

Kinah #10: Eichah Yashvah Havatzelet ha-Sharon

Speaker: Rabbi Dr. Jacob J Schacter

Date: Jul 25, 2021

This kinah focuses exclusively on kohanim and on cities of kohanim. The kohanim were divided into twenty-four families, each one called a mishmar, and each mishmar ministered for at least two weeks a year in the bet ha-mikdash. In turn, each mishmar was divided into seven batei av, each of which served for one day that week. Thus, every kohen served in the bet ha-mikdash for some two days a year. We know the names of some of these families; some are mentioned in Nach and some in the Gemara. In addition, here we have a list of the twenty-four cities in which the kohanim lived; there were entire cities that consisted of only kohanim.

This is not only an ancient reality. Rishonim deal with how aliyot on Shabbat morning are distributed in such cities where everyone is a kohen, who gets she'ni or shlishi, etc.¹ The island of Djerba off the coast of Tunisia is known for its unusually high percentage of kohanim. There is a local tradition there, that as far back as churban bayit rishon large numbers of kohanim escaped from Jerusalem to Djerba.

Why do we single out kohanim when it comes to the kinot of Tisha B'Av? Simply speaking, perhaps the reason is that they were the one group most directly impacted by the churban because they could not do the avodah there any longer. It affected them more intensely than it affected any other Jews. Rabbi Soloveitchik offered a different suggestion. He often explained that they are singled out for their bravery and heroism. How long did it take the Babylonians (first bet ha-mikdash) or Romans (second bet ha-mikdash) to get from the walls of the city to the har ha-bayit? In the case of the Babylonians there is a disagreement between the Bavli (Taanit 28b: 30 days) and the Yerushalmi (Taanit 4:5: 21 days); in the case of the Romans all agree that it took them 21 days — 21 or 30 days were necessary to progress the distance that today is a six-minute walk! And the reason for this was, said Rabbi Soloveitchik, because the kohanim were valiantly and desperately fighting to protect the bet ha-mikdash. Since they were the ones, more than any other group, who heroically extended themselves to save the bet ha-mikdash, we give them special consideration.

I would like to suggest another reason the kohanim are especially deserving of a separate kinah on Tisha B'Av. We know that a kohen cannot do the avodah if he drinks wine. We have a pale imitation of this ruling on Simchat Torah, during which we follow the unusual practice of duchening during Shacharit to avoid the kohanim duchening in their usual spot during Musaf, where they may do so under the influence of the wine (or other alcohol) they may have drunk after their aliyot on that day. The Gemara (Taanit 17a) states that when the bet ha-mikdash was standing, the kohanim whose time it was to serve had to be careful because, depending on the circumstances, they might be pressed into service at a moment's notice. The Gemara continues and states that even these days, when there is no bet ha-mikdash, kohanim need to be careful because, as Rashi explains, the bet ha-mikdash may be rebuilt suddenly and their services will be necessary.² While the Talmud goes on to cite Rebbe's counter ruling, this notion that the bet ha-mikdash may be rebuilt at any moment is so powerful that it impacts normative halachah even in the 21st century. This ruling demonstrates that the kohanim, more than any other group, had to always live, in a practical way, with the expectation of a rebuilt Temple. In fact, one of the Geonim had a tradition, brought down from his family of kohanim, to let his nails grow long so that, at a moment's notice, he would be able to properly participate in a particular Temple ritual that required long nails.³ He is one of the Geonim, living roughly nine hundred years or so after the churban, and yet the possible immanence of a rebuilt bet ha-mikdash affected his personal hygiene!

I would like to suggest that perhaps this is why the kohanim, more than any other group, are worthy of their own kinah mourning for the destruction of the bet ha-mikdash. Every day they were forced to confront, in a most practical way, the possibility of a rebuilt Temple, and so the passage of every day without that taking place was for them a source of extra sadness and disappointment. Their mourning on Tisha B'Av thus deserves being acknowledged separately.

Endnotes

1. See Teshuvot ha-Rashba Meyuhas le-ha-Ramban #186. My thanks to my rabbi, Rabbi Yosef Adler, for this reference.

2. See Rashi ad. loc., s.v. asur lishtot yayin kol oto ha-סמך, "ש.מא יבנה בית המקדש ותכבד העבודה ויהיה זה צריך לעבוד."

3. B. M. Levin, Otzar ha-Geonim, Taanit, p. 30.