

# Do Bad Things Come in Threes?

Category: Bamidbar, Pinchas

*People are quick to interpret tragic events. What does this week's parsha teach us?*

## Bad Threes

I learned a new saying this week: "Bad luck comes in threes."

After hearing about the terrible tragedy in Miami, people noted that it's the third tragedy of the same type that has befallen the Jewish people in recent months.

On Lag Baomer, some 45 people passed away in a stampede in Meron, Israel. On the eve of Shavuot, bleachers collapsed in the Karlin synagogue in Jerusalem and three people died and dozens were injured. And now, in Miami, a full building has collapsed and over 150 are still missing. People were quick to tell me, "Bad luck comes in threes."

First of all, let me share with you the Rebbe's view of such events.

In 1992, the Chabad community was quite shocked when three young women — one in France, one in Israel, and one in the United States — suddenly passed away under tragic circumstances. A group of rabbis turned to the Rebbe, pointing out the 'unlucky three' and asking him to pray for the community, but the Rebbe responded that we only point out successive events when they are positive ones. When three good things happen to us, we interpret it as a good sign, but when bad things occur, it's not our job to start counting. Bad events don't have any spiritual 'bonding power.' They each stand alone. (Maanos Kodesh 5752 #375).

## The Jewish Approach

Now, when I dug a little deeper, I discovered that the original saying is, "Good things come in pairs, bad things come in three." In Judaism, the opposite is true. The number three is a number of good luck.

The Talmud points out that every element of the Giving of the Torah was

associated with the number three: It was given in the third month after leaving Egypt; it consists of three parts, Torah, Prophets and Writings; the Jewish people are made up of three, Kohens, Levites and Israelites; it was given through Moses who was his parent's third child, and so on and so forth (Tractate Shabbos 88a).

There's more: The Priestly Blessing is three verses. We have three Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The list goes on and on. Many positive things in Judaism are associated with the number 3.

On the other hand, pairs are more complicated. There was a time when Jews were careful not to do certain things in pairs. In fact, the Maharsha famously writes that on the second day of Creation, G-d did not say "It was good" — as He said on the other days.

Why?

On the first day of Creation, G-d was the only existence in the world; the number one represents the singularity of G-dliness (that's why the Torah calls it "Day one," and not "the first day.")

On day two, G-d was no longer alone. He created the possibility of other existences. That is why He didn't say, "It was good." There is a fundamental danger in the concept of "something aside from G-d." Day two represents our ability to be disconnected from G-d.

This raises an immediate question: If pairs are so bad, why do we get married?

The answer is that there is a third partner in every marriage — G-d.

Either way, in our day, we don't pay too much attention to the concept of pairs being negative at all. The Talmud says, "If you pay attention to it, it might affect you. But if you ignore it, it will not." In the Code of Jewish Law, the issue of pairs is not mentioned at all. (Pesachim 110b)

## **When We Look for Answers**

With the tragedy in Miami, many people have been asking questions.

On one hand, we hear amazing miracle stories.

One woman participated in the Yud Beis Tammuz farbrengen at the Chabad center, and upon returning home late at night, she heard sounds of construction. She wondered to herself, “Who would be doing construction at this hour?” She went outside the building to speak to a supervisor and complain about the noise when she noticed steel and iron collapsing into the parking garage. Assuming it was an earthquake, she yelled at her children to escape the building, and as soon as they left, the entire building collapsed. Her experience was nothing less than miraculous.

On the other hand, a couple came to the building just a half-hour before the collapse to visit their parents — and they never made it out.

Why do these things happen? What determines a person’s fate?

Nobody has these answers. But perhaps this week’s parsha could guide us in coping with these situations.

Today, we read the famous story of Tzelaftchad’s daughters. The five sisters came before Moses and the High Priest Elazar and the elder and the entire People of Israel and registered a complaint. Their father died without sons, they said; why should he have no legacy in the Land of Israel? Why shouldn’t they receive a piece of the Land of Israel for themselves (Pinchas 27).

Moses brought the question to G-d. As Rashi explains, he was stumped. He didn’t know the Halachic answer to their question.

This wasn’t the first time that Moses wasn’t sure what a law is in a specific matter and instead turned to G-d. Several weeks ago, we read about a group of Jews who approached Moses and complained that they had missed the opportunity to offer the Passover lamb due to their impurity. They asked for a ‘redo,’ and there too, Moses didn’t know the answer. He said, “Please wait on the line — I’ll ask G-d straight away.”

There were actually two additional times when Moses didn’t know the Halacha. There were instances where people sinned and Moses was unsure about their punishment. One instance was the story of wood collector in the end of Parshat Shelach, and the other was the story of the man who cursed G-d, at the end of Parshat Emor.

The Rebbe gives a beautiful insight into these stories:

When we compare the four different accounts in the Torah, we discover something amazing.

In the stories of Tzelafchad's daughters and the Second Passover, Moses initiates a conversation with G-d to ask for guidance. But in the other cases, where the doubt was as to how to punish people, we don't find Moses asking anything of G-d. He simply commands that the people be held in confinement until G-d clarifies the law. He clearly was in no rush to find out. If G-d wanted to punish the people, he would need to reach out to Moses on His own.

In the Rebbe's words: "Moses loved the Jewish people...it was not his job to figure out how to punish people; he left that for G-d." (Pinchas 5726, *Toras Menachem* vol. 3. pg. 234).

When someone needed Moses to help, he was quick to pull the best connections he had, and he was not afraid to get involved. But when something negative needed to occur, he was happy to stay out of the picture.

## **When To Mix In**

This is an attitude that we can all learn to adopt.

We are always quick to compare and interpret bad events and determine who is at fault. But instead, let's take a lesson from Moses. When something unfortunate occurs, leave that to G-d. Don't mix in. But when a Jew needs your help, pull all of your connections to assist him.

Every Jew has special connections with G-d.

Let us pray that He give those families the strength to cope with the pain and the loss, and let us pray that He bring us the Moshiach and the final redemption. Amen.