

## CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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### THE CLASH OF SYMBOLS

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By their very nature, symbols wordlessly convey a great deal of information. Have you watched any pre-9/11 movies that show the twin towers? They used to be a symbol of prosperity and power; an instantly-recognizable message that the location was New York City. Now they are symbols of savagery and suffering. And yet the destroyed buildings became a symbol of something much greater: that the human spirit, no matter how ugly it is in its physical "container" may have great inward beauty. This is difficult for most of us to understand. We have an inherent (and probably universal) bias to believe that outward beauty is a reflection of inward grace. Judaism has a text to help us see things differently.

On this, the second yartzeit of 9/11, the powerful prophetic image of Isaiah's Suffering Servant (52:13-53:5) may be a useful paradigm to begin understanding how these towers of power have been transformed into a symbol of compassion. The Suffering Servant in Judaism refers to the entire Israelite community in Babylonian exile.

Behold, my servant shall prosper, he shall be exalted and extolled, and be very high. As many were astonished at you, saying, Surely his visage is too marred to be human, and his form, to be from humanity[*'s mold*]: so shall he startle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths: for that which they had not been told them shall they see; and that which they had not heard they shall comprehend. Who [would have] believed our report? and to whom is the arm of God's arm revealed? For he grew up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he had no form nor comeliness, that we should look at him, and no countenance, that we should desire him. He was [the most] despised and rejected of men; a man of pains, and knowing sickness: and we hid (as it were) our faces from him; he was despised, and we considered him not. But he has borne our sicknesses and endured our pains; yet we considered him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded because of our transgressions, bruised because of our iniquities: his sufferings were that we might have peace, and by his injury we are healed. (Isaiah 52:13-53:5)

The Suffering Servant appears in Deutero-Isaiah, i.e., the author of Isaiah chapters 40-55 who lived in Babylonia during the exile and wrote during the sixth century B.C.E. The Suffering Servant is the literary creation of a stateless teacher, trying to define Judaism in exile. He has no role in politics, war or the Temple service. Rather, it is through his devotion in the face of suffering by which he attains his purpose. This description could also fit the situation of Jews after the Temple's destruction in 70 C.E. Significantly, it is the sages who will later emphasize this concept: that suffering may replace the atonement previously found in the Temple Service.

From whence [do we know] that charity and [deeds of] loving kindness are a great intercessor and [bring] great peace and between Israel and their Father in heaven? As it is said, "Thus said God: Do not enter into the house of mourning [neither go to lament nor bemoan them. For I have taken away my peace from this people, says the Lord, both love and mercy.] (Jeremiah 16:5)" "Love"--this is [deeds of] loving kindness. "And mercy"--this is charity. [This] teaches that charity and [deeds of] loving kindness are great [makers of] peace between Israel and their Father in heaven. (T. Peah 4:21//B.Baba Batra 10a)

The Servant image as a whole, could naturally be seen as a political metaphor, not only a moral one, for Jewish readers of later eras. The Servant suffers as the faithful of Israel suffer. He is downcast as the exiles are downcast. The Servant's disabilities are a political metaphor: to be stripped of one's country and cult is to be disabled. But deeds of

loving kindness and charity are the "medicine" that cures the "Suffering Servant" of all ills.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. Has our national suffering increased our compassion for others? In what ways?
2. Christians often refer to this passage as a prediction of Jesus' birth. How would you answer them?
3. How can we learn to look inside people rather than focusing on their outer presentations? This is a true spiritual discipline. How would you start taking steps to achieve that goal?