

Tisha b'Av Reconsidered

Delivered by Rabbi David Novak August 12, 2016

Many of us remember going to summer camp--and some of us went to Jewish summer camps. Each Friday night, like tonight, we marked Shabbat, changing the table cloths for a lovely Friday night meal that indicated sacred time and place. All throughout Shabbat the schedule reflected the difference from the rest of the camp week. It was regular, expected and for this child who was not so great at sports, a welcome break in the day-to-day camp schedule.

One time each summer, though, there was a different day, Tisha b'Av, literally the ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av.

Here the tone changed dramatically.

This is the annual day of mourning for the destruction of two temples--one in 586 before the common era, over 2,600 years ago; the other in 70 of the common era, 1946 years ago.

This was a strange day on the calendar at camp, for it brought an element of mourning into camp life that was anything but mournful.

As the years have passed, I continue to struggle with Tisha b'Av and its observance in our ritual lives.

We are actually on the ninth day of Av this evening as Shabbat always takes precedence over mourning, so the observance of Tisha v'Av begins tomorrow night.

The Mishnah, the first blueprint of rabbinic Judaism states that:

“Five events. . . took place on the ninth of Av: the decree was made against our forefathers that they should not enter the land, the first Temple and the Second Temple were destroyed, Betar was taken [the Bar-Kochbah revolt in 135 CE against the Romans], the city was ploughed up [after the war of Hadrian] ordered by the Roman emperor.

Unlike the month of Adar when we sing “When Adar enters, joy increases,” the Mishnah says, “When Av comes, rejoicing diminishes.”

The Mishnah was codified in the aftermath of the Roman destruction of the Second Temple.

Three of the cited disasters were at the hands of the Romans; the first disaster was from the Israelites who lost faith after the report of the spies in the Book of Numbers; the first Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians.

Over many years, other tragedies were lumped into the same date, such as the expulsion of Jews from England by Edward I in 1290, the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492, and World War One’s beginning in 1914.

Each of these horrific events share an indisputable fact: Jews did not do anything to bring this on ourselves. Each was done to the Jewish people by a foreign power.

Yet still there are many in the Jewish world who recite a traditional liturgy which describes the sacrifices that would have been offered in the Temple if it had been standing. This is in the additional service for the New Month and the Festivals where,

before the prescribed sacrifices are articulated in the amidah, the liturgy states this:

“Because we and our ancestors sinned against you, our city was laid waste, our sanctuary made desolate, our splendor exiled and the glory gone from our House of Life. . .

“We can no longer fulfill our obligations in your chosen House, the great and holy temple, called by your name because of the hand that was stretched out against your sanctuary.”

The liturgy assigns blame to our ancestors and to us for the destruction of the Temples and our inability to worship there. This liturgy experiences these tragedies as a Divine response for a people who fell out of relationship with God.

This is a difficult concept, so difficult, in fact, that it has been excised from Conservative and Reform prayer books.

This is also a difficult idea to get our heads around given that the greatest tragedy to ever face our people occurred in the last 100 years with the destruction of a full one-third of our people, children, men, women, innocents.

Because of how close we are to the actual event, there is no universally accepted Jewish theological response to critical questions such as how or why could God allow this to happen. We have questions: there are no good answers.

As Orthodox Rabbi Yitz Greenberg has said “Do not say anything about God that you would not say in front of 1.5 million burning children.”

Therein lies my ambivalence about Tisha b’Av.

Like many of you, I struggle with reconciling the idea of a just and loving God with a God that would be silent in the greatest calamity that our people have experienced, one much greater than the destruction of the Temples.

Outside of Yom haShoah, we have no cogent theological response to the enormity of our loss.

Many of us question our ideas of a God that would allow such wanton and irreparable destruction to happen, if we even spend time thinking about the role of God in our lives and in the world.

We are instructed on Tisha b'Av to take on Jewish mourning practices: sitting low on the ground, fasting, not greeting each other, singing mournful dirges, and reading the Book of Lamentations with its incredibly harsh language. Along with Yom Kippur, this is one of the two fasts that tradition prescribes for the day.

Yet the loss of millions of people is a much greater tragedy than anything the rabbis of the Mishna could have ever imagined.

Most liberal Jews do not observe Tisha b'Av. In part this is why there will be few people here tomorrow night when we read Lamentations.

Why then, we must ask, do we keep it on our ritual calendar?

Is it a traditional anachronism like the eighth day of Passover that we do because it was always done as part of Jewish life in the Diaspora even though it is not observed in the modern state of Israel?

Does Tisha b'Av need to be “reconstructed” to deal with contemporary issues and would that be fair to do?

Given all of the suffering in our lives that is part of being alive, do we need to intentionally mourn for what happened in the distant past?

I affirm that we must honestly look at the underlying motivations for these observances and freely use our intellects to rethink why we continue to observe them other than rote behavior which denudes them of meaning.

Much of our Jewish past is characterized as being lachrymose or mournful. It comes from a major construct of Jewish memory coming from tragedy, thereby causing tears.

To be sure our traumas remind us of our people's many tragedies, yet none compare to our recent losses.

Yet if Judaism is only about the lachrymose, we would be in perpetual mourning.

We would lose our sense of what makes the Jewish people unique among other peoples.

We have always been in Rabbi David Hartman's term a “life-intoxicated” people. We prize being in life: we are a people who want to be in life, to make life matter.

This is why I hold Tisha b'Av to be suspect: our people's history has changed since first articulated in the Mishnah. We do not need to reach back thousands of years to be reminded of the Roman, Babylonian and other conquests of our people.

Mourning is not an incentive to be part of our people. Our very being reminds the world that we survive, against all odds.

This is worthy of ongoing celebration and embracing, as the psalmist declared:

“You turned my mourning into dancing, you undid my sackcloth and girded me with joy.”