

Namchai & Tamchai

This past Wednesday: I was one of a panel of speakers at a program on the Tsunami disaster at the Hilel of U of T.

Interesting program – a grad students in geophysics spoke about the physics of a tsunami. A representative from Veahavta – the Canadian Jewish Humanitarian & Relief Committee - spoke about the organisation, and the incredible work they are doing on the ground, all over the world, but especially now in South Asia.

But undoubtedly, one of the most interesting speakers was the Vice Consul for the Thai Trade Commission, Prayoth Benyasuth, who had intended on speaking on the economic impact the disaster has had on Thailand. But instead, after seeing a Rabbi and Imam on the program, decided to ditch the prepared speech, and talk about the cultural and spiritual values of the Thai people that they have seen tested, and demonstrated through this entire experience.

I was fascinated, and deeply moved, by his words, and I want to share the core of what he said with you this morning.

He said that throughout this tragedy, he has witnesses two concepts which the Thai people call “namchai” and “tamchai”. (They are both originally Buddhist concepts, but have been integrated into the general Thai culture, regardless of religion – the vice consul himself was a Christian.)

To best explain *namchai* – let me quote from an internet site on Thai society:

Buddhist teachings are at the root of the typical Thai villager's sincere consideration for others, embodied in the virtue known as *namchai*, "water of the heart," a concept encompassing spontaneous warmth and compassion that allows families to make anonymous sacrifices for friends and to extend hospitality to strangers. For example, a stranger entering a village will rarely be seen as an intruder and a subject for suspicion and distrust. Much more likely, the villagers will have the *namchai* to take him in, feed him, offer him a bed in one of their homes, and generally treat him as a friend.

The vice consul spoke of the incredible outpouring of *namchai* that he and his people saw in recent weeks. For example, one of the most difficult and important tasks was to identify victims, and for that more often than not the only discernable feature are dental records. And influx of literally hundreds of forensic dentists poured into the country, to help with the very difficult task of pouring over victims' bodies, identifying them by their teeth. This he called *namchai*.

Tamchai is a more philosophical concept – of how to cope with tragedy or grief by making the best of a situation. It is related to *mai pen rai* ("never mind. it doesn't matter") – both originally Buddhist concepts – that when something unfortunate happens, one gracefully submits to external forces beyond one's control, attributing them to the effects of past karma (past life).

It is their way of coping with the theological challenge I spoke of last week.

Together, the people of Thai and the international community have demonstrated such *namchai*, he concluded, it has helped the Thai people have *tamchai*.

I was very moved – by what he said, and by some of the similarities of concepts:

Namchai – being essentially their equivalent to the value of חסד – of kindness, hospitality, and genuine caring for another human being. It was uplifting to know that we share these values, and somewhat humbling to see the extent to which an entire society has been successful at living by them.

Tamchai – although the belief in previous lives and reincarnation is a subject of great debate amongst Jewish philosophers – we do share the concept of קבלת הדין, acceptance of the decree.

It was an opportunity to find common language and common values with a people with whom the vast majority of Jews have very little contact. And I found that particularly heart-warming.

And in addition, the relationship between these two concepts reminded me of a beautiful insight from the great Chassidic scholar Rabbi Tzvi Elimelech of Dinow (1785-1841), the author of “Bnai Yissachar”, and a student of the Chozeh of Lublin

ראש חדש – Redemption begins with ראש חדש. Why?

On the one hand – there is a very important symbolism in the new beginning of the moon, and the new beginning for our people. It symbolises the hope – that no matter how bleak and black the world gets at times, there is hope and there is redemption, a new beginning – ראש חדש – a new history.

But it is also a message of the importance of this month of ניסן when we left Egypt. Rav Tzvi Elimelech explains that there is great symbolism and meaning in the letters and words of Hebrew. ניסן comes from the word נס – meaning miracle, and it is a month of miraculous redemption. בניסן נגאלו ובניסן עתידין ליגאל.

But what is the significance of the word ניסן?

בבלי ברכות ד ע"ב

אמר רבי אלעזר אמר רבי אבינא: כל האומר +תהלים קמ"ה+ תהלה לך ביום שלש פעמים - מובטח לו שהוא בן העולם הבא. מאי טעמא? אילימא משום דאתיא באל"ף בי"ת - נימא +תהלים קי"ט+ אשכרי תמימי דרךך דאתיא בתמניא אפינ! אלא משום דאית ביה +תהלים קמ"ה+ פותח את דרך [וימשביע לכל חיי הצון] - נימא הלל הגדול דכתיב ביה: +תהלים קל"ו+ נ' תן להם לקל כפשוטו [פי לעולם חסדו]! - אלא: משום דאית ביה תרתו.
אמר רבי יוחנן: מפני מה לא נאמר נו"ן באשרי? - מפני שיש בה מפלתן של שונאי ישראל, דכתיב: +עמוס ה'+ נפלה לא תוסף קום, בתולת ישראל... אמר רב נחמן בר יצחק: אפילו הכי חזר דוד וסמכן ברוח הקדש, שנאמר +תהלים קמ"ה+ סומך ה' לקל הנפלים

The greatest miracle – is the ability to help the fallen, support and bent, and give hope to the downtrodden. ניסן – סומך ה' לכל הנפלים!

That's what Redemption is all about:

- Egypt: finding and strength – when all looked doomed, and hopeless. Renewing our national identity when our enemies did everything to destroy it. (That's what Redemption has always meant for us – even in our own generation...)

The message from the Vice Consul for the Thai Trade commission was just this: for the people of Thai, their *tamchai* was possible because of the *namchai* of the international community. They find their strength in the outpouring of kindness and generosity of people, their own – and people from all over the world.

That was their סומך ה' לכל הנופלים, in which a renewed sense of spirit and hope can be found.

This is such a beautiful – and so important a lesson for the world today!