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What Makes You Feel Ashamed?

Tom Shafer has made a donation to Maqom and is sponsoring this Talmud study to honor the memory of the 1st Battalion of the 41st infantry (Mechanized) and all the officers and men who served in this unit in Europe in World War II.

Tom writes:

I'm making this dedication in a Jewish publication because this unit was a spearhead in General Patton's drive into Southern Germany and Czechoslovakia and liberated our people in at least two camps. As a Veteran's Administration physician, I have been privileged to minister of God's healing gifts to several men from this unit who, even fifty years later, are still haunted by the memories of what they saw. The only regret any of them has ever expressed was that they weren't able to get there sooner. I ask that you remember these "Righteous of the Nations of the World" in your thoughts and prayers as I do.

Since April 16 is Yom Hashoa, I thought this would be an appropriate time to make the dedication. Thank you Tom!

Our next section of Gemara continues to outline the details of the public fast: how the ashes are placed on the participants, and why as well as some details and theory of the choreography of praying outside.

Bavli Taanit, 15b-16a, Steinsaltz Edition, pp. 13-14, Gemara:

[We learned in the Mishnah:] Each and every one places [ashes] on his head.

Let the Nasi and the president of the court also take [ashes] by themselves and place [them] on their heads!

What is the difference that another person takes [ashes] and places [them] on them [the Nasi and the president of the court]? Rabbi Abba of Caesarea said: Someone who humiliates himself is not like someone who is humiliated by others.

And where does one place them [the ashes]?

Rabbi Yitzhak said: On the place of the tefillin as it is said: "To appoint to those who mourn in Zion, to give them an ornament instead of ashes. (Isaiah 61:3)"

[The following are a mnemonic sign for matters the Gemara will now discuss about a fast day]: Open area, ark, and sackcloth, ashes, ashes, burial and Moriah.

Why do we go out to the open area?

Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba said: To say, "We cried out in private but we were not answered. Let us put ourselves to shame in public.

Reish Lakish said: "We have been exiled. Let our exile atone for us."

What is [the difference] between them?

There is [a difference] between them where one goes out from [one] synagogue to [another] synagogue.

Background:

As usual, our passage requires some explanation before we can analyze it.

What the Gemara Considers Shameful:

The Gemara here feels that it's more shameful for the Nasi and the President of the Court to have ashes placed upon them than to put the ashes on themselves. In the parallel passage in the Yerushalmi, it appears that the *shamash*, the person who helped to run the services, would put ashes on some of the people and that those he didn't reach were adjured to put the ashes on themselves, so it was not only the leadership to whom these ashes were applied.

Ashes and Tefillin:

The ashes are placed in the spot in the center of the forehead where the tefillin rests, right near the hairline, in order to be able to fulfill Isaiah's words. When the rains come, the ashes will be replaced by a "garland" or an "ornament" and the Jewish ornament, par excellence, is tefillin.

Mnemonic Devices:

As you have just been through a seder, the memory of the mnemonic device there (regarding the ten plagues) should be fresh in your mind. The sages often developed these aids to memory. They also serve, within the document as we have it now, as a good framing device or set induction. You certainly know now what's coming up and in what order the issues will be raised!

Praying in Another Synagogue v. Praying in a Square:

We have two different ideas as to what should happen symbolically and physically when the congregation takes the ark out into the square. Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba thinks that the prayers should continue out in the square so that all the world should know of the community's shame and fear (although, surely, the drought is already public knowledge). Reish Lakish thinks that the process of exile should be embodied in leaving one synagogue and entering another.

A Word of Consolation:

The words of Isaiah, partially cited in this piece of Gemara, seem a beautiful message of consolation on this Yom Hashoa:

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me;
Because the Lord has anointed me
To bring good tidings unto the humble;
He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,
To proclaim liberty to the captives,
And the opening of the eyes to them that are bound;
To proclaim the year of the Lord's good pleasure,
And the day of vengeance of our God;
To comfort all that mourn;
To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion,
To give unto them a garland for ashes,
The oil of joy for mourning,
The mantle of praise for the spirit of heaviness;
That they might be called terebinths of righteousness,
The planting of the Lord, wherein He might glory.
(Isaiah 61:1-3)

May these words be fulfilled speedily and in our own day!

Discussion Questions:

1. In theory, what is more shameful, to embarrass oneself in public or to have someone else do it? Personally now, which of these two is more shameful? Which is more powerful, to be blessed by someone else or to bless yourself? Why? Today, what would make our highest leadership in the Jewish community feel most vulnerable and shamed in a ritual setting? In your own life, how does the source of your greatest glory (here, tefillin) also become the locus of your greatest shame (the ashes)?

2. How much difference does a prayer setting make? Which, in your opinion, would be more powerful: praying in the public square (Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba's view) or praying in another synagogue (Reish Lakish's view)? Imagine actually choreographing this in the Jewish section of your town where synagogues are in close proximity to one another. How would it feel to go outside and pray or to start in one synagogue and end in another?

3. What mnemonic devices--poems, acronyms, etc.--do you use in your everyday life? For example, HOMES is the way most people remember the names of the Great Lakes.

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