

TISHA B'AV

Tisha B'Av and Tu B'Av: A Month of Lions and Lovers Renew Our Days as of Old

By *Hanna Tiferet Siegel*

During the peak of the summer, when many people in the northern hemisphere are on vacation and enjoying the warmth and light of the season, the Jewish calendar is dimmed by a day of fasting and mourning.

Tisha B'Av, the ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av, which falls this year on August 10, is the culmination of a three-week period commemorating the destruction of the first Temple by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E. and the second Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E.

The Beit HaMikdash, the Holy Temple, was the center of Jewish life and ritual practice. Daily and holiday sacrifices were brought to the Priests as offerings to God, and the Levitical choir, as described in Psalm 150, filled the courtyard with song, dance and Halleluyahs. With the destruction of the Temples came the exile of the Jewish people to foreign lands, the loss of the sacrificial cult described in the Torah, and the shattering of the dwelling place of the Shekhina, the female Presence of God.

The Evolution of Synagogues

In place of the priesthood, synagogues evolved as religious and cultural gathering places, and the basic prayers of our current services were established. Although the democratization of Judaism may seem today like a positive result of our loss, it was accompanied by the dislocation, confusion and suffering that any people in exile feels. Where is our home? Where do we belong? Will we ever return to our native land? In

addition to the destruction of the Temples, the ninth of Av seemed to be a bad luck day in which many calamities befell the Jewish people including the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 and the outbreak of World War I, followed by its pogroms and massacres. Tisha B'Av became a national day of mourning in which we bemoaned all of the bad things that befell us as a people.

The three-week period of mourning begins with the seventeenth of Tammuz, when the walls of the city of Jerusalem were breached. During this time, many Jews do not celebrate weddings, listen to joyous music, or buy new clothes. These practices intensify with the first day of Av. Meat and wine are consumed only on Shabbat and many do not cut their hair, shave, or use water for pleasure or cleanliness. The Shabbat preceding Tisha B'Av, is called Shabbat Hazon, the Shabbat of Vision, because of the first word in the Haftarah for that day, from Isaiah 1: 1-27.

Tisha B'Av is a major fast day, like Yom Kippur which, when fully observed, prohibits food, bathing, anointing, wearing of leather shoes, sexual relations, or study of sacred texts except Job and those related to mourning. The fast begins at sunset after a meal for mourners including hard-boiled eggs, lentils, and bread dipped in ashes. After Ma'ariv, the evening service, everyone sits on the ground or low stools, chanting the heart-breaking words to the plaintive mode of the Book of Lamentations, often by candlelight. Lamentations is also called

"Aikha," which is the first word of the first verse, "How does the city sit alone, that was so full of people, like a widow..." The same word, with different vowels, also spells out the word "Ayeka," "Where are you?" Genesis 2:9 which God asks of Adam in the Garden of Eden, at the moment of



the very first exile. Another echo is heard in Deuteronomy 1:12 "Aikha ... How can I alone bear your trouble and your burden and your fighting?" which is always read the Shabbat before Tisha B'Av. Lamentations concludes with the words, "Cause us to turn to you, God, and we will return. Renew our days as of old." Despite our despair, we have faith that we have not been abandoned and what we once knew will again be valuable in the future.

The Seed of Hope and Redemption

In the morning, tallit (prayer shawl) and tefillin (phylacteries) are not worn, which is also the custom before a funeral, but they are donned for Mincha, the afternoon service, with the anticipation of the consolation at the end of the day. Although the despair of this day can take one down into the depths, the seed of hope and redemption is imbedded in its observance, for there is a tradition that the Messiah, the one who will bring comfort, healing, and peace

to the world will be born on this day. To support this legend, there is a custom to sweep out your house in the afternoon so that you are ready when s/he comes.

Av is the same as the astrological sign Leo the Lion, and it is the Hebrew word for father. It consists of the letters aleph and bet, the first two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. So the beginning of this month is stripped down to the basics of life, death and survival. But by the tenth of Av, the harshness of the month has been transformed into Menachem Av, the Comforting Father, or perhaps we could rename the second half of the month "Eym," the Mother.

The Shabbat after Tisha B'Av is called Shabbat Nahamu, the Shabbat of Comfort, and it begins the seven weeks of healing and teshuvah before Rosh Hashanah. And on the full moon of the month of Av, there is a minor festival called Tu B'Av, the fifteenth of Av, which is becoming increasingly popular as a day to celebrate weddings. In the Talmud, Ta'anit 4:8, it was written, "There are no days as festive to Israel as those of Yom Kippur and the fifteenth of Av. The daughters of Israel used to dress in white and go out to the fields to dance and young men would follow after them." The custom to open the heart and find one's beloved after a time of introspection and purification affirms the potential for life to continue.

Why Are We Still Mourning?

Many people ask, since the establishment the State of Israel, why are we still mourning? Do we really want another Temple built, complete with priests and animal

sacrifices? If we are not mourning the loss of the Temple, then what are we praying for? We are not the first to ask this question. Maimonides said that it was important to remember the past and encourage repentance and good deeds. Robert Gordis wrote that it reminds us of the work that remains to be done within the Jewish people and in the world. Jerusalem means "city of peace" and "a vision of wholeness." If we read the news or observe the problems in our communities, we see how much work remains for us as partners with the Holy One in the repair of the world.

Many have come to look at this holiday globally, for on August 6 and 9 in 1945, the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan. It is a time for us to look at the barbaric futility of war and hatred. Since the Jewish people can return to Israel and are no longer in exile, there are others like the Kosovars and the Tibetans, who could be aided by our concern for their struggles.

As the inner cities heat up in mid-summer, we can turn our attention to the people who could use support in our local communities. And when the temperatures reach the high nineties and there is a bad air alert in the city, with no rain in sight for days, we realize that our precious earth is crying out to us to not be destroyed by our thoughtless habits. There are many ways to observe this fast day of Tisha B'Av followed by the romantic full moon of Tu B'Av as we restore the Shekhina, the Divine Presence, to the dignity of each human being and welcome Her into the way we live our lives on Earth. ✪

Hanna Tiferet Siegel wrote this article for Jewish Family & Life!, www.jewishfamily.com.

Tisha B'Av: Make a Start

By *Erica Meyer Rauzin*

What kind of religion sets aside a day for the express purpose of being unhappy?

One with a memory, that's what kind. Tisha B'Av marks the destruction of the first and second Temples in Jerusalem. We are to ponder these tragedies and the resulting global dispersion of the Jewish people. This Hebrew date — the ninth of Av — evokes other tragedies. It is said to be the date of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, a date linked to the start of World War I in Sarajevo, again a center of conflict, and the date of other sad events in our history.

To me, it is impossible to consider tragic turning points in Jewish history without discussing the Holocaust. Perhaps Tisha B'Av can also help us confront, commemorate, honor, mourn and remember this relatively recent tragedy which continues to touch so many of us every day. The wonder is not that we mourn on Yom HaShoah, the modern day set aside to mark the Holocaust, or on Tisha B'Av, the ancient day of commemoration, but that we ever leave off mourning.

I am amazed to read commentators who complain that Jews have spoken too much of the Holocaust, that we dwell on our losses. How can a community which has built so much in this country and in Israel be accused of any such thing? We have both mourned and moved forward. But, as was the case in the days of the destruction of the Temples, ignorance about

our people is a terrible enemy and provides potent fuel for hatred.

My teacher about Holocaust is my mother, who escaped Germany as a young teenager. She lost her grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins, her school friends, her home, her financial security, her country, her youth, and because of the lack of medical care for Jewish children in Germany in the late 1930's when she had scarlet fever, the hearing in her left ear. If I fail to evoke in myself a spirit of loss on Tisha B'Av for the sake of the lost Temples, I can think of the great-grandparents I never knew, of the family demolished, of my grandfather, whose name I carry. He was changed from a vigorous department store owner to a stricken, ailing clerk. He died of a heart attack at age 55, an immigrant in South Carolina. My mother says he never recovered from the news that his mother had perished in Theresienstadt, after he had scrapped and borrowed to send her money to buy an apartment in Germany's so-called "model Jewish community."

My mother's experiences are not unusual, would that they were. She is unusual only in that she survived, and her parents and sister survived. Because of her, I know about righteous gentiles. The movie's Oscar Schindler was not the first one I ever heard of, because mother told me about Frau Duhng. She was the Christian cleaning lady who worked for my grandparents. One

day shortly after Kristallnacht, the Gestapo came to my grandparents' home seeking Jews. Frau Duhng was the only adult present. My blond blue-eyed mother and her brunette, brown-eyed sister, then adolescent girls, were also home. Frau Duhng calmly introduced them as her own daughters in so matter-a-fact a way that the Nazis believed her and left. I am here to mark Tisha B'Av, and to live a full life, and to raise Jewish children, only because of her.

On Tisha B'Av, we are charged to reach deep, feel the loss of the Temple, be moved by ancient history and grieve. But perhaps we can also try to use this cathartic, healing, thoughtful day of study and fasting to fulfill a parallel duty: to learn about the Holocaust and to teach our children. Instead of wishing each other an "easy fast," perhaps we need to taste the bitterness afresh and not evade it. This is hard with kids, even older ones, because the subject is so frightening and horrific, but the older your children are, the more crucial it is to teach them.

We cannot just send our children to the movies to learn their own history. While Rwanda and Kosovo and Haiti challenge us to act because they prove to us that genocide is not only a scourge of the past, while deniers and haters flourish, we cannot grieve enough; we can only fail to turn grief into action. We cannot help enough. We cannot learn enough. We cannot teach enough. But we can start. ✪

"Since the Destruction, there has been no joy above or below."

— Zohar, Gen., 61b

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