

Parshas Ki Savo 5771

THE UNWRITTEN CALAMITY

One of the hallmarks of this *parshah* is the sizeable section known as the *tochachah* – the “rebuke.” Moshe Rabbeinu exhorts the people to remain loyal to the Torah by elaborating on the inevitable consequences of their actions. Should they observe the *mitzvos*, they are guaranteed bountiful blessing and peace. However, an abandonment of the Torah will result in a host of misfortunes in the form of maladies, an unleashing of the elements, enemy plunder, exile, death and destruction.

After presenting a wide-ranging list of terrifying events, the verse then adds a curious item: “Additionally, Hashem will bring upon you all manner of sickness and calamity, which are not written in this book of the Torah” (*Devarim 28:61*). Although not explicitly named, the Medrash asserts that the verse actually refers here to a specific tragedy: the death and disappearance of *tzaddikim* (the righteous).

That a *tzaddik*’s death is considered a tragedy of immense proportions should not be surprising; after all, the Sages consider it equivalent to the burning of the Beis Hamikdash itself (*Rosh Hashanah 18b*). What does appear somewhat mysterious about the Medrash’s assertion, however, is the derivation; where did the Medrash see in this verse a reference to the specific misfortune of the death of *tzaddikim*? A tragedy “not written in this book of the Torah” could, ostensibly, be referring to almost anything!

A closer examination of the Sages’ view of the passing of a *tzaddik* could help clarify the matter, as we shall

Dedicated in loving memory of

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by his loving children, Mr. & Mrs. Dovid Presser, Brooklyn, NY

לזכר נשמת האשה חוה בת רב ירוחם ע"ה

soon see:

GOOD DEATH AND BAD DEATH

The Mishnah in Sanhedrin (8:5) provides the following contrast between the wicked and the righteous:

מיתתו של רשעים הנגזה להו והנגזה לעולם, ולצדיקים, רע להו ורע לעולם.

“The death of *resha'im* (the wicked) is a benefit to them and to the world at large. The death of *tzaddikim*, however, is detrimental to them and to the world.”

The death of a *rasha* is obviously good news for the world; people can now rest easier, no longer concerned about the harm that could be perpetrated by these evil schemers. But his death benefits the *rasha* himself. Having been removed from this world, the *rasha* can no longer continue to commit sins. As such, the store of retribution awaiting him will stop growing. It is precisely for the converse reason that the death of a *tzaddik* is personally detrimental, as his ability to add to his store of merits has been terminated (*Rashi, Sanhedrin 71b*).

For the world at large, the death of a *tzaddik* is obviously a tragic and difficult blow. But the exact nature of its calamitous effects on the world is the source of some discussion. *Rashi (ibid.)* highlights the substantial advantages posed by the *tzaddik*’s presence. Through his direction and instruction, he provides his generation with the means to improve their ways. Through the merit of his own deeds, the people are afforded protection from evil and harm. The people are thus deprived of these crucial benefits with his demise.

There is yet another aspect associated with the *tzaddik*’s death, one alluded to by the *Yad Ramah (ibid.)*. He cites

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of יוסף חיים בן אלכסנדר ע"ה, a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his neshamah.

a passage from Yeshayah (57:1), where the prophet laments: “The *tzaddik* is lost, and no man takes to heart... no one discerns that it is on account of the (coming) evil the *tzaddik* was taken.” In his commentary to this verse, the *Radak* sounds a somewhat ominous note. Apparently, the death of a *tzaddik* presages some coming misfortune. Hashem removed the *tzaddik* from this world to spare him the pain of witnessing the calamity that is to befall his generation.

A MATTER OF PLACEMENT

According to the Medrash – as mentioned previously – the “calamity not written in the Torah” refers to the death of *tzaddikim*. It was unclear, however, what led the Medrash to make this identification. R’ Yitzchok Elchonon Spektor clarifies the issue based on the discussion above.

He first adds one more essential piece of information regarding tragedies recorded in Scripture. Whenever a series of calamities is presented, they are listed in a specific arrangement: in ascending order of severity (לפי (המאורח בפסוק... קשה מחבירו). Thus, for example, when the prophet Yirmiyahu (15:2) speaks of impending sword attack, starvation and kidnapping, the latter is considered the most severe (*Bava Basra 8b*).

The Medrash’s interpretation can now be viewed in a new light. The ultimate calamity of the death of *tzaddikim* had no other place in the *tochachah*. Where else amongst that long list of tragedies should the Torah have mentioned the death of *tzaddikim*? It could not have been mentioned at the beginning of the section; its earlier placement on the list would have implied that it is the *least* severe of all of the tragedies. This is certainly inaccurate for, as mentioned previously, the death of a *tzaddik* is equivalent to the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash!

Perhaps, then, the death of *tzaddikim* should have been placed at the *end* of the list, in accordance with the magnitude of its gravity. However, the implication of such an arrangement would have been that – chronologically speaking – the death of *tzaddikim* would have followed all of the other punishments. Hence, this placement is likewise unsatisfactory. As also mentioned before, the death of *tzaddikim* takes place *prior* to the visitation of other calamities so as to spare them the pain of witnessing the travails.

Due to the aforementioned technicalities (regarding the proper order of listing tragedies), it appeared that the death of *tzaddikim* could not be recorded – it simply had no place. The Medrash, then, found the one possible reference to this calamity. It concluded that when speaking of the “calamity which is not (or could not be) written in this book of the Torah,” the verse was actually referring to the ultimate tragedy of the passing of *tzaddikim* (*P’ninim Mishulchan Gavohah*).



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