

Rabbi Dr. Aharon Adler



The Execution of Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua

צִדִּיק רַבִּי אֱלֶעָזָר בֶּן שְׁמוּעַ בְּאַחֲרוֹנָה נִהָרַג בְּמִדְקָרָה. יוֹם עֶרֶב שַׁבַּת הָיָה זְמַן קִדּוּשׁ וַיִּקְדֹּשׁ וַיִּקְרָא.
חָרַב שְׁלֹפּוֹ עָלָיו וְלֹא הִנְחוּהוּ בְּחַיִּים לְגִמְרָה. יָצְתָה נִשְׁמָתוֹ בְּבְרָא אֱלֹקִים, יוֹצֵר וְצָר צוּרָה.

The righteous Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua was killed with a chisel.
It was Sabbath eve, the time of Kiddush, **and as he recited it,**
They drew the sword upon him, not permitting him to live to finish it.
His soul departed at the words **"G-d created,"** the Creator and Sculptor of forms.

One of the central themes of the Tisha B'Av *kinot* is the catastrophic collapse of Torah authority, along with its giants, as foretold in Eicha 2:9, "Her king and her princes are among the nations: there is no Torah; her prophets also find no vision from the L-rd." This theme reverberates throughout the *kinot* in a plethora of historical settings, including the Temple's destruction, the Bar Kochba defeat, the Crusades in medieval times, as well the modern-day Holocaust.

One particular elegy stands out which is dedicated exclusively to this theme: the disintegration of the Torah world. *Arzei HaLevanon*, composed by the 13th-century Ashkenazi Rabbi Meir ben Yechiel, bewails the martyrdom of the famous 10 great scholars (עֲשָׂרָה הַרוּגֵי מַלְכוּת) executed by the Romans in the aftermath of the Second Temple's destruction and the Bar Kochba rebellion. In this particular Tisha B'Av version of these tragic episodes (there are four such versions - including the Yom Kippur version of *Eila Ezkara*), each of the Sages murdered is enveloped with a particular mitzvah reflecting enormous significance to his martyrdom.

In the case of Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua, the *mitzvah* is the *Kiddush* recitation on Friday night. Whether absolutely historical or purely allegorical, the poet provides the setting - the murder takes place while reciting the *Kiddush*, along with a focus upon the precise word in the *Kiddush* - thereby leaving the *Kiddush* unfinished.

We learn that this all happens while Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua is still reciting the preliminary verses to *Kiddush*. He is now in the middle of the third verse, which includes the word, "וַיִּקְדֹּשׁ":

וַיִּבְרָךְ... אֶת יוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי וַיִּקְדֹּשׁ אֹתוֹ כִּי בּוֹ שַׁבַּת מְקַל
מִלְאֲכָתוֹ אֲשֶׁר בָּרָא אֱלֹקִים לַעֲשׂוֹת.

This is the meaning in the poem: "זְמַן קִדּוּשׁ" וַיִּקְדֹּשׁ וַיִּקְרָא. We then learn that at this very moment the execution takes place and that Rabbi Elazar is one word shy of completing the verse. His life expires as he is saying, "בָּרָא אֱלֹקִים," with the final word, "לַעֲשׂוֹת," remaining unsaid.

In his commentary to Bereishit 2:3, Ramban proposes that all the days of Creation represent a blueprint for six millennia of world history. The ultimate objective and aspiration is to move the world into the eschatological seventh millennium. This is the pro-active meaning of "לַעֲשׂוֹת."

Clearly, Rabbi Akiva and colleagues viewed the Bar Kochba uprising as a prelude to Messianic days. They were engaged in "לַעֲשׂוֹת" activities, in their gallant attempt to move the Jewish nation out of exile and usher in "the end of days" as quickly as possible. But, tragically, Divine Providence had a very different plan for the nation. Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua would not be allowed to utter the word "לַעֲשׂוֹת" in his *Kiddush*, as the entire nation's drive to implement "לַעֲשׂוֹת" would fall short. And for this we weep and cry on Tisha B'Av.

Most remarkable is a similar thought echoed by our Talmudic Sages (Ta'anit 29a)

in reference to the final moments leading up to the First Temple's destruction. There it states that the Levites were singing the appropriate Psalm (94) in utter desperation, given the impending catastrophe. Approaching the final verse (23), "And He has brought upon them their own iniquity and will cut them off in their own evil" (וַיִּשָּׁבַע עֲלֵיהֶם אֶת אוֹנָם וַיִּבְרַעֲתָם יְצִמִיתֵם) Chazal say, "לֹא הִסְפִּיקוּ לומר יְצִמִיתֵם ה' אֱלֹקֵינוּ עַד שֶׁבָּאוּ, גוֹיִם וַיִּבְשׂוּם" and they hardly had time to say, "The L-rd our G-d will cut them off," when the heathens came and captured them."

The Talmud concludes with an ambiguous comment: "The same thing happened in the Second Temple" (וְכֵן בְּשֵׁנִיָּה). The precise details of Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua's execution might very well be that which is alluded to in that closing Talmudic comment, "וְכֵן בְּשֵׁנִיָּה."

On Tisha B'Av, we beg for אֱלֹקֵינוּ ה' יְצִמִיתֵם, as we engage in doing our part: "לַעֲשׂוֹת," in ushering in the era of full redemption speedily in our days.

Rabbi Dr. Aharon Adler is a former student of, and special assistant to, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik.



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