

# SNATCHING DEFEAT FROM THE JAWS OF VICTORY

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

*You will eat the flesh of your sons, and the flesh of your daughters you will eat.*

Be'er Yosef: A midrash<sup>[2]</sup> places this prediction into historical reality. At the end of the first Temple period, a man died, leaving behind a single young son to the child's mother. The mother doted on the child, measuring him every day, and donating his weight in gold to the Temple. Despite this, when the hunger brought on by Nevuchadnetzar's siege of Yerushalayim become severe, she slaughtered the child and consumed him. Yirmiyahu lamented<sup>[3]</sup>, "Should women eat their offspring, the babies of their care?" *Ruach ha-Kodesh*, however, responded, "Should a *kohen* and prophet be slain in the Temple of Hashem?" referring to the murder of the prophet Zecharyah ben Yehoyadah ha-Kohen.

This passage is difficult to understand. Our *parshah* serves as an effective warning to Klal Yisrael of what to expect if they are disloyal to Hashem. We were able to survive many horrors precisely because we had been forewarned about the price of our *aveiros*. We knew that we were not abandoned by G-d, but chastened by Him. Our *pasuk* could not be clearer. What did Yirmiyahu, then, find so surprising? How was his surprise alleviated by the response of *Ruach Ha-Kodesh*?

One fairly simple approach might be to see Yirmiyahu grief-stricken - but not at all surprised - upon witnessing famished mothers devouring their children. The Torah had warned of it; he had himself exhorted his people that Hashem's patience with them was running thin. Yirmiyahu was nonetheless shocked by the poignancy of the way in which the prediction of the *tochechah* was fulfilled. Had it been any average citizen, he would have been prepared for what he witnessed. He was not prepared that it should happen to a lone child of a father who died young, and who was so precious to his mother that she measured him and offered a huge gift of thanks to Hashem daily.

The response of *Ruach Ha-Kodesh* was that the episode was a *midah-keneged- midah* / measure-for-measure consequence of deaths at the hands of the people. Any murder is a gross outrage. How much more so when the victim is a *kohen* and a *navi*, and the crime takes place within the precincts of the *Beis Ha-Mikdash*! The enormity of the crime meant that the punishment, when it came, would also elicit enormous pathos.

Rav Itzele Peterburger zt"l explained the gemara in a strikingly beautiful and different manner. As committed Jews, one of the ways we can cope with tragedy is the realization that the tears and pain

are never wasted. Chazal<sup>[4]</sup> teach that "affliction purge sins." At least when properly absorbed, the tragedies we experience as individuals or as a nation rid us of the weight of sin, and allowing for the reconstruction that follows.

But what if afflictions lead instead to even greater sin? Then those afflictions are doubly tragic. All pain, and no gain. Worse even. Reacted to improperly, the affliction brings more sin, which generates even more affliction!

Consider this unfortunate woman. How dear her only son was to her! How she treasured him, and showed that affection every day of his life. Imagine her inner torment in the days prior to her deciding to kill him, to calm the incessant pangs of hunger. A brief while after the terrible deed was done, her hunger returned as before. What had she gained, other than horrible pangs of conscience? We might think that this sort of agony might surely purge her of prior sins.

In fact, however, when she finally stood before the Kisei Ha-Kavod, she certainly was held accountable for murder. Her previous suffering not only failed to cleanse her, but in this case led to further and more serious sin.

This was a tragedy that Yirmiyahu lamented, beyond what our *pasuk* in the *tochechah* revealed to us.

*Ruach Ha-Kodesh* was prepared with an explanation. For many, many years, Hashem had sent messengers to His people, warning them to mend their ways. They pleaded, they remonstrated, they prophesied doom. Had the people listened and repented, they would have freed themselves of sin.

They didn't. Instead, they compounded the sin by murdering the *navi*, right in the Beis Ha-Mikdosh. The patterns of crime and its punishment overlapped perfectly.

<sup>[1]</sup> Based on Be'er Yosef, Vayikra 26:29

<sup>[2]</sup> Yoma 38B

<sup>[3]</sup> Eichah 2:20

<sup>[4]</sup> Berachos 5A