



## THE KINNOT OF THE CRUSADES

**O**n Tisha B'Av, we recite several Kinnot (liturgical readings) to commemorate the Crusades. In an effort to understand why the Crusades remain so central to our cultural consciousness, this article will explore questions relating to their recitation.

First, is there a change when we move from Kinnot related to events surrounding *Churban HaBayit* to the Kinnot related to the Crusades and other events in Jewish history? Do we discuss these historical events simply because Tisha B'Av is the most

appropriate day to commemorate all tragedies, or is there a deeper thematic link between all these tragedies and Tisha B'Av?

Second, to what extent do the Kinnot color our understanding of the historical events that took place? In our world, Jewish history is seldom studied. Jewish history remains in the domain of specialists, historians and scholars; it largely does not penetrate the domain of the average shul-going, yeshiva-educated Jew. This can clearly be seen by perusing the shelves of most *batei midrash*. Seforim

on Shas, poskim, halacha, aggada, and mussar abound. Even seforim on Jewish philosophy (often called *machshava*) can standardly be found in *batei midrash*. Seforim on Jewish history, however, are rarely found. Consequently, for most shul-going Jews, the only time the history of the Crusades is discussed is on Tisha B'Av. On Tisha B'Av we don't read pure history; instead we read liturgical poems about the events. Dates, precise figures, names (even of major personalities), all the hallmarks of history are largely absent. Instead, the



language and themes of Kinnot recited over the Crusades is virtually identical to the language of all Kinnot. If we miss the brief introductory sentence in the Kinnot or read quickly without paying careful attention to the text, we may miss that the Crusades are being discussed at all.

Is this proper? Should rabbis limit our exposure to the Crusades to the words found in the Kinnot, or should they delve into their history? Is it important for shul-goers to hear the name of Pope Urban II on Tisha B'Av? In our tradition, based on the way Rav Soloveitchik expounded upon the Kinnot, history is clearly not an afterthought. It is noteworthy, however, that the Rov did not cite historians by name. He spoke in generalities and discussed trends rather than focusing on specific details.

Third, why are events from a thousand years ago, which appear relatively small, still a focus? A total of ten people, all *talmidei chachamim*, were killed in the first attack of the Crusades on Speyer. This number pales in significance to the massive numbers killed in more recent times. But we continue to mourn Speyer. Why?

Perhaps the lesson is that we should not become inured to the single tragedy, the individual suffering, even in the face of what is numerically so massive. Perhaps the lesson is also that the destruction of these three communities in the Rhineland represents much more than the number of those killed.

If this is the case, we need to question what precisely was so bad about the Crusades. From the perspective of Torah scholarship in Ashkenaz (writ large), little changed; Rashi wrote

both before the Crusades and after; the Baalei HaTosafot and subsequent Rishonim who comprise our staple of learning in Yeshivot wrote after 1096. Why, then, are the Crusades mourned nearly 1,000 years after they occurred? Numerically relative to recent tragedies few people were killed; in terms of Torah scholarship the impact does not seem to be that significant. Why all the focus?

This question is compounded when we note that we recite far more Kinnot for the Crusades compared to other tragedies in Jewish history. Most communities recite but a single kinna to commemorate the Holocaust. Yet four Kinnot are recited to remember the Crusades. Why so many? Why are more Kinnot recited for the Crusades than any other tragedy save Churban HaMikdash?<sup>1</sup>

Rav Soloveitchik explained these Kinnot by focusing on the destruction of Torah brought by the Crusades.<sup>2</sup> Yes, the Baalei Tosafot we study were written after the Crusades, however there still was very significant loss to Torah. The majority of the extant Baalei HaTosafot we have come from France. An entire German school was destroyed.<sup>3</sup>

The German school of Baalei HaTosafot had slightly different interests and proclivities than the French school. Whereas the French were most interested in comparing each piece of Gemara to its parallels throughout Shas, asking questions on discrepancies from these sources and resolving these questions by drawing distinctions, the Germans took a different route. Their method often began not from the Talmudic text but from a real-life story. In this context, they drew upon the Gemara and sought to properly understand it.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, German Rishonim had an affinity toward piyyutim.<sup>5</sup> This affinity is largely absent from the French school of Baalei HaTosafot, which remain our staple of study today.<sup>6</sup>

In effect, the German school was more emotive and focused on *realia*,<sup>7</sup> as opposed to the French school. Building upon Rav Soloveitchik's analysis, it seems that when we mourn the Crusades we mourn this loss to Torah. Our mourning is both a qualitative and a quantitative loss of Torah. Not only did the Crusades cause a loss to Torah in that many books were not written,<sup>8</sup> but perhaps more important was the qualitative loss. The destroyed German schools represented a slice of life that we no longer have access to. All the stories cited in Rishonim to convey deep meaning, all the analysis of piyyutim that could convey deep-seated emotion, that is all lost. We may have all the facts, all the raw material. However, the emotion, the slice of life that the German school represented is sorely lacking. In our world, where information is so easily accessed, but wisdom and meaning remain so elusive, this loss looms even larger.

However, I would like to suggest another reason why the Crusades continues to loom so large in our communal and collective memory. Dr. Haym Soloveitchik once noted that the Crusades represented the last time Jews of Ashkenaz (writ large) were surprised by their persecution. Following the Crusades, Jewish history in Ashkenaz (as described by a famous Jewish historian) was written in blood rather than in ink. We went from persecution to persecution, from blood libel to allegations of well-poisoning and host desecration, from pogrom to pogrom. Our lives

were constantly at ill-ease. We never felt secure. Promises made by kings and governors almost always rang completely hollow.

The Crusades may represent the first time since Churban HaBayit when Jews were surprised by an attack. It was this feeling of surprise, this sudden loss of security, that may be why the Crusades continue to occupy such a major place in our consciousness.

Perhaps this is an overarching theme of Kinnot. We were surprised by Churban HaBayit. Yirmiyahu HaNavi describes how the people felt the abode of Hashem could not possibly be destroyed:

אֶל תִּבְטְחוּ לָכֶם אֶל דְּבַר הַשָּׁקָר לֵאמֹר הִכָּל  
ה' הִכָּל ה' הִכָּל ה' הִפָּה.

*Don't put your trust in illusions and say, "The Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord are these [buildings]."*

#### Yirmiyahu 7:4

The false prophets claimed that the Beit HaMikdash was impervious; it could never be destroyed. Many believed them. Churban HaBayit was sudden and unexpected. In a similar light, Rav Eliezer HaKalir begins all of Kinnot by noting *Shavat suru meni* — it all ceased. The tranquility and peace suddenly and unexpectedly ended. Security was no longer. There was no warning. The end came suddenly.<sup>9</sup>

We can maintain that not all tragedies are included in Kinnot. We don't recite Kinnot for the Khelminicki

massacres of 1648–1649.<sup>10</sup> We only recite Kinnot for those tragedies that befell us suddenly. The Crusades were such a tragedy.

An added dimension is that Churban HaBayit itself is commemorated on the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av rather than the 10<sup>th</sup> when the Beit Hamikdash was actually destroyed. The Gemara, *Ta'anit* 29a, comments that we observe the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av because it represents *atchalta d'puranuta*, the beginning of the tragedy. The beginning of tragedy is worse than the culmination. The Crusades may represent the same idea. The tragic events that took place in a way mirror the Churban HaBayit.<sup>11</sup>

## Endnotes

1 See *Kinnot Mesoret HaRav* page 538.

2 See *Kinnot Mesoret HaRav* page 431.

3 Most often French and German Baalei HaTosafot are grouped together into a single unit. See for example Artsroll's popular work, *The Rishonim*. Rav Soloveitchik, however, with his keen historical sense noted that these two groups of Rishonim were in fact quite different.

4 Good examples of the German school of Baalei HaTosafot can be seen when reading the Mordechai and the *Or Zarua*.

5 The classical work on piyyutim is Rav Avraham ben Azriel's *Arugat HaBosem*. It is worth reading but a few pages of his explanations on one of the Kinnot we recite on Tisha B'Av to gain a sense of his breadth of knowledge of midrashim that he accessed and his ability to bring this to the fore when analyzing a kinna. That *Arugat haBosem* (d.

circa 1235) does not explain the Crusades Kinnot suggests that perhaps these were not widely recited in his time.

6 Dr. Haym Soloveitchik summarizes the differences between the French and German Baalei HaTosafot in many places. See for example *HaYayin Beyemei HaBeinayim* pages 122–127.

7 A fine example of a German work that focuses heavily on realia and has no parallel among the French Baalei HaTosafot is Rav Yehuda ben Klonimyou of Speyer's *Yechusei Tannaim VaAmoraim*.

8 This point is made by Rav Soloveitchik, *Kinnot Mesoret HaRav*, page 435, in explaining the line מי יפליא נדירות ומי יערך נדרים in kinna #22.

9 See *Kinnot Mesoret HaRav* page 198.

10 These kinnot, including one authored by the Shach, were written to be recited on the fast of 20 Sivan.

11 One of the Kinnot that commemorates the Crusades, *Mi Yitein Roshi Mayim*, states that Tisha B'Av is the national day of mourning and additional days of mourning should not be added to commemorate subsequent tragedies (*ein l'hosif moed shever v'tav'erah*). Much has been written on the permissibility or advisability of establishing a separate fast day to commemorate the Holocaust. In this context, many cite the comment of Rashi on Divrei hayamim (2:35:25) that on Tisha B'Av, one should recite Kinnot even for contemporary tragedies. This source was one of the major reasons why many gedolim opposed the establishment of a separate day of mourning. Many ask, if that is the case, why is it that the 20th Sivan was established to commemorate an attack on the Jews during the days of Rabbenu Tam and later expanded to include those who died in the Khelminicki massacres? It is worth noting that Rav Aryeh Pomaranchik in his *Emek Bracha* page 133 notes that poskim do not cite this Rashi as halacha. Rav Pomaranchik was a student of Chazon Ish. See however *Iggrot Chazon Ish* #97.



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