

Tisha b'av and the 20th Century

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Mourning is a deeply personal and emotional experience. Merely “going through the motions” without authentic inner sadness yields a listless and empty experience. Mourning ancient tragedies or events which transpired in the distant past is always emotionally daunting.

Tisha b'av in the modern era is even more emotionally complicated. For centuries, Jews were scattered across the globe and mired in hopelessness and despair. Living through endless persecution and hatred, it was “easy” to trace our bleak world to the day we left Yerushalayim. Tisha b'av may never have been “current”, but its footprints were traceable in everyday life. We had abandoned Hashem and betrayed our relationship, and for that, we were cursed. Our suffering was the price for our crimes, even while we hoped to one day rebuild that great love with Hashem.

That day has come, and our love has been restored. Millions of Jews live in Israel and millions of others live in the spiritual shadow of Israel. Though we still struggle with the final phases of history, our condition does not closely resemble the hardships and darkness of previous generations. Living with triumph and pride, how do we mourn within this new and unfamiliar historical context? Without updating our mourning, Tisha b'av can become emotionally disconnected. How can Tisha b'av be updated and how can we discover authentic and relevant sadness? Perhaps, the solution lies in looking back to the past century and to the two seismic events which reshaped the Jewish landscape— the Holocaust and the formation of the state of Israel. If we don't associate Tisha b'av with these two recent history-altering events, we risk severing our national mourning from our modern reality.

The Abyss

The Holocaust was not just as a horrific tragedy. It was the “abyss” of Jewish history, and, after centuries of sorrow, we endured our darkest nightmare. Without minimizing the misery of our long 2000-year “night” of Jewish exile, the Holocaust was the single greatest trauma of Jewish history. No inquisition, or pogrom, or

any Crusader invasion compares to the Holocaust, either in scope or intensity.

Exposing the Monster

The Holocaust wasn't just the bleakest moment of Jewish history. It also pulled back the curtain and exposed the horror of anti-Semitism. Throughout history, violence toward Jews was always "attributed" to the general decayed state of humanity. In a world of religious intolerance, racial discrimination, and savage cruelty, violence toward Jews felt "natural". Life in brutal and repressive societies is always fragile, and Jewish life was even more vulnerable in these morally degraded conditions.

However, Europe of the 19th and 20th century had turned the corner and was a continent on the move. Rapid industrialization, economic revolution, political enfranchisement, and cultural evolution had created optimism, progress, and great belief in the virtue of Man. Humanity had pulled itself out of the quagmire of corruption and savagery and was rushing headlong toward a utopian world of science, tolerance, and education. Germany was at the center of this development, spearheading advances in every sector of human progress. Yet, tragically, even this progressive and cultured society degenerated into hatred and genocide.

Jews must never *define* themselves by anti-Semitism, but we also should not ignore its pervasiveness. This hatred is baked into human history. It can be tamed and curtailed, but can never be fully eliminated.

Tisha Bav plunged the world into a dark state of repression and regression. After extinguishing the light in Yerushalayim, humanity suffered through close to 1500 years of stagnation and oppression. About 500 years ago the world enjoyed a Renaissance of spirit and began fashioning a more civil society of reason and morality. Sadly, even the modern enlightened world hasn't shown immunity to anti-Semitism.

If anything, the Holocaust showcases of the catastrophic impact of Tisha b'av- the unleashing of anti-Semitism. This incurable disease has stained the moral consciousness of humanity, plaguing even the modern world of enlightenment and equality. Tisha b'av

released a horrific monster which devoured human virtue for centuries. In the first part of the past century that monster ran wild. It still assaults the human spirit, and we are still struggling to slay it. For this we mourn on Tisha b'av, the day we let the monster out of its cage.

On the doorstep

The second seismic shift of the past century was the formation of the State of Israel. How should Tisha b'av be “streamed” *through this* miracle of history? Firstly, by pondering just how close we are to the conclusion of history. Ironically, as our redemptive appetites have been whetted, Tishav b'av feels even *more* devastating. Our ancestors lived hundreds of years away from redemption. They dreamed and hoped, but it remained elusive and distant. Though they imagined caressing the stones of the Kotel and kissing the dust of a blessed land, they lived trapped lives, dispersed across continents, and strewn across time. We are living at the doorstep of history. As we pray that “our eyes should witness the return to Zion” we are haunted by the prospect that those eyes will go dark before redemption concludes. Will we miss these epic scenes by a mere ten years? Will redemption happen soon after we have departed this world? These disturbing possibilities didn't preoccupy our ancestors, but they should worry *us*, and they should vex our spirit on Tisha b'av.

Easy to celebrate, harder to yearn

Though we generally rejoice our historical achievements, on Tisha b'av we grieve that, though we are so close, there is still so much more that we hope for. Tisha b'av is part of the ongoing attempt to calibrate a redemptive mindset somewhere between triumph and longing. It is easy to be grateful for what we have received, but how deeply do we long for that which remains beyond our historical grasp? If, year-round, we celebrate our return home, Tisha b'av is a day to “long” and to yearn for comprehensive redemption. Celebration and longing go hand in hand.

Modern Hatred

Our return to Israel in the 20th century ignited a firestorm of opposition to Jewish presence in Israel. We face physical violence,

international condemnation, and accusations of moral hypocrisy. Much of this opposition is just a manifestation of classic anti-Semitism dressed in the costume of contemporary politics. However, opposition to Jewish settlement in the land of Israel is a separate form of animosity and Tisha b'av is responsible for this resentment as well. We inhabited this land thousands of years ago and were on the verge of creating the kingdom of Hashem. This kingdom of God would have beckoned all humanity to Yerushalayim to bask in the divine presence. We would have been the "rock stars" of history, the people who re-introduced the world to Hashem and brought them to his doorstep.

We forfeited that chance on Tisha b'av, and it has been a long odyssey home. The long road home has been fraught with anger and opposition. One day the world will once again embrace our presence in this land and celebrate Jews in Yerushalayim. The world is still broken and still resists us. We broke our world on Tisha b'av and until that fracture fully heals, we cry. Tears that flow through the epic events of the 20th century are more relevant and more authentic.