

CHIZUK *and* IDUD

*Divrei Torah from the weekly sedra
with a focus on living in Eretz Yisrael
Chizuk for Olim & Idud for not-yet-Olim*

by **Rabbi Yerachmiel Roness**
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The current Coronavirus pandemic has greatly disrupted many of our normal life-patterns. Things which would have seemed fanciful half-a-year ago, quickly have become a commonplace part of daily lives. Years from now we will surely all have memories to share, and to relate to those who will have been too young to remember the events...

One specific area of our lives which has been impacted is in the realm of inter-familial relationships. Grandparents have been kept apart from the rest of their families out of the legitimate fear that this hypersensitive part of society would be more susceptible to the virus. As a direct consequence, already early on, we grandparents were forced to spend the Seder night alone. We all gaped disbelievingly as many a Chupa were held with a mere handful of participants; Bar-Bat Mitzvas celebrated virtually with the parsha being recited in the privacy of the home via Zoom. Similarly, participation in sad

events, LO ALEINU, like the demise of loved ones, was severely curtailed. Participation in Levayot was highly restricted and limited to a minyan - all others being asked to 'virtually' take part, and to conduct their Shiva visits, via Zoom.

Long months have since passed, and yet we continue to hear stories of family Simchas being disrupted. One stark example is the Australian couple who recently were denied their request to fly out of their home country in order to attend their own son's wedding in the USA.

How, though, will all of this be remembered by future generations? Will it be quickly forgotten, or will it be remembered years hence?

As we are currently living through the events, and the current crisis is still far from any conclusion, it is too early to know how they will be recorded for posterity.

I would like to take this thought, though, as a springboard to broaden the question of historical memory, and to focus on the way the Jewish calendar has been indelibly marked by certain major historic events, while others fade from memory.

This coming Friday is an interesting case in point.

The Mishna B'rura (580:16) writes that on the Friday before we read Parshat Chukat NAHAGU HAYECHI-DIM L'HITANOT" - some people have the custom to fast. As the Mishna Berura explains, This relatively minor fast, which finds little practical expression today, commemorates events that transpired on this day over seven hundred and fifty years ago. On this day, in the year 1244, twenty wagons loaded with Sifrei Torah and volumes of the Talmud were publicly set on fire and burnt in the center of the city of Paris. This terrible event occurred on Erev Shabbat of Parshat Chukat. This parsha begins with the words: "ZOT CHUKAT HATORAH", which the Targum translates as DAH G'ZEIRAT ORAITA, a phrase which can be read in a darshanic vein to mean: 'This is the decree rendered against the Torah'. As a result, it was determined that the commemoration of this calamitous event would not be linked to the day of the month, but rather to the day of the week, namely on the Friday before Shabbat Chukat .

The burning of the Seforim was preceded by a public debate between a number of leading rabbis, including the famed Rav Yechiel of Paris and Rav Moshe of Coucy. These rabbis were called upon to defend the Talmud against accusations raised by

an apostate named Nicholas Donin. Donin had accused the Talmud of besmirching Christianity, and as a result the King of France, Louis IX ordered that a public disputation regarding these claims take place in his presence. In the wake of this debate, the king condemned the Talmud and ordered that all the books be rounded up and set on fire.

One might inquire why such ancient history should be brought to mind? After all, for most of us today, the memory of these events has long been relegated to the dusty archival shelves of Jewish history...

I would answer that the importance, and the direct relevance to our lives, lies in the moral lesson we are to derive from these events.

Already way back then, many noted that an additional burning of books had taken place on that very same spot in the center of Paris some twenty years earlier. The Rambam was accused of including Apikursut, heretical thoughts, in his writings, and as a result his works were burned. Therefore, just as we link the memory of the destruction of the Batei Mikdash with the moral imperative to veer away Sinat Chinam, baseless hatred, so too with the burning of the books in Paris. Here too, the fast was intended to

impress upon our hearts the consequences of hatred directed towards a fellow Jew as a result of their espousal of different thoughts and views, and the all-too-quick reflex to accuse another of harboring heretical tendencies.

Always remember the positive effects of Ahavat Chinam, and as a necessary precaution - never forget the terrible consequences of Sinat Chinam.

Coming back to our current predicament, I would add a last thought: Some would like to make a distinction between a tragedy brought about by human endeavor, like the burning of the Batei Mikdash or the burning of the Talmud in France in 1242, and a natural disaster like a pandemic. Even though a man-made tragedy naturally calls for human reckoning and T'shuva, many fail to appreciate how much Man, with the help of the Almighty, has the ability to affect and even to control the course and extent of a pandemic. While pandemics occur in nature, it is human behavior that will determine the severity of its path. A sense of community, of Ahavat Yisrael, of caring for the welfare of another who is at greater risk, whether it be a neighbour or a grandparent, prompts you and your family to downsize this

great event in your life. Being willing to invite fewer people to your simcha so that your grandparents can share in the nachas is not an easy one - but it is a big Zechut for us and ultimately and a lesson for those around you which we deeply appreciate and value!