

What Tisha B'Av Can Teach America About National Tragedy

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The Jewish Center

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The period we call the *Nine Days* is always a difficult one and it was particularly so this year as we watched the all-too-familiar scenes in Dayton and El Paso. Politicians and pundits spend a lot of time debating things like motives and causes. But this morning I want to grapple instead with our reaction: with the question of how to respond to national tragedy.

And it strikes me that there is really no one with more expertise in this issue than the Jewish people. We've been thinking about, if not suffering, national tragedies for thousands of years.

So on this ninth day of Av – a date marked on the calendar for the commemoration of national tragedy – I want to share with you three observations: Three messages that emerge from the annals of Tisha B'Av that I believe bear directly on these fraught times in America.

The first thing to notice about Tisha B'Av is that we nationalize local events. It's not just that we mourn over tragedies that took place a long time ago; we mourn over events that are very far away. So in 5th century Babylonia, Jews were lamenting calamities that befell the Jews in 1st century Palestine. And in 16th century Lithuania, Jews were saying Kinnot for a massacre that happened in 13th century Worms.

We collapse not only a temporal divide, but a geographic one.

It seems so obvious, but it's largely absent from the public discourse today. Tisha B'Av teaches us that there is such a thing as national mourning. I've never been to Dayton or El Paso. I don't know anyone from Dayton or El Paso. Nothing about what happened this past week has an immediate or tangible effect on my life here in NYC. But to be part of a nation means that both they and we share a common bond. And we have to feel it.

Tisha B'Av – and everything we do in advance of it – is a mandate not just to remember tragedy, but to stop and mourn over it. And because it's not something we'll necessarily feel intuitively, we condition ourselves such that we will feel it.

And so if I may be so bold, I would suggest that part of our duty as citizens of this country, is to stop and mourn.

- Maybe it's watching a clip from a funeral of one of the victims.
- Maybe it's reading a eulogy or biography to get a sense of who was lost.

It's true that we can't spend the entirety of our lives in mourning. But it's equally true that we can't spend the entirety of our lives not in mourning. The moment we become inured to the loss of human life is the moment we risk sacrificing our own humanity.

The second message that Tisha B'Av teaches is highlighted by a Gemara in Taanit.

תשעה באב שחל להיות בשבת, וכן ערב תשעה באב שחל להיות בשבת - אוכל ושותה כל צרכו, ומעלה על שולחנו
אפילו כסעודת שלמה בשעתו

If Tisha B'Av falls out on Shabbat – or if it falls out on Sunday: What's the status of Shabbat itself? Normally on Erev Tisha B'Av we would have a *seudah ha-mafseket*; we would eat the food of mourners; we certainly wouldn't be eating meat or drinking wine. It's Erev Tisha B'Av; but it's Shabbat. So what's the halacha? How do we reconcile the tension?

There's no tension. It's Shabbat. You can eat and drink whatever you want. Nothing at all needs to be curtailed. And then the Gemara adds this line:

ומעלה על שולחנו אפילו כסעודת שלמה בשעתו

You could even have a feast. Your table could be as lavish as that of Shlomo Hamelech.

Of course we understand the halacha. Shabbat supersedes *aveilut*. Why mention King Solomon? Maybe it's just a handy example. The Navi is explicit about the kinds of banquets he held.

But the Chassidim have a different take on this Gemara. There's another layer of meaning here.

We mention Shlomo specifically because he built the first *beit hamikdash* and it's his descendant who will usher in the period in which we build the third.

Normally we don't get to celebrate on Tisha B'Av; but this year we do. It's mostly suppressed, but deep within the spirit of Tisha B'Av is another dimension. It's not all gloom; there's a messianic component to the day; there's even a tinge of joy in the knowledge that Tisha B'Av will eventually become a *yontif*.

So when Tisha B'Av falls on Shabbat, we have a unique opportunity to give expression to the joyous underside of the day that we too often ignore.

It's a kind of inverse of our practice under the *chupah*. It's not just that we break a glass to remember the temple; we break a glass to remember that in Judaism there's really no such thing as unmitigated joy.

And by the same token there's no such thing as unmitigated sadness.

Tisha B'Av is surprisingly complicated. On a day that's marked for mourning and grief; there's also a component of consolation and even joy.

It's no accident that we don't say Tachanun. Tisha B'Av also has the status of a *moed*.

This is the second message: Even on the saddest day of the year, we recognize that life is not so neatly organized. There's a duality.

Whatever our positions are on what ails this nation and what will be its remedy, we would do well to remember that we mere mortals have never trafficked in absolutes. There's always another side to the story.

I find Yehuda Mirsky's summary of Rav Kook's political credo to be particularly apt: "I should always recognize not only that my opponent is human, but also that he has a piece of truth that is unavailable to me." (*Rav Kook: Mystic in a Time of Revolution*, 112)

All the certainty in the world won't change the fact that there's always another perspective.

And finally, I want to share with you a comment of the *Levush*, R. Mordechai Jaffe. In our community, we don't make a bracha when we read *megillat Eichah*. Nor do we read it from a *klaf*. Which is perfectly consistent.

But in 16th century Poland, it seems the prevalent custom was in fact to make a bracha on *Eichah*.

Just like we do on Purim. The Baal Koreh gets up and says

בא"ה אמ"ה אקב"ו על מקרא מגילה .

But it was equally universal that there was no *klaf*. Everyone just read *Eichah* from a *chumash*.

So why is it, the *Levush* wonders, that no one *lains* from a *klaf*? Wouldn't authentic parchment be more appropriate than a printed text?

And his answer is stunning.

מפני שלא היה מצוי להם. מפני שהסופרים לא נהגו לכותבם, משום שאנו מחכים ומצפים בכל יום שיהפך לנו יום זה לששון ולשמחה ולמועד, ואם היו כותבין מגילת איכה היה נראה כמיאשין מן הגאולה

It's because they didn't have it.

The scribes didn't write *Eichah*.

We wait around hoping and anticipating that this tragic day will turn into a day of joy and exaltation. And were they to write the book of *Eichah*, it would appear as though they had despaired of the redemption.

The very act of writing *Eichah*, the *Levush* says, would be a kind of resignation. It would constitute the abandonment of the hope that Tisha B'Av might yet become a holiday. And that's not who we are. We never abandon hope.

In the thick of the kinds of challenges we face today, it's very difficult to imagine that a day will come when we find the cure for what ails this nation. If ever human civilization knew a people with a right to despair, it would be the Jewish people.

If someone entirely uninitiated picked up our Tisha B'Av Kinnos and read it through from *Eichah* to the end, they couldn't help but ask: Who's left? Who could have possibly endured this unfathomable history?

Our existence – our entirely unexpected existence – is itself a testament to the idea of hope.

If there's a message we're uniquely qualified to inject into our national discourse at this particular moment in history – this is it. It's the notion that even in our darkest day we have the vision to see a place on the horizon where the darkness ends and a new dawn begins.

I don't think we relish the distinction of being world experts in national tragedy. But attached to our expertise is a responsibility: An obligation to model for our fellow Jews and our fellow Americans the lessons that have sustained us through persecutions and pogroms; exiles and expulsions; and the horrors of the Holocaust.

- Because our nation is a fraternity that transcends both time and place, we mourn the loss of every life.
- Because the complexity of our tradition is a protest against the notion of absolutism, we embrace the ethic of listening to voices different from our own.
- And because we know the story of Jewish history, we know, too, that there is always room for hope.

May the words of Yishayahu come to fruition:

וְאֲשִׁיבָה שְׁפָטֶיךָ כְּבָרָאשׁוֹנָה, וְיַעֲצִיךָ כְּבַתְּחִלָּה; אֶחָר־כֵּן, יִקְרָא לְךָ עִיר הַצְדָקָה--קִרְיָה, נְאֻמְנָה

May the banner of righteous and faith once again fly proudly over this country and all Israel and let us say Amen.