

# Mussar HaTorah

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Parashas Devarim

“...YOUR COUNTRY IS DESOLATE; YOUR CITIES ARE BURNED WITH FIRE.” (YESHAYAHU 1:7)

**The Romans took the gold  
and sent back an empty  
basket**

THE MIDRASH RABBAH (Eicha 1:39) tells of the siege laid by the Romans on Yerushalayim: The starving Jews would lower a basket of gold from atop the walls of the city to the enemy soldiers below; the Romans replaced the gold with wheat and sent the basket back up. Later, after the Jews sent down a basket of gold, the Romans sent up barley. Eventually, they sent up straw. Finally, when the Jews lowered the basket; the Romans took the gold and sent back an empty basket. The Midrash continues, “Regarding one who has received nothing from the poor and does not give, the Torah states, ‘And [the poor person] shall call out against you to Hashem and you will have a sin’ (Devarim 15:9) – how much more so, one who takes from the poor person and does not give [is a sinner].” In other words, the Romans certainly sinned by taking our money and by not giving us food (see Matnos Kehunah ibid.).

**Will Hashem really take  
them to task?**

We can understand the Torah’s expectations of *tzedaka* and *chesed* from the Jewish people. We could perhaps extend these lofty standards to a non-Jew with refined character traits. The Roman legionnaires besieging Yerushalayim, however, were far from kind-hearted individuals. They were hardened, evil soldiers who maliciously murdered and brutally tortured the Jewish people (and their many other victims). The horrifying descriptions of the *Churban*, with rivers of Jewish blood flowing in the streets, stagger our imagination. Could these cruel murderers have been expected to have feelings of pity for the hungry Jews – just before they attacked us? The Midrash’s criticism seems to even apply the *pasuk’s* higher-level requirement of pure giving, without receiving anything in return, to the Romans. In their final judgment, will Hashem really take them to task for not providing the Jews with sustenance free of charge? In addition, why mention this criticism in light of all the more severe crimes they committed – mass slaughter of millions of innocent Jews, acts of moral depravity against men and women alike and the destruction of the Beis HaMikdash,

**The worst of our brethren  
are far more righteous  
than the Romans**

Every human being is created in the *tzelem Elokim* – image of Hashem, invested with a spark of Divine spirituality that demands of him to emulate his Creator, in kindness, mercy and many other *midos*. No matter how far a person may have strayed from tender feelings of caring and concern, he still has the ability – and the obligation – to be sensitive to his fellow man’s needs. The Roman soldiers, even though they were far from sensitive, were still human beings with a Divine *neshama*. They could have felt our pain and somehow been motivated to feed us. This callousness is such a serious flaw that it stands out even against the backdrop of their many other terrible crimes.

This message can help motivate us to reach out to all our fellow Jews, no matter how far from perfect they may be. Certainly, the worst of our brethren are far more righteous than the Romans were, and their *tzelem Elokim* is receptive to the light of Torah. As we approach the day Tisha B’Av, we can also use this lesson to eliminate *sinas chinam*. If we appreciate the greatness in every Jew, despite his or her shortcomings and misdeeds committed against us, we will overcome the baseless hatred that led to the *Churban*, and increase *ahavas Yisrael* that will pave the way to the coming of Moshiach and the rebuilding of the Beis HaMikdash.