



Divrei Torah on Jerusalem by Rabbi Yosef Bronstein Parashat Parashat Vayera / פרשת וירא 5779

The Ashes of Self-Sacrifice

Ashes are an integral part of various Jewish rituals and services. Perhaps the most famous occasion when ashes are featured is at a wedding, when ashes are placed on the forehead of the groom. The Gemara¹ teaches that this custom is a means of remembering the destruction of Yerishalayim at the moment of greatest joy as per the verse: “If I forget you, Yerushalayim, let my right hand forget its cunning. Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I remember you not; if I set not Jerusalem above my highest joy.”

Elsewhere, the Mishna teaches us that during a time of severe drought special prayers must be arranged:²

They remove the ark to the main city square and place ashes upon the ark, and on the head of the Nasi, and on the head of the deputy Nasi, and each and every member of the community takes ashes and places them upon his head.

The Gemara asks for the reason behind this ritual and offers two suggestions:³

And why do they place ashes upon the head of each and every individual? Rabbi Levi bar Hama and Rabbi Hanina disagree with regard to this matter. One said that this is as though to say: We are considered like ashes before You. And one said that these ashes are placed in order to remind God of the ashes of our forefather Isaac, on our behalf.

¹ Bava Batra 60b. translation is from sefaria.org.

² Ta'anit 15b.

³ Ibid 16a.



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Thus, according to at least one answer of the Gemara, the ashes are a symbol of the binding of Yitzhak.

It is not coincidence that Yerushalayim and the binding of Yitzhak are both remembered with ashes. The story in this week's parsha describes the epitome of self-sacrifice. Yitzhak was ready to literally give up his life for the sake of Hashem. Therefore, the symbol of this ordeal is ash – a stark reminder that we are nothing before God.

Using ashes as a memorial of Yerushalayim challenges us to behave similarly. If we want to properly mourn Yerushalayim and be part of its rebuilding, we need to be ready to sacrifice on its behalf. We know that the previous generations that lived in and developed the city did so at great expense to their personal comfort and even safety. While we benefit today from the fruits of their labor and live in an infinitely better situation than them, we cannot afford to lose the sense of direction, purpose and dedication to the mission that they had. We must learn to put Yerushalayim's needs before our own. Only then will we be able to raise Yerushalyim to the next level both materially and spiritually.