

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Emor)

Visit the Synagogue of the Maharal (Rav Meir Leibush Lowe) of Prague (known as the Altneu Shul, in Prague), and you will immediately notice its most distinctive feature : with the exception of some Hebrew letters very high up near the ceiling, the walls are completely blank; devoid of any art or decorations. Standing in stark contrast to all the other Jewish Synagogues of Prague (not to mention all over Europe) this detail demands explanation.

There is an intensity to this shul with its history of hundreds of years; perhaps this is why:

On April 17, 1389, Easter Sunday, a Priest apparently leading a procession past the Jewish community of Prague was hit with sand thrown by a few Jewish children. (It may be some sand kicked up by a game they were playing landed on the Host (the Eucharistic wafer representing their Lord.)

Claiming they had denigrated Christianity and desecrated the Host, his incitement led the clergy to encourage the mobs to pillage, ransack, and burn the Jewish quarter for two days in what became known as the Prague pogrom. 3,000 Jews were murdered by their Christian brethren; all but the youngest children were murdered, with countless more injured and maimed, many of whom had their limbs cut off and eyes put out. Almost the entire Jewish community of Prague was wiped out.

As there were not enough able bodied Jewish men left to give the dead proper burial in a short period of time, to prevent a further desecration of the dead, the 3,000 Jewish bodies were stacked in the shul until little by little they were able to be given a proper Jewish burial. By the time they were all buried, the blood from their bodies had seeped into the walls all the way up to the tops of the windows. For over two centuries this was how the walls were left; the red stained stones a constant reminder of the price the Jewish community of Prague had paid for their faith.

*When the **Maharal** (Rav Yehuda Lowe) came from Poland to Prague in the latter half of the 16th century and saw the blood on the walls he immediately told the Jewish community they could not pray there as the blood needed burial. Eventually they compromised by plastering the walls to 'bury' the blood behind the plaster. (As the blood had seeped into the bones this was the only alternative to taking apart the entire building). But every 100 years or so the blood seeps through and the walls need to be re-plastered.*

Nonetheless, as part of the compromise, the walls remained blank without decorations out of respect for those who lost their lives. (Eventually Rav Yechezkel Landau (the Noda Be'yehuda) convinced the community to decorate the tops of the walls with verses but only the first letters of each word.)

This past Friday night I had the privilege of experiencing Kabbalat Shabbat in the Altneu Shul of the Maharal in Prague. Having just heard this story, it recalled to my mind the verse spoken by G-d after Cain's murder of his brother Abel (Genesis 4:10)

"Kol d'mei achicha tzo'akim elai min ha'adama..."

"The sound of the blood of your brother cries out to me from the earth ..."

This week's portion (overseas; last week's portion in Israel) contains a famous verse (Vayikra –Leviticus 24:20) that gives one much pause for thought:

"An eye for an eye..."

If someone hits or attacks his neighbor causing him to lose an eye, he is 'owed' an eye. The verse seems to suggest that the consequence for the attacker or negligent damager is that he must forfeit his own eye. Our rabbis explain however (tractate *Baba Kama* 83b-84a), that we are dealing with monetary value and not an actual eye.

Now this interpretation makes a lot of sense, especially as it would be difficult back in biblical times to ensure removing an eye did not kill a person, and what would one do if the attacker was already blind, and so on. But it leaves us with the question as to why the Torah did not simply tell us that the consequence for such an action would be to pay the victim the monetary equivalent of sight from one eye?

The Maharal of Prague (in his *Gur Aryeh*) explains that in reality a person should have had to pay with his own actual eye, to teach that no monetary equivalent could compensate a person for a living limb or organ, save that the Torah (Hashem) is merciful.

A person might come to mistakenly think that once paid, the debt is finished; he has completely ‘compensated’ his neighbor for the damage that was done. But in reality, such crimes can never be compensated for, and the damager must seek the forgiveness of the victim.

Think about who those 3,000 murdered Jews of 1389 would have been today. Imagine one couple in 1389 of that population were to have on average three children and assume of those 3,000 Jews there would have been at least 300 couples, which would have meant 900 children in 1430 who themselves would have had 2,700 children by 1470, who would have had 8,100 children by 1510, who would have had 24,300 children by 1550, and 72,900 by 1590, and 218,700 by 1630, and 656,000 by 1670, 1,968,300 by 1710, and 5,904,900, almost six million Jews, by 1740.... So how many Jews would have been born by 2016? (Even allowing for distant cousins marrying each other.)

We live in a generation that is seeing an attempt by some of the countries responsible for the most sinister destruction of a people in human history, attempt to make some compensation for those crimes. And as the Torah suggests, there is a need for and a value to attempting some level of monetary compensation. But at the same time it is important to remember why the Torah states the consequence as ‘an eye for an eye’, because we need to remember that such things can never be fixed.

This past Shabbat morning I was privileged to join the morning services (*tefillah*) at Prague’s Jerusalem Synagogue. I got a bit lost on my way to shul and so finally joined the services a bit late, just in time for the *barechu* ‘prayer which requires a minyan (quorum of ten men).

When I walked in, the cantor looked extremely relieved as I had just ‘made the minyan’ as the tenth Jewish man. As it turned out we were praying in the ‘winter room’ a much smaller room that could be more easily heated. After services we were allowed to walk in to the main sanctuary, a magnificent hall that seats nearly 1800 people. The echoes of the prayers still reverberate there, but the Jews who uttered them are no more, they were all deported to Terezin and eventually to Treblinka and Auschwitz. There were 56,000 Jews in Prague before the war; there were 1500 left in 1945.

The Czech government in 1989 when Communism left, announced they would return all Jewish property to the Jewish community, and we heard a number of times while in Prague that the Jewish community (as opposed to Jewish individuals) in Prague is one of the wealthiest in the world due to the properties they own and the rents they can charge. But we dare not forget that such crimes can never be compensated for, and the Jewish community will never regain the true riches it once had: of Jews by the tens of thousands.

And of course, this need to strive to make amends while being cognizant of those things that can never fully be rectified, exists for us as individuals as well. Deep in the midst of the mission of the *Kohanim* (Priests) who were meant to be Judaism’s educational role models, we are reminded of how important it is to be ever-sensitive to the ‘blemishes’ we may sometimes inflict on our fellow human beings: physical, emotional and even psychological, that cannot always be fixed or healed so easily.

Shabbat Shalom, from back home in Jerusalem,
Binny Freedman