The Importance of “Seeing” the Churban

Ominous clouds of destruction and dispersion hang heavily over the Three Weeks. On the one hand, Shabbat Chazon is just one day, no different than the others during this period leading up to Tisha B’Av. On the other hand, an insight of Rav Kalonymous Kalmish Shapiro, the Piaseczner Rebbe, suggests there might be more to it than that.

The Rebbe, as is well known, delivered inspirational derashot during the last years of the Warsaw Ghetto, a collection of which were published as Aish Kodesh. As it happens, the final piece in that remarkable work, the very last derasha Rav Shapiro delivered, just a few short days before the deportations from the ghetto began, took place on Shabbat Chazon, July 18, 1942.

Imagine discussing the Churban while living through one: what would you say? The Rebbe begins with a simple question. Why is the universal custom to call this Shabbat “Shabbat Chazon”? While the name comes from the opening words of the haftarah, תושב ירושלים כר פרום, (the vision of Yeshayahu), this is insufficient to truly answer the question; after all, we read a haftarah every Shabbat and Yom Tov and yet Shabbat Chazon is one of the very few instances when the words of the haftarah define the entire Shabbat. What deeper message is conveyed by these words?

The Midrash (Shir Hashirim Rabbah 3:2) notes that 10 different expressions are used throughout Tanach to describe the process of prophecy. The Midrash lists terms such as dibbur, amira and tzivui, but it is chazon which is characterized as חזון, the most difficult and painful form of prophecy.

Rav Shapiro explains this assertion based on the experience familiar to us all – but highlighted poignantly by what was occurring to him and others in the ghetto – that there is a vast difference between hearing about something and actually seeing it. It’s one thing to hear about a tragedy, but it’s quite another to witness it.

Typically, the prophet was told about a future or potential calamity – he heard the bad news. However, there were rare instances when G-d actually showed the prophet something terrible that was going to happen to the Jewish people. קא יראתי – the prophet had a vision, he actually saw the calamities that would befall the nation, and that was חזון, a uniquely painful experience.

Nevertheless, continues the Rebbe, it’s typically from the most intense pain that a glimmer of hope emerges. He notes that when G-d first spoke to Moshe and told him the time of the redemption had arrived, He mentions both that קריאת ראותו וראיהיך, “He has seen the affliction of His people,” and “He knows of their pain” (Shemot 3:7).

Obviously if G-d sees what’s happening then He knows about it as well; why the need for both phrases?

The Aish Kodesh explains that even though there was a higher, positive purpose to the servitude in Egypt, once G-d truly saw, as it were – קא יראתי – the pain of the Jewish people, then קא יראתי, all G-d knew, all He cared about, was how He could relieve their pain. In other words, it was only after the true depth of ביני ישראל’s suffering was seen that the process of redemption began.

The Rebbe suggests that it is because of this dialectic we refer to “Shabbat Chazon.” The word chazon gives appropriate expression to the horror of the impending destruction and, at the same time, it also indicates that G-d truly “saw” the pain of the Jewish people. As a result, He was already planning the future redemption. Thus, the haftarah concludes on a high note, ציון בתפלה, “Zion will be redeemed through justice and righteousness” (Yeshayahu 1:27).

Rav Shapiro’s powerful words – inspired by a prophecy from the original Churban and delivered during the churban of the Holocaust – articulate a profound principle of Jewish belief.

The arc of Jewish history bends inevitably towards redemption. No matter how difficult or painful it may be at times, the overall direction remains the same – chazon follows by nachamu and galut eventually leads to geula.

A few years after the Piaseczner Rebbe and millions of others were murdered, we merited the establishment of a Jewish State! In the merit of our continued mourning over the original galut may we soon merit the complete and final geula.