

Tisha B'Av: Some Introductory Thoughts

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The Fast of the Ninth of Av (Tisha B'Av) is one of the most significant and important, as well as one of the most misunderstood, days in the Hebrew calendar. Jewish law requires that we fast for a full twenty-five hours and refrain from other physical pleasures on this day, like on Yom Kippur.¹⁵² In addition, tradition has mandated some forms of mourning for the three previous weeks, like refraining from washing clothes and taking haircuts.¹⁵³ And we do all of this, we are told, as an expression of mourning for the destruction of both Temples in Jerusalem, the first in the year 586 BCE, over 2500 years ago, and the second in the year 70 CE, almost 2000 years ago. Why? Why are the destructions of the Temples of such significance to contemporary Jews living at the beginning of the twenty-first century and what meaning do they have for a generation blessed to be living six decades after the founding of the Jewish sovereign State of Israel?

It is important to recognize three factors that combine to provide great meaning and significance to this day. First, the destruction of the Temple is not the only tragic event that occurred on Tisha B'Av. The Mishnah (*Ta'anit* 26a-b) teaches that five tragedies took place on this day, beginning with the decree requiring our ancestors to wander in the desert for forty years before being allowed to enter into the Land of Israel. Furthermore, based on a passage in Abravanel's commentary to Jeremiah 2:24, the late historian Cecil Roth claimed that the first expulsion of a major Jewry in the Middle Ages, that of the Jews from England in 1290, took place on Tisha B'Av.¹⁵⁴ According to Don Yizhak Abravanel, the last major medieval expulsion, that of the Jews from Spain in 1492 to which he was an eyewitness, also culminated on this day.¹⁵⁵ I have seen it

152 See *Shulhan Arukh, Orach Hayyim* #552-554.

It is interesting to note that on more than one occasion the Rambam explicitly parallels the laws of Tisha B'Av to those of Yom Kippur. See, for example, *Hil Ta'anuyot* 5:7, "Tisha B'Av . . . ke-Yom ha-Kippurim;" 5:10, "Ve-asur . . . ke-Yom ha-Kippurim." On this parallel, see my *The Lord is Righteous in All His Ways: Reflections on the Tisha B'Av Kinot* by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (Jersey City, 2006), 2, and elsewhere.

153 *Shulhan Arukh, Orach Hayyim* #551.

154 Cecil Roth, "England and the Ninth of Av," in idem., *Essays and Portraits in Anglo-Jewish History* (Philadelphia, 1962), 63-67.

155 See his commentary to Jer. 2:24. Yitzhak Baer claims that this does not seem to be totally accurate. The edict of expulsion gave professing Jews in Spain until July 31, 1492 to leave the country and he pointed out that July 31 that year fell on 7 Av. See Yitzhak Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia, 1971), 439 and n. 14. Cf. B. Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel: Statesman and Philosopher* (Philadelphia, 1972), 282, n. 74, who argues for the accuracy of that date.

asserted that the First World War began on the Ninth of Av and someone also told me that the Arab massacre of the Jews in Hebron in 1929 did as well.¹⁵⁶ The Ninth of Av is a “*yom hayyav*” (*Ta’anit* 29a), a day that is inherently ominous, and, to quote Maimonides (*Hil. Ta’aniyot* 5:3), it is a “*yom ha-mukhan le-pur’anut*,” day “set aside” for the occurrence of tragedies.¹⁵⁷ It is for all of them, including the destruction of the Temples, that we mourn on this day.

Secondly, and more significantly, the Fast of the Ninth of Av is meant to commemorate *all* tragedies that befell our people, whether or not they happened to occur on this day. In the traditional liturgy recited on Tisha B’Av, mention is made of the Ten Martyrs who were killed during the second century, the Crusade pogroms which devastated German Jewry at the end of the eleventh century, and the burning of holy Jewish books in thirteenth century France. None of these tragedies occurred on this day or even during this month. Yet, Tisha B’Av is the day designated to mourn for them all. Indeed, were we to set aside a day to remember each and every tragedy that occurred to us in the last two millennia, we would be forced to live in a constant state of mourning. And so we “set aside” one day to remember them all, limiting our commemoration in order to enable us to function creatively and effectively the rest of the year. There are those who feel that the commemoration of the Holocaust should also be subsumed under Tisha B’Av and not be the focus of a separate day. Even many of those who disagree, and I am among them, feel that it is certainly appropriate to remember and mourn for the Holocaust on Tisha B’Av as well.¹⁵⁸ Tisha B’av is, thus, the day designated to remember an entire series of tragic events that have unfortunately recurred with such constant regularity throughout our history.¹⁵⁹ And, as such, it continues to have real significance in our lives as well.

Finally, we should not for a moment underestimate the ongoing, constant impact of the Temple’s destruction, even today, in the case of the Second Temple, close to 2,000 years later. The *bet ha-mikdash* was not just some ancient building; its existence not simply some archeological curiosity. It served as the spiritual center and major unifying element of the people, their source of atonement, and a place for prayer for all the nations of the earth; it represented peace, security, wholesomeness and serenity. Surely our world today, even in America and even with the existence of Israel, is far from perfect, and perhaps it is this, most of all, that we should think about on Tisha B’Av. The rebuilding of the Temple will herald the return of all these wonderful ideals and usher in an eternity of peace for the Jewish people and the entire world. May it happen soon, *be-meherah be-yamenu*.

156 See *The Lord is Righteous in All His Ways*, p. 208; R. Avrohom Chaim Feuer and R. Shimon Finkelman, *Tishah B’Av – Texts, Readings and Insights* (New York, 1992), 157-58.

157 For another example of the use of this phrase, see the *kinah* entitled, “*Be-lel zeh yivkayun*” recited on the night of Tisha B’Av. See R. Abraham Rosenfeld, *The Authorised Kinot for the Ninth of Av* (2nd ed., 1970), 36.

158 I deal with this issue and debate in my “Holocaust Commemoration and *Tish’a be-Av*: The Debate Over ‘*Yom ha-Sho’a*,’” *Tradition* 41:2 (2008):164-97.

159 For an elaborate treatment of this theme, see *The Lord is Righteous in All His Ways*, pp. 208-301.