

### **Atheists in the Foxhole (Vaetchanan)**

*"In foxholes, there are no atheists and very few ideologues." – Robert A. Heinlein*

The phrase "There are no atheists in a foxhole" was apparently popularized during World War Two, though some attribute its coinage to "The Great War" (World War I). It refers to a common phenomenon exhibited most strongly during intense infantry trench warfare. Namely, that in conditions of extreme stress, people who otherwise did not consider themselves religious, or even believers in God, suddenly start praying fervently.

In Jewish historical memory, there is no day more painful or stressful than the 9th of Av, observed this year this past Sunday. It is the day when God's judgment descended on His chosen nation repeatedly throughout the millennia. The most significant events we commemorate and fast for on the 9th of Av are the destruction of both Temples, the massacre of the Jewish people, and the exile of the remaining survivors from the Land of Israel.

Whether it was the punishment of forty years of dying in the desert or the expulsion from Spain in 1492, the 9th of Av has come to symbolize death, destruction, exile, and the profound pain of divine distance. It is a day that invites reflection and longing for closeness.

The various punishments that God will visit upon the Children of Israel are recounted in excruciating detail in various places in the Bible. A more general description is given early in this week's Torah reading:

*"When you beget children and grandchildren and will have been long in the land, you will grow corrupt, and you will do evil in the eyes of Hashem, your God, to anger Him. You will surely perish quickly from the land. You shall not have lengthy days upon it, for you will be destroyed. Hashem will scatter you among the nations where Hashem will lead you. When you are in distress and all these things have befallen you, you will return unto Hashem, your God, and hearken to His voice."*

[Deuteronomy 4:25-30]

Rabbi Ovadia Sforno is intrigued by the juxtaposition of God's wrath followed immediately in the next verse by His forgiveness:

*"For Hashem, your God, is a merciful God. He will not abandon you nor destroy you, and He will not forget the covenant of your forefathers that He swore to them."*

[ibid 4:31]

Sforno explains that God's forgiveness is a function of our return to God, and that our return is a natural reaction to the troubles we face.

When cataclysm and tragedy strike us, whether on a personal or national level, it is hard to be philosophical. However, Sforno maintains that even when we cannot understand the reasons for our suffering, one aspect of it is a call from God to return to Him. And that call is directed toward each of us, including those of us in foxholes of any type.

May our national sorrow be turned to comfort, and may we witness the healing of our people and the rebuilding of the Temple speedily in our days.

Shabbat Shalom,

Ben-Tzion

*Dedication*

*To all those working on Temple initiatives, whether loudly or quietly, directly or subtly.*