

# Tish'a B'Av: Holiday of Distance

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There is a fundamental dilemma with which we are confronted with on Tish'a B'Av. The reality is that we are pretty comfortable in *golus*, and we aren't sensitive to the fact that the Bais HaMikdash is missing from our lives. So how can we really properly mourn on this day?

## A Contradiction

As a point of departure, chazal (*Yuma* 54b) record that when our enemies entered the Bais Hamikdash, they saw the keruvim, the two angelic figures, embracing. At first glance, this is very strange. The embrace of the keruvim reflects a tremendous amount of love between God and the Jewish People. As our rabbis have taught us, when the Jewish people were doing the will of God, the keruvim faced each other, and when the Jewish people did not, they faced outwards, towards the walls. How, then, at the time of the destruction, were the keruvim embracing?

The answer to this question directs us towards understanding the essence of Tish'a B'av: the embrace of the keruvim. If one had to summarize Judaism in one word, it is "closeness." Feeling that God is so close to us, although He is exalted and is infinitely more than this universe, we have the ability, through the Torah, to bring Him into this world. That is what "doing the will of God" means – doing those things which bring Him close to us in this world.

## The Jewish Calendar: A Cycle of Closeness

This is the theme of one of the *kinos* on Tish'a B'Av, "*Ahali Asher Ta'avti*," every stanza of which ends with the word "*poh* – here." The author, the Kalir, sets up the whole concept of the *churban* (destruction) on the word "here."

In the Bais HaMikdash, the *Shechinah* was tangible, and this reality gave the physical a whole different form. It is a different view entirely when you have the concept of God infusing Himself into this world.

Rav Shlomo Wolbe (1914-2005) points out that the Jewish calendar is focused on this concept of "here." During Tishrei we crown God as King over us, in our world, and we are His subjects. From Pesach to Shavuot, God redeems us and we accept His commandments. The cycle of the Jewish year, and Judaism itself, surrounds this concept of making God part of our lives.

However, there are two events marked on the calendar as days when the Jewish people consciously created distance from God. The first was the sin of the Golden Calf, for which every generation is punished, and likewise, the sin of sending the spies, where we said, in essence, “Thank you God, but no thank you.”

The Golden Calf happened on the 17<sup>th</sup> of Tammuz, and the spies, on the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av. These two dates mark the three-week mourning period, a time of distance, on the calendar that is so focused on closeness.

## The Keruvim’s Embrace

If one takes a look at love in this world, whether in marriage or friendship, when the pair is together, their love may not be so evident. But when they are on the brink of a separation, those feelings are brought to the fore.

Marriage is apt imagery to understand the relationship between G-d and the Jewish people. According to the *Bnei Yissaschar* (Rabbi Zvi Elimelech Spira, 1783-1841) at the time of the destruction of the Bais HaMikdash, Hakadosh Baruch Hu was about to take an active step of distance. And before the actual separation, we had the most intense time of closeness. This is the embrace of the keruvim, the intense love before parting.

## Separated from God

When we refer to God leaving, as it were, what we mean is the state of a tremendous concealment in the world, in which we do not see God’s Hand. It’s almost like describing a sunset to a color-blind person. If you’re looking at the world on a black and white level, then you will not absorb all the beautiful colors. *Siluk hashechinah* (the distancing of the Divine Presence) is an empty concept to many of us because we don’t live in a reality of closeness.

An enigmatic midrash states (*Eicha Rabbah*) that when God left the Bais HaMikdash and His *shechinah* left this world, the angel Metatron fell on his face and said, “I will cry, and you will not cry.” Hakadosh Baruch Hu said, “Why do you not let Me cry?! I will enter into a place that you cannot enter, and I will cry.”

Metatron exemplifies our job of bringing the glory of God’s kingdom into this world. When the *shechinah* left Israel, that doesn’t mean it is no longer in this world. If we would measure the intensity of the shining sun outside, and then inside our home, and find the room much dimmer, the difference is not that in the room the sun isn’t shining. It is the walls that conceal its presence, and maybe our windows are dirty. The *shechinah* is still present. But we are no longer capable of using the Divine Presence to come close, to have the optimum relationship.

This is the concept of crying and laughing. Laughing – *simchah* – means *hispashtus* – moving outwards. Crying is *tzimtzum*, moving inwards. We share *simchahs*, but during times of tragedy, we turn inwards.

Metatron says to God, “You have no need to cry, as there is no impact on You. You are still being *mashpiah*, but we don’t have the ability to take the *shechinah* and to get close to God. The constriction is from our side.” To this reasoning God responds, “No I need to cry too.” In the

highest realm of Heaven, beyond even this angel, there is a point where the *hashpa'ah* of Hakadosh Baruch Hu is also affected. He can't give as much as He wants to.

God created the world in a way that enables us to use the *shechinah* to come closer. The concept of *richuk*, distance, is not having those tools. The time of transition is a time of great closeness and love, as we anticipate the distance. And that leaves us, thousands of years after that embrace, still apart.

## Celebrating Our Distance

Tish'a B'Av is called a *moed*, a holiday. We don't say *tachanun*, and we dress nicely. But what kind of holiday is this? Tish'a B'Av is the declaration: "I am not close. I am far." Why are we celebrating this?

Rav Wolbe, quoting Rabbenu Yonah, explains that when you're close, you're close, and when you're far you're far. But when you think you're close and in reality you're far, then you're in really bad shape.

This is what Yirmiyahu Hanavi said (2:23): "*Eich to'mri lo nitmeti, acharei hab'alim lo halachti – r'u darkech bagay. D'i mah asit!*" How can you say you haven't followed after the idols? Look, your foot prints are in the valley! You're going to tell me you didn't sin? The problem with the Jewish people was that at the very time they were doing evil, they found excuses for it. If you can admit you've done wrong, that's ok, that's *richuk*. But to sin, and say, "It's not so bad; we still believe in God," to live in a world of light and darkness, that's the worst.

This is the idea behind having a day that celebrates our distance. Facing up to the truth about being so distant is the first step to closeness.

We do not have even an inkling of what the Jews were like when the Bais HaMikdash was standing. But let's take a look at ourselves, focused so entirely on the desires of our bodies and the vanities of time. We do not miss the Bais HaMikdash. And we do not understand the reality of Divine Presence in the fabric of life. Tish'a B'Av says, let us at least look at the reality of how far we are standing from God. Let us celebrate our distance.

One of the essential *avodahs* of Tish'a B'Av is to ask ourselves where we stand on the spectrum. If we're honest, we can understand that we're disconnected, and no matter how much we want to fool ourselves, we have a distance to go. And that's why it's so powerful. Rabbi Yisrael Salanter (1810-1883) says that on Tish'a B'Av one can come as close to God as one does on Yom Kippur itself, because the realization of our distance brings a tremendous desire to come closer.

If we are close, then we know we're close. If we think we're close and we're far, then we're complacent. But if we're far, that should bother us, and that agitation is the desire to come close to God which we can achieve on Tish'a B'Av like on Yom Kippur.

## Painting the Background

The celebration of distance can bring us closer, because Tish'a B'Av has a certain power of closeness.

Rav Chaim Shemulevitz (1902–1979), in explaining the keruvim at the time of the churban, writes that God punishes with a tremendous amount of love. Where there is no love, there can be no punishment. This explains the embrace of the keruvim.

The Maggid of Mezerich<sup>101</sup> explains the *possuk* (*Eicha* 1:3): “*kol rodfeha hisiguha bein hameitzarim* – all who pursued her caught up with her between the straits.” *Kol rodfei-Ka* – All those who run after God, are able to catch up with Him at this time of year, during the three weeks, called “*bein hameitzarim*.”

Why? Because when a king is in his palace, it is hard to gain an audience with him. But when he is in exile, he is accessible. Likewise, the greatest amount of love between a father and his son is when the son is sick and the father himself has to act as a doctor and operate on his son. At this time there is the most intense love, with the father knowing that both he and his son are suffering so terribly.

This time of suffering is filled with a tremendous amount of love between God and the Jewish People.

The concept of the keruvim embracing during the time of God’s punishment is a concept for eternity. When an individual has difficulties in life and feels the Divine Judgment pouring over him, he needs to understand this concept of the embrace of the keruvim: that although it feels like a time of distance, on the deepest level, it’s one of closeness.

The 22 days between the 17<sup>th</sup> of Tammuz and Tish’a B’Av parallel the 22 days in Tishrei between Rosh Hashanah and Simchas Torah, placing Tish’a B’Av as a parallel to Simchas Torah. The climax of all our *avodas Hashem* in Tishrei is found on Simchas Torah, and this is the potential for closeness of Tish’a B’Av. These 22 days are like the dark background on which an artist paints a vivid picture. The blackness, the distance, creates the strong desire to come close to God. And only painting on that black background of distance and longing can prepare us to stand before our King on Rosh Hashanah, ready for a relationship with Him.

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<sup>101</sup> From here until the end of this essay is based on the *Nesivos Shalom*