

On Tisha B'Av, Laments for a Jewish State That Seemingly is on the Edge of Ruin

By Uriel Heilman

Jerusalem (JTA) — Commemorating Tisha B'Av in Jerusalem is a bit of an exercise in paradoxes.

On the one hand, the remains of the Holy Temple whose destruction we lament on this national day of fasting and mourning are just a stone's throw away, on the same hallowed ground where generations of Jewish soldiers died fighting for their land.

On the other hand, we live in an era when the Jewish people have the good fortune of being able to live freely in our own state in the place our ancestors prayed about for millennia. We read the Book of Lamentations and the *Kinot* prayers that bemoan the destruction of the Jewish nation-state and our subsequent dispersion to the Diaspora, yet we have returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the Jewish state.

Today, our holy temple is the State of Israel.

In 1948, when Israel was founded, and again in 1967 after Jerusalem was returned to Jewish hands, some Jews saw the victories as the beginning of the Age of Redemption — the most crucial step toward transforming Tisha B'Av into a celebration of the reconstruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

But for most Jews living in this sacred land, there is a sense that 60 years since the state was established and 40 years since Jerusalem was liberated, somehow there is something rotten in the State of Israel.

It's in the news every day, it's

talked about at dinner table conversations, mocked by satirists, lamented by rabbis and analyzed by pundits.

Sixty years on, the temple we have built seems on the verge of ruin.

The threats come from within and without.

Not far enough away from Jerusalem, the modern-day king of Persia, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, threatens to wipe Israel off the face of the earth, and he's building the nuclear capacity to make that happen.

Closer to home, Hamas is acquiring the weapons it needs to turn southern Israel into the firing range that northern Israel was for Hezbollah during last summer's war. Hezbollah, for its part, has restored the weapons arsenal it lost last summer and appears eager for another opportunity to humble Israel's no-longer-invincible military.

And from Durban to The Hague, from Geneva to New York, the nations of the world bear witness to the castigation and delegitimization of Israel, at times lending their own voices to the clamor calling for Israel's destruction, either explicitly or implicitly.

At home in Israel, the sense of ruin is palpable in other, more immediate ways.

The state built on socialist underpinnings now has one of the highest rates of poverty in the developed world. The leaders of the government we hoped would be a light unto the nations have proven either grossly inept or cor-

rupt. Even when found guilty by the courts, Israeli leaders seem impervious to punishment.

In the last month alone, ex-President Moshe Katsav escaped rape charges in exchange for a deal to plead guilty to sexual harassment and indecent acts; Omir Sharon, son of the former prime minister, had his jail sentence reduced by two months and postponed yet again; and just this week former Knesset member Naomi Blumenthal had her eight-month prison term for bribery commuted to two months probation and six months community service.

The preponderance of cases like these give the Jewish state the appearance of a place where power, not justice, prevails.

It's not only the government's corruption and ineptitude that has Israelis lamenting the ruination of the Jewish state. It's the people, too.

Secularists blame the Orthodox for ruining the state, siphoning off tax money to schools whose kids who won't serve in the army, don't believe in the legitimacy of the state, and will uphold the Orthodox stranglehold on issues like marriage, conversion, and religion in Israel. Orthodox Israelis say secularists are purging the state of its Jewish character through shortsighted education policies, unfair court decisions, and lax immigration policies.

Settlers feel abandoned by a government that uprooted 9,000 Jews from the Gaza Strip during the 2005 disengagement and still

contemplates trading away the West Bank for a false peace that will only hasten Israel's demise. Left-wingers say the settlers have wrought Israel's moral corruption by turning the Jewish state into an occupying power that persecutes an entire people in order to survive.

It's not just about ideology, either.

Israeli drivers have turned the nation's roads into avenues of death, where fatalities from car accidents far exceed those from wars and where even a normal car trip becomes an exercise in rage and survival.

Real estate developers snap up Israel's few remaining open spaces and transform them into apartments, roads, and office buildings while the government planning boards responsible for land management authorize wide-ranging construction projects with alarmingly short-term vision, all in exchange for easy money. Even the walls of Jerusalem's Old City, a national treasure, are now blocked from view by a new mall that has gone up right outside the Jaffa Gate.

Thirsty cities divert water from Israel's few freshwater sources

and turn a blind eye to wealthy corporations' dumping toxins back in. Some of Israel's most prized sites — among them the polluted Jordan River, the shrinking Dead Sea and the increasingly toxic Mediterranean shoreline — seem in various stages of ruin.

Israel's best and brightest are moving overseas to take higher-paying jobs, government-controlled food prices are rising, and every day seems to be hotter than the last.

So what do we do about all these problems?

First, we lament. In our tradition, the collective "Oy vey" we express on Tisha B'Av is meant to be our wakeup call.

Then, we act, however we can: We vote, we write letters to our representatives, we put a dime in the pushke, we volunteer, we make aliyah, we support worthwhile causes, we treat our fellow Jews and Israelis with human decency, we act like mensches even when no one's looking.

Will this fix the problems of Israel and the Jewish people? No. But it's a start, and we've got to start somewhere. Perhaps today it can start with us. ✧



Write Your Own Dirge for Tisha B'Av

By Edmon J. Rodman

Los Angeles (JTA) — Jewish tradition teaches that we are commanded to write a Torah in our lifetime, but not a *kinah*, or dirge. For ages, our prophets and rabbis have done this for us, filtering and distancing, putting our most painful group memories into acrostic, poetic form.

Beginning with Eicha (Lamentations) and continuing with additional *kinot*, our forebears have turned the darkest days in our history into a ready-to-use alef-bet of tragedy.

Now as we approach Tisha B'Av, the 9th of Av, the fast day on which we remember the destruction of the First and Second Temples and other disasters that occurred on this date by chanting these *kinot*, I am encouraging you in this age of immersion and Googley do-it-yourself to pick up pencil or pen and write your own dirge.

Tisha B'Av, which starts this year on the night of July 27, literally cries out for our involvement. Writing your own *kinah* can create a powerful connection to a summer day that might otherwise pass you by.

Historically, not all *kinot* were in Hebrew — Italian Jews wrote them in their own language, so you can, too.

Through the *kinot*, Tisha B'Av lives as a construct of memory. The day takes on new meaning as we place our own memories, in our own words, into the construct.

The writing of personal *kinot* is an activity that I have led several times in Los Angeles with a lay-led Jewish community called the Movable Minyan. Participants have found that writing their own *kinot* helps them forge an intimate connection to Tisha B'Av — a fast day many Jews find difficult to encounter — especially if they are read or even chanted.

In these *kinot* workshops, participants have written about personal loss during the Holocaust, onset and recovery from serious illness, how Jewish generational links have been broken and re-forged, earthquakes and riots.

Over the centuries the focus of these poems — which began with the destruction of the ancient Jewish Temples — has evolved to include other calamities as well. There is a *kinah* for the York massacre in 1190 and one for the French Crown's order in 1242 that all copies of the Talmud be burned.

The Ten Martyrs — you will recall them from Yom Kippur's Martyrology Service — also have a *kinah* dedicated to their sacrifice. Several *kinot* have been writ-

ten about the Holocaust and are now in use around the world. Sephardim have written them about the Expulsion from Spain.

No one is expecting you to be an elegiac master. With a few good moments of focus and intent, the form of the acrostic *kinah* can be yours to appreciate and use. Don't be thrown by the acrostic part. It is based on the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, with the acrostic being created by the initial letter of each verse. Two common explanations for choosing this literary form are that the use of the entire alphabet represents the totality of the destruction, and that even in destruction there is a beginning and an end.

In Hebrew, the lines of a typical *kinah* gain strength from alternating long and short lines. Rhythmically, the lines play off each other, adding nuance and meaning. In English translation, you can reach some of the same rhythm.

Take, for example, this section from the beginning of Eicha, the book read on the night of Tisha B'Av (it helps to read aloud):

"Alas!
Lonely sits the city
Once great with people!
She that was great among nations

Is become like a widow;
The princess among states
Is become a thrall."
(JPS Translation © 2000)

And here, listen carefully to each line's rhythm:

"Her enemies are now the masters,
Her foes are at ease,
Because the Lord has afflicted her
For her many transgressions;
Her infants have gone into captivity
Before the enemy."

For your *kinah*, writing ten lines will give you a good feel for the form. Alas, the wellspring for poetic inspiration about loss and tragedy in Jewish life often seems endless. Yet try to focus on one theme. Your source might be Jewish-related news, an e-mail or a late-night call.

Once you have a theme, simply begin your first line with an "A" word and work your way line by line to "J."

There is no need to rhyme, only to recall and feel. Think of the *kinah* as a soulful mnemonic in which each line's beginning helps you to remember.

As you prepare to

write, get into the mood of the approaching day. Many congregations chant Eicha while seated on low stools or even on the floor. Lights are dimmed. For as the commentary Eicha Rabbah teaches, "What does a mortal king do when he is in mourning, he extinguishes the lanterns."

Use a simple pen or pencil. Find an "un-easy" chair. Go basic, light a candle. If you can, let some hope in, as Eicha's closing line is: "Renew our days as of old."

On Tisha B'Av, sitting together, we chant the *kinot*. It's a communal experience where the memories and pain are mourning shared. Prepare and help others to prepare for Tisha B'Av by sharing your creation. To awaken your inner poet, just listen a little, sift a bit, think and write yourself into this Jewish way of remembering. ✧

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"Tisha B'Av" by Issachar Ber Ryback