

# Justice Chaim Cohn in 770

Category: Devarim,Devarim

*What happened the last time an Iranian tried to schedule an attack on a bad day in the Jewish calendar?*

## The Unlikely Parallel

This week, reports emerged in the media that Iran is planning to attack Israel on Tisha B'Av. They are well aware that this is the day when the Jewish people mourn the destruction of the Temple; and on this day of mourning, they hope to add more pain to our sorrow.

However, this reminds me of a different holiday altogether: Purim.

Purim is named after the “pur,” the lottery that Haman cast to determine the month in which he would carry out his decree to “destroy, kill, and annihilate” the Jewish people. Haman didn't want to decide himself which month to carry out his plan; he left it to G-d by casting lots, and it fell on the month of Adar.

The Talmud explains that when Haman saw the lot fall in Adar, he rejoiced—because he knew it was the month of Moses' death (Megillah 13b). He thought it was a bad sign for the Jewish people, and assumed it increased the chances of his success. However, he was unaware of a crucial detail: Moses was also born on the same day in Adar, and Rashi comments that “The merit of Moses' birth outweighs the tragedy of his death.” So, the month of Adar is actually a positive month, a time when miracles will occur for the Jewish people—and indeed, the “pur” of Haman became the celebration of “Purim.”

## A Day of Mourning and Celebration

The same could be said about Tisha B'av.

You might not expect this, but Tisha B'Av, a day of mourning for the Jewish people, is also, in a way, a day of celebration. If you've ever been to a weekday service at the synagogue, you know the “Tachanun” prayer. It's a set of prayers recited after the Amidah where we confess our sins and ask for G-d's mercy. But

on joyful days or festivals, we skip it. So, on Rosh Chodesh, Chanukah, Purim, and, of course, Shabbat and holidays, we don't say Tachanun. If there's a wedding or a bris going on and the groom or the father or sandek are present in the congregation, we skip it then, too.

Skipping Tachanun might only save a few minutes, but it brings a surprising amount of joy to the congregation. The joke goes that if non-Jews would know the pleasure of skipping tachanun, they'd convert to Judaism!

But what's fascinating is that one of the days we don't say Tachanun is Tisha B'Av! Why? Jewish law explains that in the Book of Eicha—Lamentations which we read on Tisha B'Av, the day is called a "moed" (festival), so we skip Tachanun (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 559).

## **Why is Tisha B'Av a "Moed"?**

You might wonder why Tisha B'Av is called a "moed." How can a day that marks the destruction of the Temple be considered a festival?

The Midrash says something very interesting: The day the Temple was destroyed is also the day the Moshiach was born (Eichah Rabbah 1:51). The Midrash adds that his name is Menachem. The name "Menachem," which means comforter, reflects the fact that he will comfort the Jewish people and the world.

The birth of Moshiach is a moment of consolation and a time which has the potential for redemption. So, even though the Temple was destroyed on Tisha B'Av, what the Iranians don't realize is that this led to the birth of Moshiach, bringing the promise of salvation from all troubles—their threats included.

## **What Must We Do?**

So, we need to remember that it is up to us to transform Tisha B'Av from a day of destruction into a day of redemption. But what should we actually do?

Many people know the famous story of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza in the Talmud, which is brought as the cause for the destruction of Jerusalem. It's a classic story in Jewish tradition about the deep divisions and hatred which existed in Jerusalem just before its destruction.

Here's how the story goes: A wealthy man in Jerusalem threw a big feast and asked his servant to invite his friend Kamtza. But the servant made a mistake and invited Bar Kamtza, who was actually the host's enemy. Bar Kamtza thought the host was trying to make peace, so he showed up at the party—and the host publicly demanded he leave.

Surprised and embarrassed, Bar Kamtza offered to pay for whatever he would eat and drink just to stay. The host refused. Bar Kamtza then offered to pay for half of the whole feast. Again, the host refused. Finally, Bar Kamtza offered to pay for the entire feast to avoid public humiliation, but the host wouldn't budge. In the end, the host forcibly threw Bar Kamtza out in front of all the guests.

Bar Kamtza was humiliated and angry, especially since many sages were at the feast and did nothing to stop the humiliation. So he decided to take revenge. He went to the emperor and told him that the Jews were rebelling. To prove it, he suggested that the emperor send a sacrifice to the Temple and see if the Jews would refuse it. The emperor sent a calf with Bar Kamtza, and on the way, Bar Kamtza made a tiny blemish on the calf which made it unfit for sacrifice according to Jewish law, but which wouldn't be noticeable or significant to the emperor. When the Kohanim refused to offer it, the emperor took it as proof of rebellion and marched on Jerusalem (Gittin 55b).

It's truly a shocking story. How could the sages at the feast just sit there without saying anything?

The Chasam Sofer explains that Bar Kamtza belonged to a group called the Baytusim, who were not accepted by the sages. The Baytusim were a sect during the Second Temple period who didn't believe in the afterlife, reward and punishment, or the resurrection of the dead. They only accepted the Written Torah and ignored the rabbinic tradition of interpretation. The problem was that Judaism as we know it relies heavily on tradition, much of which isn't explicitly written in the Torah.

The Torah doesn't mention things like bar mitzvahs, Jewish weddings as we have them today with a chuppah and kiddushin, or Jewish burial practices. There are hundreds of laws and customs that every Jew observes which are not written in the Torah. So, the sages saw the Baytusim as a major threat to the Jewish existence and tried to distance themselves from them as much as possible. So, when

Bar Kamtza showed up, the sages at the feast stayed quiet and let the host handle it. The host probably thought he was doing something noble.

Yet, the Talmud teaches us that Jerusalem was destroyed because of such disagreements, ostensibly “for the sake of Heaven.” Humiliating a fellow Jew is forbidden, even if you think you’re doing it for a holy cause—and we are still suffering the consequences today (Rabbi Shneur Ashkenazi, Parsha Sheet No. 201).

## **The Right Approach**

So, what’s the right approach?

Let me share a story that’s completely the opposite of the previous one.

On the night of Simchas Torah in 1975, a group from the Israeli consulate came to join the Rebbe’s hakafos at 770, as they did every year. Among them was Justice Chaim Cohn, who would serve as Deputy President of the Supreme Court, Attorney General, and Minister of Justice. Cohn grew up in an Orthodox home but eventually drifted away from his upbringing and became a vocal opponent of religion in Israel.

The custom is that before the hakafos, the congregation recites seventeen verses, starting with “Atah Horeisa..,” praising G-d, the Torah, and the Jewish people. Each verse is recited by a different person, giving as many people as possible the chance to participate. The practice is to action this honor, and the money raised goes to the shul or another cause.

The Rebbe would occasionally buy verses and honor guests with them. So, on that night, he bought a verse for Justice Chaim Cohn, and Cohn was given the honor of reciting it. Then, the members of the Israeli delegation were honored with a hakafah. They came over to the Ark, and each received a Torah scroll.

Standing near the Ark was Reb Berel Lipsker, holding the “Sefer Torah of Moshiach,” a large and heavy Torah scroll with a beautiful crown. The custom in 770 was that nobody danced with this scroll; they would hold it right outside the circle, to ensure it didn’t get damaged.

Chaim Cohn, not knowing the custom, approached Reb Berel and wanted to take

the Torah scroll. Reb Berel, who didn't defer to anyone, told him that nobody could take that Torah scroll. Neither was willing to back down, and the argument soon progressed beyond words.

Suddenly, the Rebbe turned to Reb Berel and said, "A Jew wants to take on the yoke of Torah... let him have it!" So Chaim Cohn took the Sefer Torah of Moshiach to the hakafah.

During the singing, the Rebbe encouraged the singing enthusiastically and urged the Israeli delegation, especially Justice Chaim Cohn, to dance. Cohn, who was tall and broad, got very involved, and danced very energetically. By the time the Hakafah ended—much later than usual—Chaim Cohn was drenched in sweat.

In the religious world, many were unhappy that the Rebbe welcomed Chaim Cohn and even honored him with the recitation of a verse and a hakafah. But the Rebbe taught us the right way to build the Temple: when a Jew comes to visit, no matter who he is or what he stands for, we should do everything to bring him closer. With a little Ahavat Yisrael for a fellow Jew—even if you disagree with him on every issue—we can tip the entire world to the side of merit and bring Moshiach.