Jews. But they did not succeed. I once told Ben-Gurion that there had been many occasions to establish a fast-day for the Crusades but those in positions of authority chose not to do so. I pointed to the formulation toward the end of the *kinah* beginning “*Mi yitten roshi mayim*” that we recite about the Crusades. As indicated earlier, the author of the *kinah* says explicitly and unequivocally that we do not add days of mourning: “*Ve-khi ein le-hosif mo’ed shever ve-tav’erah.”* I told Ben-Gurion that the *paytan* here took a different position on this matter, and there was no reason to violate his instructions. Yes, there should be a fast-day, of course, but it should be Tish’ah be-Av. It should be done with *kinot*, with the recital of verses from *Tehillim*, but not on an additional day **for the same** **reason that they did not introduce a separate fast-day or day of mourning for the great scholars killed in Speyer and Mayence.**[[8]](#footnote-8)

***Minhagei Aveilut* during *Sefirat Ha-omer***

It was said that Rabbi Akiva had twelve thousand pairs of disciples, from Gabbatha to Antipatris; and all of them died at the same time because they did not treat each other with respect…

A Tanna taught: All of them died between Pesach and Shavuot.

(BT Yevamot 62b)

*Sefirat ha-omer*, the counting of seven weeks from the second day of Pesach until Shavuot, should be a joyous time, but this tradition about Rabbi Akiva’s students has made it a time of *minhagei aveilut*.

Rav Yosef Karo explains that this entails no weddings and no haircuts.

Lag Ba-Omer, the thirty-third day of counting, signals the end of this period of mourning, he writes.[[9]](#footnote-9)

However, the Rema presents an alternative tradition to keep the *minhagei aveilut* from the second day of Iyar until Shavuot (which also works out to thirty-three days).[[10]](#footnote-10)

Furthermore, there are sources which indicate that during these days, Ashkenazic Jews add stringencies like not bathing and not wearing new clothes.[[11]](#footnote-11)

What is the source of these customs?

The answer is that the Sephardic customs of *aveilut* are solely based on the Talmudic tradition of Rabbi Akiva’s students dying between Pesach and Shavuot.

However, due to the tragic events of the Crusades which occurred over Iyar and early Sivan, Ashkenazic Jews added stringencies and changed the original date. Thus, they combined both tragedies and set customs of mourning for both tragic events.

1. *Shibbolei Ha-leket*, *Shabbat* 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Regarding the theories as to who who wrote this prayer, see Ephraim Kanarfogel, “*Al Nuschah U-mkorah shel Tefillat Av Ha-rachamim,”* *Yeshurun* 27 (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Maharil, *Minhagim* 21a. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Rema, *OC* 284:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For a detailed article on this topic, see: Mordechai Meyer, “*Zekhor Na Ha-bekhiyot Bi-tehom Ha-geviyot,”* *Akdamut* 9, pp. 77-99. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Rav J.J. Schacter, “Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik on the Tisha B’Av Kinos”, *Jewish* *Action*, Volume 54, Number 4 (Summer 1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Community, Covenant and Commitment: Selected Letters and Communications*, pp. 120-121. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *The Lord is Righteous in All His Ways*, Ktav Publishing, pp. 299-300. See also Rav Herschel Schachter, *Nefesh HaRav,* p. 199. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *OC* 493:1-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Daniel Sperber, *Minhagei Yisrael,* Volume 1, pp.106-107. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)