

# Kol Nidrei: Yosele, Don't Focus on the Troubles

Category: Holidays, Yom Kippur

*The Jewish approach to coping with pain and tragedy is to remember and honor the loss but not to dwell in mourning forever.*

## Always Look Ahead

Not long ago, I spoke with someone whose mother had recently passed away. He told me he was struggling with guilt. In the beginning, he was completely heartbroken and couldn't focus on anything but his loss, and even now, although he's back to living his normal life, every time someone mentions his mother, he still tears up. Nevertheless, he feels guilty for not mourning her the way he used to.

Before the Holocaust, there was a Rebbe in Poland called the Ostrovtzer Rebbe. He was a leader to thousands of Chassidim who sought his advice at every step of their lives, and he was known as a wise, practical, and level-headed man. About ten years before the Holocaust, he woke up one morning and said that he had a dream of terrible things to come, but he didn't want to share more details. The next morning, he again spoke about seeing terrible visions in his dreams.

In Judaism, there's a concept called "*hatavas chalom*." If someone wakes up from a bad dream, they gather three Jews who care about them and say a special prayer asking that the dream not come to pass. Additionally, halacha says that fasting and repentance are effective in nullifying bad dreams. As a result, some people fast on the day after a troubling dream and pray to G-d that the dream remains just that—a dream, and nothing more.

The Ostrovtzer Rebbe followed this tradition. He gathered three rabbis and recited the traditional prayer for improving a dream. He also fasted that day, and when he had the same visions again the next night, he fasted again. This continued day after day. Every day for him was like Yom Kippur, as he fasted from Sunday through Friday. His family pleaded with him to take care of his health, but

to no avail. Even when doctors warned him that he was destroying his health, he insisted that he had a responsibility to pray to G-d that these terrible visions not come true. He never shared what he saw, but in hindsight, after the Holocaust, we can imagine what those terrifying dreams may have been.

Indeed, the Ostrovtzer Rebbe became ill, and his condition worsened. One Shabbat, he lay bedridden, unable to move, and asked to see one of his beloved students, known to all as Yosele Ostrovtzer because of his close attachment to the Rebbe.

The Rebbe turned to him and said: “Yosele, the day will come when the Jews of Poland will endure great suffering, but I promise you that you will be saved. After your rescue, I ask you not to focus on the troubles you went through. Don’t constantly speak about the tragedies you witnessed. Instead, focus on the miracle of your survival, and even more—focus on the life that awaits after the tragedy. Look forward, and don’t dwell on the past.”

The Rebbe added: “This is the proper Jewish way to deal with hardships. Take Pesach, for example, when we celebrate the Exodus from Egypt. In the Haggadah, we read only a few lines about the suffering of the Jewish people in Egypt. Most of the Haggadah focuses on what happened after—the miracles, the Ten Plagues, the splitting of the sea, and so on. Even though the Jews endured nearly a hundred years of horrific suffering in Egypt—children were thrown into the Nile, babies were slaughtered for Pharaoh to bathe in their blood—the Haggadah only briefly mentions these things. It quickly moves on to describe the miracles and what came after the suffering.”

## **Remember, But Don’t Dwell**

We see a similar approach when it comes to the destruction of the Temple. Until the Holocaust, the destruction of the Temple was the greatest tragedy in Jewish history. Historians believe that nearly two million Jews were killed during that time. Some people wanted to mourn the loss every day in different ways, but the Sages didn’t agree with this.

The Talmud (Bava Batra 60b) tells us about how, after the second Temple was destroyed, many Jews took on extreme measures—like refusing to eat meat or drink wine—because these were things once used in the Temple services. Rabbi

Yehoshua questioned them, asking, “Why aren’t you eating meat or drinking wine?” They answered, “How can we eat meat when it used to be offered as sacrifices, or drink wine when it was once poured on the altar, now that these rituals are gone?” Rabbi Yehoshua responded by pointing out that if they were going to follow that logic, they shouldn’t eat bread either, because the grain offerings had also stopped, or drink water, since the water libations no longer took place.

He then explained, “While it’s impossible to avoid mourning altogether, it’s also not reasonable to mourn excessively. Our Sages taught us to leave a small unfinished section in our homes to remember the destruction, but we’re not meant to live in constant mourning.”

So, the Sages established a single day—Tisha B’Av—on which we fast, remove our shoes, and sit on the floor in mourning. On that day, we read the book of Lamentations and recite kinos, describing in detail the tragedies of the Temple’s destruction. But that’s it. It’s just one day a year. For the rest of the year, we indeed remember the destruction, but we do not mourn. It is forbidden to mourn the destruction of the Temple every day.

This approach applies to personal grief as well, G-d forbid. At first, there are three days dedicated to crying and fully mourning the loss. After that, there are seven days for eulogies, where we talk about and remember the person who passed away—it’s important to do this. During that time, it’s not allowed to work or do anything that might take the mourner’s mind off their grief. Then comes the thirty-day period, where the mourning is a bit lighter. There are still some restrictions, like not cutting hair, but you can start going back to work and getting back into your regular routine.

Following that, there are eleven months during which Kaddish is recited daily. One refrains from attending weddings, but the mourning becomes more subdued as the year progresses. After the first year, our Sages established the *yahrzeit*—one day each year when it is proper to mourn the person who passed. The rest of the year, it is permitted and appropriate to remember the loved one, but it is forbidden to continue mourning.

The same idea applies to the Holocaust. Once a year, it’s important and appropriate to mourn, which is why we have Holocaust Remembrance Day or

Tisha B'Av. But we shouldn't be dwelling on it all the time. Some people spend their days talking about the Holocaust and constantly teaching their kids about it. Of course, it's something we need to discuss from time to time, but focusing on it non-stop isn't the Jewish way. Judaism isn't a religion of tragedy—we don't dwell on our hardships. Instead, the Jewish people are a nation of hope, always looking forward with optimism, not backward at our suffering.

## **Am Yisrael Chai!**

What is my point?

These days, some people are going around saying that we're living in times just like 1938. They claim that once again, there's another "Hitler" rising up—this time from Iran—calling, G-d forbid, for the destruction of the Jewish people and Israel. They say the world is staying silent, and they immediately fall into pessimism, spreading fear wherever they go.

It's kind of like a business owner who's facing tough times. They have two options: either they can despair, lose hope, get pessimistic, and do nothing, or they can decide to believe that things can get better, take a positive approach, and start taking action to turn things around. A Jew who has faith in G-d doesn't sink into negativity. They don't give up.

The Jewish people are our "business." It's all we've got. So enough with the pessimism. Let's be optimistic! Let's stop shrinking back, sighing, and complaining about how bad things are. Instead, let's get up and do everything we can for the Jewish people, each of us in our own way. The greatest thing we can offer is our trust in G-d and our full belief that **Am Yisrael Chai**—the Jewish people live!