

What Mourning Means: Reflections of the Rav on Tisha B'Av

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Rosh Yeshiva, RIETS

The customs we observe on the day of Tisha B'Av are strikingly similar to those of an *avel*, one whose close relative has recently passed away. We abstain from washing ourselves and putting on perfume, from wearing leather shoes and talking frivolously. We even refrain from studying parts of the Torah which are unrelated to the events and the mood of the day. Instead we sit on the floor or a low chair and solemnly contemplate the loss of the Beis HaMikdash.

On Tisha B'Av the sense of mourning and sadness is palpable. But, in truth, the observances of mourning begin long before Tisha B'Av itself. Already from the 17th of Tamuz, at the start of the “three weeks” period, Ashkenazic communities minimize their involvement in pleasurable activities like getting married, taking haircuts and buying new clothing. From the beginning of the month of Av through Tisha B'Av, what is commonly referred to as the “nine days”, we refrain as well from doing laundry and from wearing freshly laundered clothing. Tisha B'Av is certainly the most restrictive of the entire “three weeks” period, but the observances of *aveilus* (mourning) are not limited to that day alone.

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik zt”l used to say that these three periods of time mirror the three periods of mourning that a child observes when losing a parent. Tisha B'Av is like the seven-day period of *shiva* when the sense of mourning is most intense. The “nine days” beginning with Rosh Chodesh Av is similar to the period of *shloshim*, and from the 17th of Tamuz until the month of Av we observe laws of mourning similar to the twelve-month period of *aveilus* that a child observes after losing a parent.

What's interesting, though, is that the order of observances is reversed. The child who loses a parent observes *shiva* first, then *shloshim* and then the twelve-month period of *aveilus*, while during the “three weeks” we first observe the *aveilus* of the twelve-month period, then *shloshim*, and only on Tisha B'Av do we keep to the restrictions of *shiva*. Why is the order changed when we mourn the loss of the Beis HaMikdash?

The Rav explained that there is a fundamental difference between *aveilus chadasha* (a new private mourning), as the Rabbis refer to it (Yevamos 43b), and *aveilus yeshana* (the old, annual mourning for the Beis HaMikdash). When a close relative passes away, the grief, the pain, the sense of loss come naturally and easily. It is therefore most appropriate to begin the observances of *aveilus* with *shiva*, the most intense expression of mourning. But after seven days, the *avel* is ready to take a step back. Although his loss is still very much on his mind, nevertheless his emotions have tempered; his feelings of sorrow have lessened. For him, the observances of *shloshim* are more fitting. By the end of thirty days, the *avel* has gained perspective on his loss. For most relatives, he is now able to conclude the observances of *aveilus*. Even for a parent, while he continues to mourn, he still reduces his *aveilus* once again.

In the case of *aveilus yeshana*, on the other hand, this progression is out of place. We have become so used to living in a world without the Beis HaMikdash, that it would be unfair to expect anyone to begin the “three weeks” with the observances of *shiva*. It simply would be unnatural for anyone to suddenly break down and cry over the loss of the Beis HaMikdash. The sense of mourning for the destruction of the Beis HaMikdash can be internalized only through gradual increments. Only by slowly increasing our observances of *aveilus* from the 17th of Tamuz through the “nine days”, while at the same time reflecting on the significance of this three-week period, can we hope to approach the day of Tisha B’Av with the right frame of mind. By engaging in this three-week learning experience, we prepare ourselves mentally so that when the day of Tisha B’Av finally arrives we are ready to grieve appropriately.

The Unique Character of *Aveilus Yeshana*

The Rav added that in certain ways *aveilus yeshana* for the Beis HaMikdash is even more stringent than *aveilus chadasha*. Although the Talmud (Moed Katan 27b) mentions that the first three days of *shiva* are days of crying, there is no obligation for an *avel* to cry. The Talmud simply says that during the first three days of *shiva* it is natural for an *avel* to want to cry. But on Tisha B’Av, crying is one of the motifs of the day. As the navi Yirmiyahu (9:16-17) says, in the haftarah we read the morning of Tisha B’Av, “Summon the dirge singers ... send for the wise women ... Let them hurry and raise up a lament for us; let our eyes run with tears and our eyelids flow with water.”

Mourning for the destruction of the Beis HaMikdash requires an expression of raw emotion. It obligates us to show how overcome we are with our longing for the Beis HaMikdash. That is why we spend much of the morning of Tisha B’Av reciting *kinos* (lamentations) which bemoan the loss of the Beis HaMikdash and describe the pain and suffering the Jewish people has endured as a result. The *kinos* are designed to awaken our emotions until we cry out uncontrollably because only by crying can we properly mourn the loss of the Beis HaMikdash.

The navi Zechariah (7:1-3) describes how once the rebuilding of the second Beis HaMikdash had already begun, some of the exiles still living in Bavel sent a delegation to ask the leaders of the Jewish community in Eretz Yisrael whether they should continue to observe Tisha B’Av. What’s noteworthy about this inquiry is the formulation that was used in posing the question. The Jews of the Diaspora didn’t ask whether they should continue to mourn on Tisha B’Av. The

language they used was, “Shall I cry in the fifth month (of Av) – *haev’ke b’chodesh ha’chamishi?*” This clearly demonstrates how central a role crying plays on Tisha B’Av. It is not simply a commendable expression of grief. Rather, it is an essential component of our obligation to mourn for the Beis HaMikdash. It is the activity, more than any other, which defines our *aveilus* experience on the day of Tisha B’Av.

There is another important difference between the observances of *aveilus yeshana* and those of *aveilus chadasha*. The Rabbis never placed any limitation on how much a person is allowed to mourn for the Beis HaMikdash. To the contrary, one who mourns the loss of the Beis HaMikdash incessantly is praised. In fact, the very last *kina* we recite on Tisha B’Av is *Eli Tzion V’areha*, in which we ask Yerushalayim and her surrounding cities to continue to cry for the destruction of the Beis HaMikdash. “Weep and wail,” we call out to Tzion, “like a woman in the travails of labor, like a young lady who has just lost her husband.” Don’t stop crying until Hashem rebuilds the Beis HaMikdash and returns Yerushalayim to its former beauty and prominence.

The Talmud (Ta’anis 29a) relates that Rabbi Yochanan felt that the fast for the destruction of the Beis HaMikdash should have been established on the tenth day of Av, not the ninth, because although the Beis Hamikdash was set on fire late in the afternoon on the ninth of Av, it continued to burn throughout the next day. Since most of the *heichal*, the main Temple structure, was destroyed on the tenth of Av, Rabbi Yochanan maintained that it would have been more appropriate to establish the fast on that day. The Talmud Yerushalmi (Ta’anis 4:6) records that some Amoraim fasted on both the ninth and the tenth days of Av – the ninth because the destruction began on that day, and the tenth because most of the *heichal* was consumed on that day.

How was it permissible for these Rabbis to add an extra fast day? If one may not sleep in the sukkah on Shemini Atzeres (Rosh Hashanah 28b) because that would violate the Biblical prohibition of *bal tosif*, adding to the mitzvos, then how could a few individual Rabbis add an extra fast day once it had already been established on the ninth of Av? Just as it is forbidden to add to any Biblical commandments, so too, we are not allowed to add to any mitzvos instituted by the Rabbis!

The Ramban (Toras Ha’adam, Chavel ed., p. 242) answers that mourning for the Beis HaMikdash is different. Not only is one allowed to add to the mourning, but such behavior is praiseworthy. An *avel* who cries or mourns too much for his relative is criticized. As the Talmud says (Moed Katan 27b), “Anyone who grieves excessively over his dead will ultimately weep over another deceased.” But one who weeps bitterly for the Beis HaMikdash is rewarded. In fact, Rav Yosef Karo writes in the very first chapter of the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 1:3): “It is proper for every G-d fearing person to feel pain and anguish over the destruction of the Beis HaMikdash.” The need to feel a sense of loss for the Beis HaMikdash is not restricted to the day of Tisha B’Av alone. It is supposed to be a daily activity, an ongoing experience in the life of every Jew.

Why didn’t Chazal place any limitations on our expression of *aveilus yeshana* for the Beis HaMikdash just like they did for the private mourning of *aveilus chadasha*? The Rav explained that an *avel* is enjoined from crying too much for his relative because, as the Rambam writes

(Hilchos Avel 13:11), death is *minhago shel olam*; it is part of the natural course of events in this world. But the destruction of the Beis HaMikdash was an unnatural event. The Beis HaMikdash was much more than a physical edifice. It symbolized the relationship between Hashem and the Jewish people. It was the focal point of spirituality in the world. When we mourn the loss of the Beis HaMikdash, we are not crying for the wood and the stones. We mourn the fact that we no longer see Hashem's presence as clearly in the world and that our relationship with Him is strained. We long for the day when the Jewish people will reunite with Hashem and feel his closeness once again. In other words, we hope for the day when the world will return to its natural state. That is why we are obligated to cry on Tisha B'Av and there is no limit to our mourning because the loss of the Beis HaMikdash is a reality we can never come to terms with.

The Tefilla of Tisha B'Av

There is something else remarkable about Tisha B'Av which highlights the unique sense of mourning we feel on this day. Aside from being a day of mourning, Tisha B'Av is also a *ta'anis tzibbur*, a communal fast day. It is similar to the fasts that were decreed in Eretz Yisrael in the event of a prolonged drought (Ta'anis 12a). The fast begins at sunset, as opposed to the more minor fasts, like those of the 17th of Tamuz and the 10th of Teves, which begin at sunrise. On Tisha B'Av, in addition to the prohibitions of eating and drinking, we refrain as well from washing and anointing ourselves, wearing leather shoes and engaging in marital relations.

On the surface, the laws of Tisha B'Av seem to follow those of Yom Kippur and other communal fasts. And yet, while Tisha B'Av does share the restrictions of these other fasts, the focus of the day is significantly different. On a typical *ta'anis tzibbur*, we place much of our attention on tefilla. We beseech the Ribbono Shel Olam to have mercy and compassion on the community. But on Tisha B'Av, many critical components of the tefilla of a *ta'anis tzibbur* are missing. We do not recite *Selichos* or *Avinu Malkenu*. There is no tefilla of *Neila*, like we have at the end of Yom Kippur. We even omit the *Tachanun* prayer and the section of *Tiskabeil Tzlos'hon U'vaus'hon* (accept our prayers and supplications) during the Kaddish at the end of Ma'ariv and Shacharis.

If Tisha B'Av is a *ta'anis tzibbur*, then why do we not engage in prayer on Tisha B'Av like we do on other fasts? The Mordechai (Ta'anis, sec. 635) offers two answers. First, he suggests that perhaps we do not recite *Selichos*, *Avinu Malkenu* or *Tachanun* on Tisha B'Av because it is called a *moed* (a special time), as the posuk (Eicha 1:15) says, *kara alay moed* ("He proclaimed about me a set time"). Presumably the meaning behind this interpretation is that Tisha B'Av is treated like a *yom tov*, a *moed*, because we hope that when the Beis HaMikdash will be rebuilt, all days which were previously designated as days of mourning for the destruction of the Beis HaMikdash will become days of festive celebration. For this reason we omit *Selichos*, *Tachanun* and any other prayer which would be inappropriate for a *yom tov*.

But this seems difficult. Why should Tisha B'Av be treated like a *yom tov* when the Temple Mount still lies in ruin? If anything, Tisha B'Av nowadays should be considered a *yom kina* or a *yom aveilus*, not a *yom tov*. What's more, the simple understanding of the posuk in Eicha seems to be making this very point, that Tisha B'Av was a day that was divinely ordained as a time for inflicting pain and torture on the Jewish people, not a time for festive celebration! And besides,

even if Tisha B'Av can be called a yom tov, how does this explain why we omit the section of *Tiskabeil* in Kaddish?

The Mordechai offers a second approach which the Rav frequently quoted (see Nefesh HaRav, p. 200). He writes that perhaps we leave out *Selichos*, *Tachanun* and *Tiskabeil* in order to show, as the Talmud (Brachos 32b) states, “From the day the Beis HaMikdash was destroyed, the gates of prayer have been sealed, like the posuk says (Eicha 3:8) ‘Even as I cry out and plead, He shut out my prayer (*sasam tefillasi*)’.”

With the loss of the Beis HaMikdash, all tefilla is less effective. It's as if Hakadosh Boruch Hu no longer wants to listen to our prayers. On a regular ta'anis tzibbur we add extra prayers to our tefilla. We try to break through the barriers separating between the Ribbono Shel Olam and ourselves. But on Tisha B'Av, when we commemorate the destruction of the Beis HaMikdash, the event which weakened the power of our tefilla, we leave out any extra supplications we would have liked to add to our tefilla, in order to demonstrate that we realize that without the Beis HaMikdash the strength of our prayers have been undermined, *sasam tefillasi*.

We omit *Tiskabeil* from Kaddish after Ma'ariv and Shacharis as an expression of sadness, as if to say that we understand we have become estranged from Hakadosh Boruch Hu, and it's as if He doesn't want to accept our tefillos. This custom of leaving out *Tiskabeil* applies only to the *aveilus yeshana* of Tisha B'Av, not to a regular *aveilus chadasha* (see Nefesh HaRav there), because it is only on Tisha B'Av that we mourn the loss of our close relationship with the Ribbono Shel Olam.

Comfort on a Day of Grief

After *chatzos* (midday) on Tisha B'Av, we get up from the floor, put on our tefillin and recite the bracha of *nachem*, asking Hashem to console Yerushalayim and us. Where is there room for consolation on such a dark day? The Rav explained with a Midrash (see Tosafos, Kiddushin 31b). The posuk in Tehillim (79:1) says, “A song of Assaf: Hashem! The nations have entered into Your estate; they defiled the Sanctuary of Your holiness.” The Midrash asks, “A song of Assaf? It should have been titled *kina l'Assaf*, a dirge of Assaf!” The Midrash answers that Assaf sang with happiness and joy that Hashem vented his anger, so to speak, on the wood and the stones of the Beis HaMikdash, and not on the Jewish people.

This is our source of comfort on the sad day of Tisha B'Av. While Hashem lashed out in fury against the Beis HaMikdash and Yerushalayim, He spared the Jewish people. Paradoxically, it is precisely at the time of the mincha prayer, when the Beis HaMikdash started to burn (Ta'anis 29a), that we feel consoled because that act of destruction was really a demonstration of love. It showed that Hashem wants the Jewish people to survive; he wants them to flourish and ultimately to reunite with Him. If Hashem punishes us only out of love, like a father disciplines his child, then there is hope for the future. We can look forward to the day of reconciliation when Hashem will return to us and reveal His glory to the entire world.