

Does Tisha B'Av Have the Status of a Festival?

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There are many terms that are used to describe Tisha B'Av. It is called a day of grief, mourning, sorrow, suffering, persecution, and comfort. One term that is not intuitive in describing Tisha B'Av is that of a festival. Yet, we find such a statement in *Shulchan Aruch*:

We do not recite Tachanun on Tisha B'Av and we do not fall on our faces because it is considered a festival.

Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 559:4

אין אומרים תחנון בת"ב ואין נופלים על פניהם משום דמקרי מועד.

שלחן ערוך או"ח תקנ"ט:ד

In this article, we will present a number of approaches to explain why Tisha B'Av should be described as a festival and how it affects our perception of Tisha B'Av.

The Meaning of the Term "Mo'ed"

The idea that Tisha B'Av is described as a festival is based on the verse in Eicha:

God has trampled the mighty in my midst, He has called an assembly/festival (mo'ed) to destroy my young men. God pressed the young daughters of Yehuda like (grapes in) a winepress.

Eicha 1:15

סָלָה כָּל-אַבְיָרֵי ה' בְּקִרְבִּי, קָרָא
עָלַי מוֹעֵד לְשֹׁבֵר בְּחֹרֶב; גַּת דָּבַךְ
ה' לְבַתּוּלֹת בַּת-יְהוּדָה.
אִיכָה א:טו

The use of the term "mo'ed" in the verse is the motivating factor to brand Tisha B'Av as a festival. While the simple meaning of the term "mo'ed" in this context does not refer to festival, we find a precedent in the Talmud that interprets this verse as containing a reference to a festival:

Therefore he informs us that Rosh Chodesh is designated a mo'ed, in accordance with Abaye's [dictum]. For Abaye said, The Tammuz of that year was indeed made full, as it is written, He hath proclaimed an appointed time [mo'ed] against me to crush my young men.

Pesachim 77a (Soncino Translation)

קמ"ל דראש חדש איקרי מועד
כדאביי דאמר אביי תמוז דהאי
שתא מלויי מליוה דכתיב קרא
עלי מועד לשבור בחורי.
פסחים עז.

The assertion that Rosh Chodesh is called a festival is derived from the term "mo'ed" used in the aforementioned verse. The Gemara, *Ta'anit* 29a, explains that when the Jews sent the spies to scout out the Land of Israel, their return was supposed to be on the tenth of Av. However, a second day of Rosh Chodesh Tamuz was declared and the spies returned on the ninth of Av, which set a precedent for future

generations that the ninth of Av would be considered a day of tragedy for the Jewish People. Accordingly, the term "mo'ed" in the verse refers to the additional day of Rosh Chodesh that was a factor in the destruction of the *Beit HaMikdash*.

The Talmudic interpretation does interpret "mo'ed" as festival, but it does not refer to Tisha B'Av as a festival. Rashi notes that the simple interpretation of the word "mo'ed" in this context is an assembly or gathering. It refers to the gathering of enemy troops to destroy the young men. Nevertheless, Rashi also quotes the rabbinic interpretation of the term "mo'ed" that it is a festival:

He has called an assembly: A mobilizing of troops to attack me. Our rabbis interpreted based on their interpretation that during that year the month was full etc.

Rashi, Eichah 1:15

קרא עלי מועד יעידת גייסות לבא עלי
ורבותינו דרשו מה שדרשו תמוז דההיא
שתא מלויי מלויה וכו'
רש"י איכה א:טו

R. Avraham Yitzchak Bloch (1891-1941) notes that calling Tisha B'Av a festival may be based on use of the term "mo'ed" as referring to an assembly:

Behold, we do not recite Tachanun on Tisha B'Av because it is considered a festival as it states "He has called an assembly/festival to destroy my young men." This is puzzling. What type of Yom Tov is this that would preclude reciting Tachanun? Isn't this a day of mourning and sorrow? My grandfather, R. Avraham Yitzchak Bloch, explained that the term "mo'ed" is derived from the root va'ad (assembly), an assembly with God. Just as on Yom Tov we gather with God, so too when there is strict judgment we gather with God, [accepting] the supervision of a father who needs to punish his son. When a person imagines that God is not watching over him and has removed His cover, he is despondent. However, when he encounters strict judgment as a message to repent and improve his ways, he can see it as the punishment of a merciful father who punishes his son for the son's benefit so that he doesn't stray from the path and returns to his good ways. Since this is a day of gathering with God, we do not recite Tachanun.

Rinat Yitzchak, Tehillim 23:4

הנה אין אומרים תחנון בתשעה באב מפני
דאקרי מועד כדכתיב קרא עלי מועד לשבור
בחורי, ותמוה איזה יו"ט היא שלא לומר
עליו תחנון הרי זה יום אבל וצרה, וביאר
בזה זקני מרן הגרא"י בלאך הי"ד שענין
מועד הוא מלשון ועד שנתועד עם הקב"ה
וכמו אהל שנקרא מועד ששם נתועדים עם
הקב"ה, והנה כמו שביו"ט אנו מתועדים עם
הש"ת כמו"כ במדת הדין אנו מתועדים עם
הקב"ה השגחת אב המיסר את בנו, דכשאדם
מדמה שהקב"ה אינו משגיח עליו והסיר צלו
מעליו הוא אומלל אבל כשפוגע בו מדת הדין
למען החזירו בתשובה ולהטיב דרכיו רואה
בזה יסורי אב רחם שמיסר בנו להטיב עמו
שלא ירד שאולה ולהחזירו למוטב וכיון שזה
יום שמתועד עם הקב"ה אין אומרים בו
תחנון.

רנת יצחק תהלים כג:ד

Tisha B'Av as a Festival of Atonement

In last year's Tisha B'Av To Go, we discussed the idea that on Tisha B'Av, we take comfort in the fact that God only destroyed the *Beit HaMikdash* and not the Jewish People.

The Midrash comments on the peculiar opening of Psalm 79:

A psalm of Asaph. O God, the heathen are come into Thine inheritance; they have defiled Thy holy temple; they have made Jerusalem into heaps.

Tehillim 79:1

מִזְמוֹר, לְאַסָּף: אֱלֹהִים, בָּאוּ גוֹיִם בְּנַחֲלֹתֶיךָ
טָמְאוּ, אֶת הַיְכָל קִדְשֶׁךָ; שָׂמוּ אֶת-יְרוּשָׁלַם
לְעֵיִם.
תהילים עט:א

Why does a discussion of the destruction of the Temple begin with a song? The Midrash states:

The text should have used a phrase like, 'Weeping of Asaph,' 'Lament of Asaph,' 'Dirge of Asaph'; why does it say, 'A psalm of Asaph'? It may be likened to a king who erected a bridal-chamber for his son which he plastered, cemented, and decorated; but his son entered upon an evil course of living. The king forthwith ascended to the chamber, tore the curtains and broke the rods; but [the son's] tutor took a piece of rod which he used as a flute and played upon it. People said to him, 'The king has overthrown his son's chamber and you sit playing a tune!' He replied to them, 'I play a tune because the king overturned his son's chamber but did not pour out his anger upon his son.' Similarly people said to Asaph, 'The Holy One, blessed be He, has caused Temple and Sanctuary to be destroyed, and you sit singing a Psalm!' He replied to them, 'I sing a Psalm because the Holy One, blessed be He, poured out His wrath upon wood and stone and not upon Israel ...

Eicha Rabbah 4:14 (Soncino Translation)

מזמור לאספ אלקים באו גוים בנחלתך לא
היה קרא צריך למימר אלא בכי לאספ נהי
לאספ קינה לאספ ומה אומר מזמור לאספ
אלא משל למלך שעשה בית חופה לבנו
וסיידה וכיידה וציירה ויצא בנו לתרבות
רעה מיד עלה המלך לחופה וקרע את
הוילאות ושיבר את הקנים ונטל פדגוג שלו
איבוב של קנים והיה מזמר אמרו לו המלך
הפך חופתו של בנו ואת יושב ומזמר אמר
להם מזמר אני שהפך חופתו של בנו ולא
שפך חמתו על בנו כך אמרו לאספ הקב"ה
החריב היכל ומקדש ואתה יושב ומזמר
אמר להם מזמר אני ששפך הקב"ה חמתו
על העצים ועל האבנים ולא שפך חמתו על
ישראל הדא הוא דכתיב ויצת אש בציון
ותאכל יסודותיה.
איכה רבה ד:יד

The Midrash notes that the destruction could have been much worse. The Almighty could have decided to destroy the Jewish people for their iniquities. Instead, He decided to destroy the Temple and exile the Jewish people. This punishment pales in comparison to what could have been.

R. Moshe Sofer notes that this idea is not only a source of comfort, but also a source of atonement:

Since [God] poured his wrath on wood and stone, "This day you shall become a nation onto God," "The punishment of the daughter of Zion has ceased and He will no longer exile you," for this reason, Tisha B'Av is considered a festival.

Torat Moshe, Haftarah to Parashat Matot

מכיון ששפך חמתו על עצים ואבנים
היום הזה נהיית לעם לה' אלקיך, תם
עונך בת ציון לא יוסיף להגלותך,
משו"ה ט"ב אקרי מועד.
תורת משה הפטרה לפרשת מטות

According to R. Sofer, Tisha B'Av commemorates the atonement that the Jewish People received through the destruction of the *Beit HaMikdash*. For this reason, we consider it a festival.

Commemorating God's Commitment to the Jewish People

Some commentators explain that Tisha B'Av is a festival that commemorates God's commitment to the Jewish People. The Talmud notes that the cherubs in the *Beit HaMikdash* served as an indicator of whether the Jewish People were following the will of God:

How did they stand? R. Johanan and R. Eleazar [are in dispute on the matter]. One says: They faced each other; and the other says: Their faces were inward. But according to him who says that they faced each other, [it may be asked]: Is it not written, And their faces were inward? [This is] no difficulty: The former [was] at a time when Israel obeyed

כיצד הן עומדין רבי יוחנן ור' אלעזר
חד אמר פניהם איש אל אחיו וחד אמר
פניהם לבית ולמ"ד פניהם איש אל
אחיו הא כתיב ופניהם לבית לא קשיא
כאן בזמן שישראל עושין רצונו של
מקום כאן בזמן שאין ישראל עושין

the will of the Omnipresent; the latter [was] at a time when Israel did not obey the will of the Omnipresent.

Baba Batra 99a (Soncino Translation)

רצונו של מקום
בבא בתרא צט.

When the cherubs faced each other, it was an indication that the Jewish People were following the will of God. When the cherubs were not facing each other, it was an indication that the Jewish People were not following the will of God. One would expect that at the time of the destruction of the *Beit HaMikdash*, the cherubs were not facing each other. Yet, the Talmud states:

Resh Lakish said: When the heathens entered the Temple, they saw the cherubim whose bodies were embracing one another. They carried them out and said: These Israelites, whose blessing is a blessing, and whose curse is a curse, occupy themselves with such things! And immediately they despised them, as it is said: All that honored her, despised her, because they have seen her nakedness.

Yoma 54b (adapted from Soncino Translation)

אמר ריש לקיש בשעה שנכנסו נכרים להיכל ראו כרובים המעורין זה בזה הוציאו לשוק ואמרו ישראל הללו שברכתן ברכה וקללתן קללה יעסקו בדברים הללו מיד הזילום שנאמר כל מכבדיה הזילוה כי ראו ערותה.
יומא נד:

If the Jewish People were following the will of God, why was the *Beit HaMikdash* destroyed? If the Jewish People were not following the will of God, why did the cherubs indicate the opposite?

R. Yehuda Rosanes (1657-1727), *Parashat Derachim, Derech Ha'Etzev* no. 23, and R. Baruch HaLevi Epstein (1860-1941), *Torah Temimah, Eicha* 1:104, suggest that the cherubs were not necessarily an indicator of the level of observance of the Jewish People. Rather, they were an indicator of God's relationship with the Jewish People. Normally, God's relationship with the Jewish People is a function of whether they are observing His will. However, there are times when God has a close relationship with the Jewish People even though they are not observing His will. R. Epstein notes that as the *Beit HaMikdash* was being destroyed, God's relationship to the Jewish People intensified, similar to two loved ones who must part ways due to circumstances beyond their control.

R. Rosanes suggests that God's relationship with the Jewish People grows stronger on all festivals, even if the Jewish People are not following His will. At the time of the destruction of the *Beit HaMikdash*, the Jewish People felt the close relationship that was normally felt on festivals. However, R. Rosanes, (based on the comments of a Midrash) notes that they misinterpreted the close relationship. They felt the atmosphere of a festival and assumed that it was because God was celebrating the destruction of the *Beit HaMikdash*. What they were really experiencing was the close relationship that God provides during times of exile:

R. Simon b. Yohai said: Come and see how beloved are Israel in the sight of God, in that to every place to which they were exiled the Shechinah went with them. They were exiled to Egypt and the Shechinah was with them, as it says, Did I reveal myself unto the house of thy father when they were in Egypt. They were exiled to Babylon, and the Shechinah was with them, as it says, for your sake I was sent to Babylon.

Megillah 29a (Soncino Translation)

ר"ש בן יוחי אומר בוא וראה כמה חביבין ישראל לפני הקב"ה שבכל מקום שגלו שכינה עמהן גלו למצרים שכינה עמהן שנאמר הנגלה נגליתי לבית אביך בהיותם במצרים וגו' גלו לבבל שכינה עמהן שנאמר למענכם שלחתי בבלה.
מגילה כט.

The festival-like atmosphere that the Jewish People felt at the time of the destruction of the *Beit HaMikdash* was not God celebrating the destruction. Rather it God's renewed commitment to the Jewish People during the exile.

Summary

We have presented three different approaches to explain why Tisha B'Av is considered a festival. The first approach is that it is a festival because it is a day of assembly when we gather with God. The second approach is that it is a festival of atonement. The third approach is that it is a festival to commemorate God's commitment to the Jewish People. On Tisha B'Av and throughout the year, we pray for the ultimate redemption. At that time, it won't be counterintuitive to call Tisha B'Av a festival and the words of the prophet Zechariah will be fulfilled:

Thus said the Lord of hosts: The fast of the fourth month, the fast of the fifth month, the fast of the seventh month and the fast of the tenth month will be to the house of Yehuda days of joy and happiness and festivals. You shall love truth and peace.

Zechariah 8:19

כ'ה-אמר ה' צְבָאוֹת, צוֹם הָרְבִיעִי וְצוֹם הַחֲמִישִׁי
וְצוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי וְצוֹם הָעֲשִׂירִי יִהְיֶה לְבֵית-יְהוּדָה
לְשִׂשׁוֹן וּלְשִׂמְחָה, וְלֹא עֲדִים, טוֹבִים; וְהָאֲמַת
וְהַשְּׁלוֹם, אֶהְבֹּ. **זכריה ח:יט**