

Underlying Values and Concepts of Tisha B'Av

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The Three Weeks between the 17th of Tammuz and the 9th of Av are the low point in the Jewish calendar, marked by commemorations of tragedies that befell the Jewish people throughout their history. The most central of these are the destruction of the First and Second Temples, both occurring on the Ninth of Av. The second destruction not only brought to an end the Temple service but also marked the beginning of the *Galut* – Exile. Tisha B'Av is the day set aside by tradition for fasting and mourning, and its laws and customs are both instructive and a bit strange, even for the observant Jew. Let us examine the idea and values behind these customs, and how these practices and values can help make each person a better Jew and a better individual.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THIS PERIOD

Maimonides summarizes¹ the various tragedies that took place on the 17th of Tammuz and 9th of Av, the first and last dates of this three-week period of mourning for the Jewish people. Calamitous events that occurred on the 17th of Tammuz include: (1) Moses broke the tablets after seeing the Golden Calf. (2) The *Tamid* (daily) sacrifice that had been offered daily for hundreds of years was suspended because the siege prevented any animals from being brought to the Temple. That was a sign of the beginning of the end. (3) The walls of the city were penetrated. In the time of the First Temple, this took place on the 9th of Tammuz, while during the period of the Second Temple it occurred on the 17th of Tammuz. (4) Apostomus burned a Torah scroll, realizing that this act would crush the Jews spiritually. This day, therefore, has been designated a fast day, when the usual additional prayers of other fast days are inserted in services of the day. Beginning with this day, certain outward signs of national mourning begin, including the suspension of weddings, enjoying music publicly, and taking haircuts.

The Ninth of Av (Tisha B'Av) stands out from the other three fasts related to the destruction of the Temples. Tisha B'Av is so important because it marks the day when both Temples were destroyed – the First Temple by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. and the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E. It is a major fast day in that it begins at sundown and continues until the following night. This day had already become a day of Jewish calamities for all time in the Torah, right after the spies returned from the Land of Israel. On this day, our forefathers who were redeemed from bondage in Egypt were sentenced to die in the desert for the sin of the spies. After ten of the twelve spies sent by Moses gave a distinctly negative report about the Land of Israel all the people began weeping, which demonstrated a singular lack of faith. Our Sages tell us that night was the ninth of Av – Tisha B'Av.² G-d's reaction was anger. We are told that He then proclaimed: "You cried without a reason. I will ensure that you have reason to cry throughout your generations."³

Later tragedies also occurred on this day, the day forever marked for Jewish tragedy: Betar was captured, which crushed the Bar Kochba rebellion against the Romans. The city of Jerusalem was plowed over in a Roman effort to destroy Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel. Other events that occurred on Tisha B'Av include the Spanish Inquisition, which culminated with the expulsion of Jews from Spain on Tisha B'Av in 1492. World War I broke out on the eve of Tisha B'Av in 1914 when

¹ Maimonides, Hilchot Taaniyot 5:3-4

² Numbers 14:1 with commentary of Rabbeinu Bechaye

³ Taanit 29a

Germany declared war on Russia. More Jewish soldiers died on the battlefields of WWI than any other war, and German resentment from that war set the stage for the Holocaust. On the eve of Tisha B'Av 1942, the mass deportation of Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto to Treblinka began.

During Tisha B'Av, as on Yom Kippur, the following activities are forbidden by Jewish law: eating, drinking, bathing, anointing with oil/perfume, wearing leather shoes, and having marital relations. The laws of mourning, as for a relative, are also in effect. Thus, there is a prohibition against the study of Torah, since studying Torah is a joyous activity, as well as greeting another person, and wearing a Talit and Tefillin in the morning hours, until noon. Aspects of the unique prayer service will be discussed below.

THE DEEP SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BEIT HAMIKDASH (TEMPLE) TO THE JEWISH PEOPLE

The Temple was not just a large synagogue – it was the center of Jewish life. Therefore, its destruction markedly changed the practice of Judaism. Life without a Temple has left the Jewish people so profoundly bereft that Jews have never ceased to mourn its loss. But what, specifically, was so special about this place? Why is this spot so holy (to other religions too) that it also makes Jerusalem holy? How is the Temple's destruction reflected in Jewish practice today?

According to Jewish tradition, the spot located under the Holy of Holies in the Temple is the Foundation Stone (*Even Shtiyah*), the very place from which G-d created the entire world.⁴ The earth from which man was created comes from this area of the Temple.⁵ All of the ancients mentioned in the Torah who brought sacrifices to G-d, brought them from the Temple area, which was already known to be the holy place where Heaven and earth meet. This included the sacrifices of Adam, Cain and Abel, Noah, and the place of the binding of Isaac by Abraham.⁶ The location of the Temple marks both the geographic and spiritual center of the world.⁷

Because of the specialness of this place, the Code of Jewish Law instructs every G-d-fearing Jew, at the very beginning of the Shulchan Aruch, to be aware of the Temple's destruction repeatedly throughout each day of the year.⁸ Every time an observant Jew eats a cookie or piece of cake, the concluding blessing of thanks includes mention of the Temple, with the hope of its rebuilding.⁹ A similar reference is made in the Grace After Meals following any full meal that includes the required amount of bread.¹⁰ In the *Shmoneh Esreh* – silent prayer that a Jew recite three times daily, a Jew faces Jerusalem and the Temple. In the weekday version of the prayer, a special blessing is recited asking G-d to return to Jerusalem and erect the third and final Temple.¹¹ One specific blessing of the Torah service should be dedicated to the Temple, according to the Talmud, and following the Haftorah, mention of the Temple is indeed one of the blessings recited.¹²

At the height of joy, a Jew remembers that no joy is complete without a rebuilt Temple. Thus, when making the largest purchase or investment in one's life, i.e. when building or buying a home, it is customary to leave one square in the house unpainted, as a reminder of the destruction.¹³ And at the greatest moment of joy in a person's life, when he or she gets married, one of the seven blessings at

⁴ Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah 12:4, Tanchuma Pikudei 3

⁵ Yerushalmi, Nazir 35b

⁶ Maimonides, Hilchot Beit HaBechira 2:2

⁷ Midrash Tanchuma, Kedoshim 10

⁸ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 1:3

⁹ "Al Hamichya" blessing following eating of pastries, wine or the seven fruits of Israel

¹⁰ Grace After Meals, third blessing

¹¹ Blessing #14 of the weekday Shmoneh Esreh

¹² Sotah 41a, Blessing after the Haftorah

¹³ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 560:1

the wedding ceremony tries to comfort those who mourn for the Temple's destruction.¹⁴ Similarly, before the wedding ceremony is complete, it is a custom for the groom to sprinkle ashes on his forehead as a reminder of our loss, even at a joyful moment. A more well-known custom at a Jewish wedding ceremony is the breaking of the glass,¹⁵ following the singing of "If I forget Jerusalem, let me right hand be forgotten ... Jerusalem must be above my greatest joy".¹⁶ When the Temple fell, some Rabbis wanted to institute a law that Jews should no longer be allowed to eat meat or drink wine (which were used prominently in the Temple service), but because the Rabbis realized that this prohibition would be too difficult for most of the Jewish community to observe, it was never instituted.¹⁷ All these practices show how grave the Temple's destruction was for the Jews and how it must be imprinted on the Jewish psyche forever.

WHY MOURN FOR A BUILDING OF STONE AND WOOD?

A question has been asked many times throughout Jewish history, and much more often in the recent past: why mourn each year for the destruction of a building, albeit an important building like the Temple, when so many Jews have perished over the millennia simply because they were Jews? Especially after the Holocaust, why is there no similar day or ritual mourning for the six million murdered Jews, as there is for the destruction of the Temple? And now that Jerusalem is a bustling city filled with hundreds of thousands of Jews, why continue to mourn the destruction of the Temple and of Jerusalem? The answer to these questions will help us understand the underlying meaning of the Temple to the Jewish people and the implication of its destruction until this day.

Numerous answers have been given to this difficult question:

- 1) The Temple was the unifying force of the Jewish people, and it brought them together. The old joke about "two Jews, three synagogues" became the reality and the norm of Jewish existence only after the Temple's destruction. So too, the disunity we experience today continues a pattern that was formed prior to the Second Temple's destruction. While the Jewish people were not always completely unified when the Temple stood, the divisions and (baseless) hatred between Jews has continued and deepened since its destruction: Orthodox versus Conservative vs. Reform, Sephardim vs. Ashkenazim, Chassidim vs. Misnagdim; the list goes on and on. Many of the deaths of Jews throughout the ages can be attributed to this hatred among Jews. On the Three Festivals, following an Aliyah to the Torah, we conclude the blessing for the person honored (the *Misheberach*) with the following words: "May he merit to go up to the future Temple together with all other Jews, his brothers." Therefore the concept of going to the Temple is equated with the unification of the entire Jewish people.¹⁸ In fact, the story is told about the Rabbi of Brisk (Brest-Litovsk) who on one occasion received this blessing after an Aliyah to the Torah, but the Gabbai-Sexton inadvertently forgot the words "together with all other Jews, his brothers," and the Rav of Brisk required the Gabbai to repeat the entire blessing. Thus, the mourning is not over a building, but rather over a concept of lack of unity among the Jewish people, still existent today, which has often resulted in tragedy.
- 2) When a woman in Rabban Gamliel's neighborhood whose son had died began to weep over her tragic loss, Rabban Gamliel heard her cries, thought of the Temple's destruction and then he began to cry with her.¹⁹ The commentaries ask the question: Why did Rabban Gamliel cry over the Temple instead over the woman's personal tragedy? One answer given is that this

¹⁴ Blessing #4 of the Seven Blessings at a Jewish wedding

¹⁵ Shulchan Aruch, Even HaEzer 65:3

¹⁶ Psalms 137:5-6

¹⁷ Bava Batra 60b

¹⁸ Misheberach blessing following the Aliyah to the Torah on Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot

¹⁹ Midrash, Eicha Rabbah 1:24

Midrash is teaching us that Rabban Gamliel understood that for Jews, any tragedy after the Temple's destruction is somehow derived from that destruction. Therefore, Tisha B'Av, the day the Temple was destroyed, represents all tragedies for the Jewish people in all generations, even those that are seemingly unrelated to the Temple itself. Thus, the Rabbis included in the *Kinot*—Lamentation prayers not only prayers that recall the Temple's destruction, but also those that highlight all tragedies throughout the ages where Jews died en masse – even those that did not occur on this day – including the Crusades, Chmelnitsky's massacres of 1648-1649 and the Holocaust.

- 3) Rabbi Zev Leff (“Festival of Life,” page 271) explains that we do not even realize and we are incapable of realizing what the Jewish people truly lost when the Temple was destroyed. He compares us to people who have lived their entire lives in a ward where everyone is physically handicapped and they move around in wheelchairs. If such people were to suddenly see someone walking on two legs for the first time, they would either consider that person weird or the product of a miracle because for them a handicapped world is the norm. Similarly, in a spiritual sense we have become accustomed to the handicapped, deprived, post-Temple world, so that we cannot fathom or feel the true mournful effect of the lack of a Temple. We also have become desensitized to the spiritual calamity that engulfs us as a result of the Temple's destruction. Thus, we cannot even understand what we are actually mourning.
- 4) The Midrash, in a play on words, described the *Mishkan*—Tabernacle as a *Mashkon* – financial guarantor.²⁰ This implies that G-d actually wanted to destroy the Jewish people for their sins. But the *Mishkan*—Tabernacle acted as their guarantor, and He destroyed the Temple rather than the Jewish people themselves, who deserved destruction. Thus, the mourning for the Temple is actually for the decline in standards of the Jewish people, who deserved to be destroyed but were saved by the destruction of the stones and wood of the Temple in their stead. This idea is also highlighted by a chapter in Psalms²¹ in which Asaf describes, in graphic detail, the terrible destruction of the Temple. Tosafot commentaries²² ask why this Psalm is called a song to Asaf, rather than a Lamentation (*Kinah*). They answer that Asaf realized that the Jewish people should have been killed for their actions, as the inanimate Temple could not have done anything to deserve destruction. But for the Jewish people to survive, something of great value to them – their holy Temple -- had to be destroyed. It is for this we mourn. The Psalm is a song and uplifting because in the end the Jews did survive as a people. This idea also helps explain another difficulty of the day of Tisha B'Av. We know that in the era of the Second Temple, the actual torching of the building began at the end of Tisha B'Av, in the afternoon. Yet it is the custom after midday on Tisha B'Av to relax the prohibitions of mourning, and to sit on a chair and wear Tefillin. Why, at the moment of greatest destruction, do we mourn less, rather than increase mourning? It is because we know that as the building burns, we have been saved and survive as a Jewish people. It is an expression of relief that it was “only” the Temple and not us. Thus (among other reasons), the laws of mourning are relaxed in the afternoon of Tisha B'Av.
- 5) Numerous sources²³ record a conversation that took place between Jeremiah, the Jewish prophet at the time of the First Temple's destruction, and Plato, the famous Greek philosopher, in which Plato asked Jeremiah this very question. Plato accompanied Nebuchadnezzar to Jerusalem and saw Jeremiah crying very deeply over the Temple's destruction. Plato asked Jeremiah why he was crying about the past and about wood and

²⁰ Midrash, Eicha Rabbah 1:24

²¹ Psalms 79:1-6

²² Tosafot on Kiddushin 31b, “*Istiya*”

²³ Me-am Lo-aiz 52:20 quoting Torat Ha-Olah

stone. Jeremiah answered Plato that undoubtedly he (Plato) had many philosophical issues and doubts that were as yet unresolved. Plato proceeded to share his doubts about issues that he said were unresolvable by any human being. Jeremiah, in short order, resolved all of Plato's issues and doubts. Astounded, Plato asked Jeremiah how a human being could be so wise. Jeremiah replied that all his wisdom was derived from those "stones and wood" that he mourned over. Thus, we see that the Temple was also the source of Torah knowledge which was greatly diminished after the Temple's destruction. We mourn for that diminished knowledge of Torah. As a further proof of this idea, Jews say at the very end of the *Shmoneh Esreh* three times daily, "May it be Your will, Lord our G-d and G-d of our forefathers that Your holy Temple be speedily rebuilt in our days, and grant us a share in Your Torah, and may we serve You there with reverence..."²⁴ What is the connection between rebuilding the Temple and "a share in Your Torah?" Obviously the link is that rebuilding the Temple will enhance our share in G-d's Torah, our understanding of it, and restore us to the level of Torah learning that existed prior to the Temple's destruction.

- 6) Jews have always assumed that since the Temple was destroyed, we are waiting for G-d to rebuild a new and final Temple. We are mourning that destruction and a severing of G-d's relationship with the Jewish people. But these facts may not necessary be the case. The very first verse in Eicha—Lamentations describes the city "as a widow," and we can infer that is why we are crying.²⁵ But it says the city is "as" a widow, not an actual widow, implying that G-d did not really leave forever, as a widow loses her husband in actuality, and that the Temple is not really destroyed. Based on another verse in Lamentations, we believe that the walls and gates of the Temple, as well as the Holy Ark, were not actually destroyed; rather, they sunk underground where they lie in wait of the Final Redemption.²⁶ Thus, the Temple somehow still exists and G-d wants to return to His people. While it is forbidden in Jewish law to mourn longer than a year for a parent, as it is improper to continue mourning after that,²⁷ most Jews assume that this law does not apply to the Temple. That is why the Jews have mourned its loss for over 1900 years. But what if the laws of mourning for the Temple follow the same pattern as those for human beings? We know that when Jacob was told that his son Joseph died, he could not stop mourning or be consoled²⁸ for the twenty-two years he did not see Joseph. Why? The sources tell us that a person cannot be consoled for someone who is alive, even if it is reported that the person died. Thus, the fact that Jacob could not be consoled was an indication that Joseph was still alive.²⁹ Perhaps this principle is also true with regard to the Temple. The Jewish people cannot be consoled about the Temple's destruction because somehow it still exists in some form, but they are simply disconnected from it. Something is missing in the lives of Jews, some form of spirituality that the Temple provided. That is why it says,³⁰ "Whoever mourns for Jerusalem merits to see its joy." It does not say "will merit" to see its joy, implying that only when The Temple is rebuilt will the Jews be joyous. It says "merits" in the present tense, indicating that mourning now sensitizes Jews to the spiritual Temple – to the fact that it is not really lost forever, but waiting in abeyance for recognition of what is lacking. All this enables the Jew to become aware now of the ultimate joy, which is satisfying.

PREPARATION

²⁴ Very end of Shmoneh Esreh

²⁵ Lamentations 1:1-2

²⁶ Lamentations 2:9 with Rashi commentary

²⁷ Moed Katan 27b, Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 394:1-2

²⁸ Genesis 37: 33-35

²⁹ Midrash, Beraishit Rabbah 84:21, Tanchuma Vayeshev 8

³⁰ Taanit 30b

Every holiday in Judaism requires preparation³¹ in order to heighten the feeling and impact of the day when it finally arrives. (See chapter about Shavuot for an expansion of this theme). But when it comes to the Three Weeks and Tisha B'Av, preparation becomes much more crucial. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik amplifies on the Talmud's concept of differentiating between "Old Mourning" and "New Mourning" -- i.e. public mourning and private mourning.³² In private mourning for one's deceased relative, the feeling of pain is immediate, strong and overwhelming. One does not need to teach such a mourner to feel something or to cry. In fact, the purpose of the mourning process is for a person to gradually re-enter society and begin to live again as normally as possible. Therefore, first comes the Shiva, the most intense period of mourning, followed the Shloshim -- thirty day period, where mourning is less intense, and (for a parent) this is augmented by a twelve month mourning period in which the laws are even less intense, until they disappear completely after a year.

But for public mourning (*Aveilut Yeshana*), the goals of the Rabbis were just the opposite. It is almost impossible to ask anyone, even a traditional Jew, to wake up one day and begin to cry for the Temple that was destroyed over 1900 years ago. This is not natural. So the Rabbis began a gradual preparation that takes three weeks, beginning from the 17th of Tammuz, when Jerusalem's walls were breached. Thus, the laws and prohibitions of the Three Weeks mimic approximately the twelve-month period of a private mourner. Therefore, weddings are forbidden, as are haircuts and joyous music,³³ much like the twelve-month prohibitions for a private mourner. Once the month of Av commences, nine days before Tisha, B'Av, the symbols of mourning and prohibitions intensify. Ashkenazim do not do laundry, eat meat or drink wine (somewhat but not exactly parallel to the Shloshim mourning period).³⁴ On the week of Tisha B'Av itself, the customs of mourning become more intense, including for Sephardic Jews.³⁵ Finally, after all the buildup, the laws of Tisha B'Av itself parallel the laws of Shiva -- i.e., it is the most intense mourning of all. Only a gradual buildup and preparation such as this allows for the possibility that Jews truly feel the pain and sorrow of the destruction of the Temples, the pain of the day of Tisha B'av, and can actually cry so long after the event took place.

THE UNIQUENESS OF THE DAY AND PRAYERS OF TISHA BA'V

Almost all of the ideas, concepts and explanations in this section are attributed to Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik.³⁶

Tisha B'Av has two motifs that are mutually exclusive: *Taanit Tzibbur*, a public fast day, and *Aveilut Tzibbur*, a day of public mourning. Since there are many fast days during the year, the Talmud indicates that no public fast day was permitted to be instituted by the Rabbis in Babylonia -- except for Tisha B'Av.³⁷ This fast is distinguished in two ways: like the Biblically ordained fast day of Yom Kippur, the Rabbinically ordained fast of Tisha B'Av begins at sundown rather than after nightfall, and the five prohibitions of drinking, eating, washing, marital relations, and anointing are in force, just as on Yom Kippur. And, like Yom Kippur, the fast does not even begin at night, but even earlier, at sundown.³⁸ Another aspect of the usual fast day, which is absent on Tisha B'Av, is the *Selichot* -- penitent prayers, which are found on every fast day, especially on Yom Kippur. (Why they are absent on Tisha B'av will be discussed below.) Like Yom Kippur, Tisha B'Av requires full day fasting from the entire adult Jewish community. That is why even pregnant women and nursing mothers, who are normally exempt from

³¹ Bechorot 58a

³² Yevamot 43b

³³ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 551:2, 4 Mishne Berurah commentary s.v. 16

³⁴ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 551:9, 1, 2

³⁵ Maimonides, Hilchot Taaniyot 5:6, Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 551:3

³⁶ Based on the book "The Lord is Righteous in all His Ways: Reflections on Tisha B'Av Kinot," Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, and numerous audio tapes made each year on Tisha B'Av of Rav Soloveitchik's talks during the Tisha B'Av service

³⁷ Taanit 12b

³⁸ Maimonides, Hilchot Taaniyot 5:7

other fasts, are obligated to fast on this day³⁹ (unless one's life is threatened, as is similarly the case on Yom Kippur).

In addition, Tisha B'Av is a day of public mourning, referred to as *Aveilut Yeshana* above. The laws of mourning on Tisha B'Av parallel the laws of Shiva for a parent⁴⁰, which is referred to above as *Aveilut Chadasha*. Some even compare this day of fasting to the very first day of mourning during the Shiva period. Therefore, in addition to the five prohibitions that are forbidden during Shiva, the learning of Torah is forbidden on Tisha B'Av, like it is to a mourner during Shiva. This is because, if learned properly, Torah brings joy to a person.⁴¹ Like the custom in many places of private mourning where Tefillin is not donned on the first day of mourning, Tefillin is not worn on Tisha B'av morning.⁴² (In the afternoon, the laws of mourning are relaxed and Tefillin are put on for the Mincha prayer).

Why are the *Selichot* (penitent) prayers and *Tachanun* prayer not recited on Tisha B'Av? Several explanations have been given. The simplest is that since Tisha B'Av is called in the Megillah a *Moed* – holiday,⁴³ these prayers are omitted since they may not be recited on holidays. This is the view of the Shulchan Aruch.⁴⁴ (Some explain that the holiday aspect of Tisha B'av will be experienced in the future when the Temple is restored and this day will be celebrated, not mourned.) Another explanation, according to Maimonides,⁴⁵ is that if a person is so distraught, tormented or distracted, he or she should not pray. The impact of the Temple's destruction should have this effect on every Jew; therefore the Selichot prayers are omitted since it is not possible to say them properly in such a state. This feeling of being too overwhelmed to pray comes from Jeremiah's own words in Lamentations when he says that his prayers are shut.⁴⁶ Another explanation is that since we follow the laws of mourning, just as in a house of mourning, the Tachanun prayer is omitted,⁴⁷ so too it is omitted on the day of public mourning.

The Unique Prayers and Motif of Tisha B'Av

Piyutim are the liturgical poems that are often recited by Jews on different holidays throughout the year. They were written to teach people Jewish concepts (in periods when it was forbidden to study Torah, so that Jews could learn Jewish principles through these poems) and to give special praise to G-d. The *Kinot* – Lamentations on Tisha B'Av, in contrast, are made up of questions and complaints. *Eicha*, the Megillah read on Tisha B'Av evening, translates not as "lamentations" but as "why?" But what right do Jews have to say *Kinot* – to complain to G-d and to question Him?

In normative Judaism, Jews are taught to simply accept G-d's actions (see chapter entitled "Why Bad Things Happen to Good People"). When the greatest Jewish prophet and leader, Moses, was shown how the great Rabbi Akiva would exceed him in Torah learning but his end would be one of suffering and torture, Moses asked G-d why this was fair. G-d told Moses to, "Be quiet. You may not question My judgment."⁴⁸ The traditional Jewish response to tragedy is not to question, but to pronounce G-d as the True Judge, even if we do not understand His way of conducting the world.⁴⁹ Jews traditionally trust that all G-d's actions are legitimate. At the moment of greatest pain and

³⁹ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 551:1, 5

⁴⁰ Taanit 30a

⁴¹ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 554:1

⁴² Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 388:1

⁴³ Lamentations 1:15

⁴⁴ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 559:4

⁴⁵ Maimonides, Hilchot Tefillah 4:15

⁴⁶ Lamentations 3:8

⁴⁷ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 131:4

⁴⁸ Menachot 29b, Berachot 61a

⁴⁹ Berachot 54a

suffering, Jews recite the verses stating that G-d is correct and just.⁵⁰ In fact, it is forbidden for a Jew to question G-d and G-d's motives. Thus, the Talmud states that Jews even have to praise G-d for the seemingly "bad" events that occur in this world.⁵¹ Misfortune and disaster must be accepted. The classic reaction to tragedy is that of Aaron the High priest. When his sons died on the great day of his coronation as High Priest, his reaction was total silence, holding his peace.⁵² This reaction is demanded of the Jew every day of the year – except on Tisha B'Av.

The destruction of the Temple is the one exception to the rule. Jews can say things on Tisha B'Av that they have no right to say any other day of the year. On this day, the Jew is given special permission to ask *EICHA* – WHY? That is the reason so many of the *Kinot* begin with the word *Eicha* (Why). The questions are elaborated upon in the *Kinot* stanzas themselves. Jews can and should cry out and question G-d on Tisha B'Av. Rabbi Soloveitchik says that it is even a mitzvah--Commandment to ask *Eicha*-why on this day, something that is normally forbidden. G-d wants this. How is this possible? The entire Book of Lamentations revolves around questions. But what is the reason that the day of Tisha B'Av is so different? Why are we permitted to question on this day but no other day?

The right to ask and question G-d on Tisha B'Av is derived from a precedent set by Jeremiah. A special license is granted to the Jewish people that allows these questions on this day, because Jeremiah wrote a book in the Bible that begins with *Eicha-Why*.⁵³ Thus, the book of Lamentations is not an introduction to *Kinot* – it is *Kinot*, and is often called the Megillah of *Kinot*. If Jeremiah had not written *Eicha* with Divine inspiration and had not this book been accepted as a holy book of the Bible, then Jews could not have asked the question "why" on this day. That explains why Jews do not recite the paragraphs of the *Kinot* immediately after the evening service on Tisha B'Av. They must read the Book of Lamentations first to then allow them to question, and begin each *Kinah* with the word *Eicha-Why*. G-d allows this because the mourning for the destruction of the Temple was considered to be so overwhelming and so terrible that the prophet or any other human being was given unlimited freedom to question, even though it is inappropriate in any other Jewish context.

This is also why Jews read this Megillah at night, contrary to their regular practice of reading Megillot, such as on Purim, when the main mitzvah is the Megillah reading in the morning. The crying in the Megillah was at night, and the feeling of lost control is associated with night. More crying occurs at night than during the day throughout our lives, and the origin of this day in the Torah came from crying at night.⁵⁴ If reading this Megillah allows Jews to question G-d and His actions at night, then how are Jews allowed to ask "*Eicha—Why*" and question G-d during the day of Tisha B'Av as well? The words of the Haftorah of Tisha B'Av, written by Jeremiah, also question G-d. And these words legitimize our reciting the *Kinot* paragraphs during the day of Tisha B'Av. That is why the *Kinot* are recited immediately following the Haftorah. If the Haftorah were not read, Jews would not have theological "permission" to question G-d in the rest of the prayers. Therefore, this Haftorah is even more important than the Torah reading on Tisha B'Av. It is for this reason that the Talmud initially wanted to have only one person called up to the Torah on Tisha B'Av before the Haftorah would be read.⁵⁵ Unlike any other Haftorahs of the entire Jewish year, when there is a rule⁵⁶ that the final words of the Haftorah must be upbeat and joyous, the Haftorah on Tisha B'Av ends with expressions of despair and distress.

⁵⁰ Deuteronomy 32:4, Psalms 145:17

⁵¹ Berachot 54a

⁵² Leviticus 2-3

⁵³ Lamentations 1:1-2

⁵⁴ Lamentations 1:2, Sanhedrin 104b, Numbers 14:1

⁵⁵ Taanit 29b, Megillah 22b

⁵⁶ Berachot 31a

CRYING FOR THE JEWS AND CRYING ON TISHA B'AV

There is only one species of animal in the world that cries due to emotion – the human being. There is a saying that “Jews are just like other people – only more so.” Most people cry when they are in great pain, be it physical or psychological. But Jews cry more as it is part of their spiritual DNA.

One important difference between a baby crying and an adult who cries is that a baby can only cry for itself. An adult is also capable of crying for others. When baby Moses was put in the river and picked up by Pharaoh’s daughter, she took the baby and saw it was crying. The verse⁵⁷ then says that she took the boy and he was a *naar* – young man crying. (*Naar* can refer to a young man or an adult, as when Isaac was called a *naar* at age 37). What did this woman see? She saw a baby who cried like an adult, who already had the capacity to cry for others. It is then that she says, “This must be a Jewish baby.” Jews can cry for others at a very young age. And Jews can also cry for a building that was destroyed far away and so long ago. The greatest Rabbis have cried for the Temple’s destruction, from earlier times until the present day.⁵⁸

As has been noted, the very origin of this day of infamy began with crying. When the Jewish people accepted the bad report of ten of the Twelve Spies and became disheartened about entering the Land of Israel, they cried. This was on Tisha B’Av night. G-d said that since they cried needlessly on this night because of the Land of Israel, He would give them good reason to cry about the Land throughout the ages of history.⁵⁹ When the second verse of the Megillah on Tisha B’Av uses the verb “cry” twice,⁶⁰ the Talmud⁶¹ explains that the first “cry” was for the destruction of the First Temple, and the second “cry” was for the destruction of the Second Temple, and, thus, G-d’s promise to give the Jews a legitimate reason to cry was fulfilled.

The act of crying can be found in the Torah quite often, and, more than crying for oneself or even for others, it seems to somehow relate either to the Temple’s destruction or the redemption of the Jewish people. When the verse says that Benjamin cried on Joseph’s neck, the exact words strangely say that Jacob cried on Benjamin’s “necks.”⁶² Rabbi Elazar explains⁶³ that this is an allusion to the vision that Benjamin foresaw in which both Temples would be built in the part of the Land of Israel given to Benjamin, and then they would be destroyed. Thus, he cried. When Joseph was unrecognized by his brothers in his position as Vice–Premier of Egypt, he came to a point when he could no longer hold himself back and he cried.⁶⁴ The Rabbis even related this cry to the future, saying that the only way the brothers believed Joseph that he really was their brother was due to his crying before them. So, too, continues the Midrash, only due to the continuous crying of the Jewish people each year will they merit to be redeemed ultimately by G-d.⁶⁵ Therefore, the crying each year on Tisha B’Av has its purpose: more than anything else, these tears make their way to G-d and ultimately “force” G-d to rebuild the Temple. They add up, year after year, and cannot be ignored by G-d. It is the Jews’ most effective way of connecting to G-d. That is why the Talmud states that even after the service of the Temple ceased and even after the gates of prayer were closed, the gates of tears remain open and can never be closed.⁶⁶ Only when the Jews shed enough tears will they return to the Land of Israel and the Final Redemption is guaranteed to come.⁶⁷

⁵⁷ Exodus 2:6

⁵⁸ Midrash Eicha Rabbah 1:24

⁵⁹ Taanit 29a

⁶⁰ Lamentations 1:2

⁶¹ Sanhedrin 104b

⁶² Genesis 45:14

⁶³ Midrash Beraishit Rabbah 93:12

⁶⁴ Genesis 45:1-2

⁶⁵ Midrash, Tanchuma Vayigash 8

⁶⁶ Bava Metzia 49a

⁶⁷ Zohar 1:146b

Of all the criers in Jewish history, it is the mother of both Joseph and Benjamin, Mother Rachel, who continually cries, waiting for her children to return to the Land of Israel.⁶⁸ Chatam Sofer⁶⁹ quotes a rabbi who mourns over the fact that Jews today do not know how to cry properly and enough, and do not feel the pain for those things which Jews should be mourning over. In fact, he says, this point alone should be enough to make someone cry. It is not for naught that the only physical connection the Jewish people have with the Temple is a structure called the “Wailing Wall,” the wall that Jews have cried billions of tears over. Possibly the name “Wailing Wall” also refers to the wall that actually cries for her Jewish people and for the Temple to be rebuilt.

TISHA B’AV AND YOM KIPPUR: TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN

The two days of the year seem so different and unconnected. And yet, it seems that they are connected, on the one hand, and yet at the same time, opposite of one another.

The first to speak at length about this connection between Tisha B’Av and Yom Kippur is Rabbi Moshe Mitrani (1500-1580) when he writes⁷⁰ that G-d had mercy on the Jewish people, and after giving them 613 commandments, G-d did not want to burden them with more than one day a year with a fast that extends from the night throughout the following day – i.e., Yom Kippur. Alas, after the destruction of the Temple and the eradication of the Temple service, Yom Kippur alone could not achieve the desired repentance and required atonement. Thus, the Rabbis were given permission to create the twenty-five hour fast of Tisha B’Av in order to complete the process of teshuva–repentance that was unneeded until the Temple was destroyed. The parallel between the days of Yom Kippur and Tisha B’Av is not merely that these are the only two days of the year when the fast extends from night to day. Maimonides states⁷¹ that the five prohibitions of both days are the same, and that the fast on both days must begin at sundown and not nightfall.

How is Tisha B’Av, like Yom Kippur, a day of teshuva–repentance? Even though it lacks the standard prayers of repentance normally recited on other fast days (see above), every fast day by definition is a day of repentance. But on Tisha B’Av, it is even more so. Jews declare in the holiday prayers that it is because of our sins that we were driven from the Land of Israel and have no Temple to celebrate in now. Not “because of their sins,” but “because of our sins.”⁷² Thus, it is clear that as Jews continue to commit the same sins of the past without repenting, the Temple will not be rebuilt. The Jerusalem Talmud therefore states⁷³ that in every generation that the Temple is not rebuilt, it is as if it were once again destroyed. The reason for this idea is that the Jewish people have not learned from the past. Instead, they continue to sin in the same way their ancestors did prior to the Temple’s destruction because they have not properly repented from those sins. Thus, the question is what were these terrible sins that the Jews committed, both in the past and still today, that brought about the Temple’s destruction?

The Rabbis say⁷⁴ that before the First Temple was destroyed the Jewish people were guilty of the three cardinal sins in Judaism: murder, adultery and idol worship. Before the Second Temple was destroyed the Jews hated each other needlessly. This doesn’t sound like a sin worthy of the Temple’s destruction. And yet, the Talmud continues and says that the fact this sin brought about the Temple’s destruction shows that the sin of baseless hatred is equal to all three cardinal sins combined. Later commentaries have reasoned that this sin of Jew hating Jew is far worse than those three major sins,

⁶⁸ Jeremiah 31:14-17

⁶⁹ Derashot Chatam Sofer, Seventh of Av, page 610, footnote

⁷⁰ Hamabit, Beit Elohim, Shaarei Tefillah 13

⁷¹ Maimonides, Hilchot Taaniyot 5:7

⁷² Musaf prayer on Jewish holidays

⁷³ Jerusalem Talmud, Yoma 5

⁷⁴ Yoma 9b

since the *galut* – exile of the First Temple lasted for only 70 years, while our exile due to our sins during the Second Temple has lasted over 1900 years. Generation after generation, then, of Jews continues to be guilty of the sin of hating one’s fellow Jews needlessly. This is preventing the Temple from being rebuilt. Until teshuva-repentance is done for this sin on Tisha B’Av itself, the situation will not change. Thus, just like the Day of Atonement is a day of repentance, so, too, must Tisha B’Av be a day of repentance.

A very strange and enigmatic Talmudic passage will also shed some light on this issue. An Athenian wise man was challenging Rabbi Joshua to intellectual riddles and brainteasers⁷⁵ for the purpose of defeating him and ridiculing Judaism. This man brought two eggs before Rabbi Joshua and said the parent of one egg is a black hen and the other one is a white hen. Which is which? Rabbi Joshua could not answer. But then, Rabbi Joshua brought two bowls of goat cheese before the Athenian, and said that one cheese came from a black goat while the other cheese came from a white goat. Which was which? The Athenian, as well, could not determine which cheese came from which goat. What is the meaning and symbolism of this incident? Many commentaries attempt to explain this enigmatic story. Only one relates to our issue. Earlier on the page,⁷⁶ the Rabbis declared that the gestation period for a hen is twenty-one days. Maharsha then attempts to illuminate what was behind these eggs and cheeses, white and black.⁷⁷

The Athenian said that each egg represents the twenty-one day period in the Jewish calendar, the length of the egg’s gestation. The Jews have a “black” twenty-one day period between the 17th day of Tammuz and Tisha B’Av, and a “white” twenty-one day period from Rosh Hashana until Hoshana Rabbah, the last possible day of repentance for the Jewish people. Since you, Rabbi Joshua, cannot tell the difference between these eggs, between these two periods of twenty-one days, they both are nonsense and neither will achieve repentance for the Jews. Rabbi Joshua countered and brought out the cheese that comes from goats. He was saying that on our day of repentance, Yom Kippur, we have two goats: One is “black” in that it represents the sins of the Jewish people, and it is sent to its tragic death; the other goat is a “white” goat that is offered to G-d on this day, and that helps atone for the sins of the Jewish people. The reason you, the Athenian, cannot tell the difference between the cheeses – which one comes from a black goat mother, and which comes from a white goat mother -- is that indeed there is no difference between them, as both goats are needed to attain repentance for the Jewish people. So, too, it is with both eggs. Both twenty-one day periods, the “black” and the “white” periods, are needed as both equally help attain atonement for the Jewish people. Therefore for the Jews, both Tisha B’Av and Yom Kippur are of equal power and help erase sins. The Rabbis recognized this deep connection between the two, twenty-one day periods of the 17th day of Tammuz and Tisha B’Av and Rosh Hashana to Yom Kippur.

Every special Shabbat during the year has a special Haftorah (verses recited from the Prophets after the Shabbat Torah reading) designated by the Rabbis. And, thus, logically, there should be three special Haftorot chanted after the Torah reading each Shabbat during the three-week period leading up to Tisha B’av. After the Three Weeks there are no special days or special Shabbatot, yet the Rabbis not only designated special Haftorot during the Three Weeks of Mourning, they also designated seven specific Haftorot to be chanted each of the seven Sabbaths after Tisha B’Av leading up to Rosh Hashana.⁷⁸ These seven weeks connect each of these two twenty-one day periods of atonement, just as the seven week period connects the two holidays of Passover and Shavuot, and this further shows that both repentance periods are needed and are of equal importance.

⁷⁵ Bechorot 8b

⁷⁶ Bechorot 8a

⁷⁷ Maharsha commentary on Bechorot 8b

⁷⁸ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 428:8

Finally, the Jewish concept of joy demonstrates how these two special days are opposites, or two sides of the same coin. In the Torah, the greatest simcha-joy is always associated with being “before G-d” in the Temple.⁷⁹ As long as the Temple stood, that joy was immense. The greatest day of joy in the Jewish calendar, a day of unique simcha-joy was Yom Kippur, when the service in the Temple was the most intricate and was the focus of the day.⁸⁰ But, alas, the Temple is no more. The expression of the lack of a Temple is the lack of simcha-joy. That is why during this period leading up to the mourning of Tisha B’Av simcha-joy is minimized) as explained above. One modern commentary⁸¹ explains that this is the reason that doing anything that brings special joy to a person is forbidden during this period marking the destruction of the Temple and its lack in the lives of Jews. Thus, Yom Kippur marked the ultimate joy when the Temple existed, and Tisha B’Av marks the ultimate lack of joy because the Temple is no more. However, G-d promises to convert the day of sorrow and lack of joy currently felt on Tisha B’Av into a day of true joy and celebration when the final Temple will be rebuilt.⁸²

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⁷⁹ Deuteronomy 12:18, 16:11, 27:7

⁸⁰ Taanit 26b with Meiri commentary on Taanit 31a

⁸¹ Sefer Todaah, Chapter 33

⁸² Midrash Zuta Eicha 1:28, Pesikta Rabbati 28:4