



Destruction, Loss, and Lamentation

Torah Reflections on *Tisha B'Av*
8-9 Av 5771 August 8-9, 2011

On the Hebrew calendar, the Ninth of Av (Monday night, August 8th through Tuesday evening, August 9th) is a day of fasting and mourning. The Shabbat prior to the *Tisha b'Av* anticipates our sorrowful commemoration with a special prophetic reading (Isaiah 1:1-27) filled with censure and foreboding. At this time of year we mark the anniversary of several momentous tragedies, including the destruction of our ancient, singular Temple in Jerusalem in the 6th century B.C.E., and the subsequent destruction of the re-built Temple in the first century C.E.

So much time has elapsed, and we live our lives so differently, that it is difficult in our day and age to grasp the overwhelming impact of these horrendous events on our ancestors in ancient Israel. We don't really have a contemporary building or institution, nor a single space or thing or organization that embodies all that the holy Temple did in Israel's ancient capitol. When the Temple was destroyed, so too was our perpetual assurance of order and blessing, and our central hub of national religious, cultural, and emotional-spiritual ties. Suddenly our hopes and visions were shattered, our prayer life left without direction, our very sense of connection with the Divine cast into doubt. We felt bereft, dislocated, vulnerable, aggrieved and in shock—and cut off from God. We lost our access to the place that had been our sanctuary, to the comforting, familiar modes of communal gathering and worship that centered around the Temple. The community of Israel, if it was to survive at all, was forever altered.

Because of the centrality and the impact of this loss, because of the ways that it threatened our very identity and self-understanding as a people, including our sense of hope and possibility and security, many Jews have felt compelled to wrestle with the reality of this destruction and loss. Scholars have speculated on its causes and probed its effects. Sages have re-cast its meaning and led us toward new forms of worship and communal organization. Poets and liturgists have struggled to preserve and give voice to the full range of raw emotion and inspirational reflection for the generations following these national catastrophes. These endeavors were largely devoted to sustaining or re-framing a distraught community's sense of hope, faith, belonging, and purpose. Historically, in addition to assuring our basic survival, we sought to regain our spiritual bearings. In the face of crisis and despair, we aimed to nurture our individual and collective efforts to continue to "choose life" and hold onto or find new meaning in our continuing identification with the Jewish people. *Our tradition has preserved many responses that can be of help when we confront our own, personal catastrophes.*

What are some of those responses?

- Lamentations – we can cry out, and give voice to what is in our hearts. We can follow the authors of the Biblical Lamentations, the Psalms, and Job who put their bitterness and despair and anguish into words, thereby honoring the depth of their losses.
- Memorials – we can remember what it is we have lost, or we can remember the person we miss. When we acknowledge the many ways a tragedy has touched our lives or the many places we hurt, or when we recall the manifold ways our lives have changed, we also honor the fullness of what was, and we may sanctify the depth and breadth of relationships and connections that existed before. Indeed Jewish tradition encourages us to connect with the full spectrum of memory and emotion through the seasons of the year, our major life transitions, and the

anniversaries of our loss. Memorializing can also afford us a reminder of the preciousness of what we still have, or of what we still seek.

- Vows – we may express our commitment to survival in the form of a promise, to ourselves, to others, or to God. And what do we wish to have survive? What may motivate us to hold fast to our commitments? We can vow not to forget the essential parts of ourselves or the values we want to carry forward. We can vow to uphold our integrity or the sanctity of life itself; to continue loving others; to preserve memory. We can maintain our determination see life’s continuation—whether through our work, our relationships, our students, or the generations that will follow us—to perpetuate, in some way our most cherished values and legacies.
- Reaching out for help – we can open ourselves to support from other members of the community and from the Source of Life. We often grieve and struggle alone, and yet there may also be comfort, strength, or wisdom in mourning or in seeking healing with others who are “in the same boat”, facing similar challenges, holding similar yearnings or emotional ties. We may, in fact, also have something to offer others. The very effort to be present with one another can bring out compassion and goodness and sanctity, even—perhaps especially—among people facing great suffering and loss.
- Prayer and meditation – quiet time for inner stillness or the act of prayer may bring solace and strength, perspective, or peace of mind, even at times when traditional liturgy has lost its meaning for us, or when familiar rituals and routines feel inaccessible or hollow. When all else fails, we can pray for comfort, for healing, for patience, for the ability to pray. And prayer need not be addressed to God. We can simply state our feelings and heartfelt needs, or address our prayerful yearnings to the innermost parts of ourselves.

In the face of near-absolute desperation and seemingly impossible odds, the Jewish People found ways to rebuild, to forge new paths, to live and bless and flourish again following its catastrophic losses. May all who today face unthinkable pain and loss find comfort, and unexpected blessing, and ultimately, the inspiration and strength to rise up again from their suffering—toward a horizon of greater fullness and *shalom*.

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