

Tisha B'Av: Renaissance of Normality

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Rabbi Widmonte has spearheaded a partnership between the South African Jewish community and YU Center for the Jewish Future, which includes sending senior educators to YU CJF to participate in our certificate programs, High school students to participate in YU's Model UN, and the printing a special edition of the Holiday To-Go for the South African community with a run of 15,000 copies.

As we approach Tisha B'Av, there are two central questions which arise. What type of behaviour should this period engender? But more profoundly, what modes of thinking and experiencing life, should grow within us? Rav Kook championed a method of Torah learning which analyzes not only the specific content of particular mitzvot, but also the thought-paradigms which the Torah implants and nurtures. In other words, he sees the process of learning Torah and fulfilling mitzvot as engendering particular modes of thinking, feeling and processing life⁶³.

One of these paradigms is particularly apt when confronting the mourning period which culminates in Tisha B'Av.

Rabbi Akiva on Exile

We learn at the end of Makkot as follows,

Rabban Gamli'el, Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya, Rabbi Y'hoshu'a, and Rabbi Akiva... were once ascending to Y'rushalayim. When they reached Mount Scopus [from which one can see the Temple Mount], they tore their clothing. When they arrived at the Temple Mount,

פעם אחת היו עולין לירושלים
כיון שהגיעו להר הצופים קרעו
בגדיהם כיון שהגיעו להר הבית
ראו שועל שיצא מבית קדשי
הקדשים התחילו הן בוכין ור"ע

⁶³ See for example at length, his *T'udat Yisra'el uLumiyuto* which has several examples of this, one of which is Shabbat and its concomitant fostering of an egalitarian world-view. Rav Kook's quasi-*hesped* for Theodore Herzl, *Misped Biyrushalayim* is a prime example of his so-called psycho-historic views, in which he sees history as the product of various currents of thought merging to create streams of positive change; or alternatively clashing and generating terrible storms in the historical landscape. In either case, he sees the Torah as cultivating particular modes of thought that will eventually merge with other streams to create powerful trends of human activity, reaching eventually to final, cosmic redemption.

they saw a fox running out of the area where the Holy of Holies had been. They all began to cry except for Rabbi Akiva, who began laughing.

They said to him, 'Why are you laughing?' He said to them, 'Why are you crying?' They replied [in shock], 'The place regarding which it is written, "A stranger who approaches it shall be put to death"⁶⁴ now has foxes running through it and we shouldn't cry?'

He responded, 'That's exactly why I am laughing! Because it is written, "Y'shayahu the Prophet said, 'I will bring two reliable witnesses regarding my people [and their fate], Uri'ah the Priest and Z'chari'ah ben Y'verechyahu."⁶⁵ Now, you might ask why these two people specifically are mentioned as witnesses when they lived in two different periods – one during the first temple and the other during the second temple? The verse mentions these two people in order to make Z'chari'ah's prophecy dependent on Uri'ah's. In Uri'ah's case, it is written, "Therefore, because of you, Tzion will be ploughed under like a field."⁶⁶ In the case of Z'chari'ah, we find, "Yet again, elderly men and women will sit in the streets of Y'rushalayim."⁶⁷ Now that I have seen Uriah's prophecy fulfilled, I know that Z'chari'ah's prophecy will also be fulfilled.'

Hearing that, Rabbi Akiva's colleagues said to him, 'Akiva, you have comforted us. Akiva, you have comforted us.'

Makkot 24b

מצחק אמרו לו מפני מה אתה מצחק אמר להם מפני מה אתם בוכים אמרו לו מקום שכתוב בו והזר הקרב יומת ועכשיו שועלים הלכו בו ולא נבכה אמר להן לכך אני מצחק דכתיב ואעידה לי עדים נאמנים את אוריה הכהן ואת זכריה בן יברכיהו וכי מה ענין אוריה אצל זכריה אוריה במקדש ראשון וזכריה במקדש שני אלא תלה הכתוב נבואתו של זכריה בנבואתו של אוריה באוריה כתיב לכן בגללכם ציון שדה תחרש [וגו'] בזכריה כתיב עוד ישבו זקנים וזקנות ברחובות ירושלים עד שלא נתקיימה נבואתו של אוריה הייתי מתיירא שלא תתקיים נבואתו של זכריה עכשיו שנתקיימה נבואתו של אוריה בידוע שנבואתו של זכריה מתקיימת בלשון הזה אמרו לו עקיבא ניהמתנו עקיבא ניהמתנו:

מכות כד:

There is a clear difficulty with Rabbi Akiva's comments: did this giant of Torah seriously doubt that the prophecy of Z'chari'ah would be fulfilled? Did he truly require a wildlife exhibition on the desolate temple mount to bolster his faith? The notion is absurd.

Directly Proportionate Destruction

The Maharsha is clearly bothered by this question and he proposes a profound solution.

Rabbi Akiva was really saying, 'I now see that Uri'ah's prophecy has been [completely] fulfilled since foxes are walking through the Holy of Holies and no-one has settled there – it is like a ploughed field which remains unsown so that idolaters do not settle there ... on the temple mount, which is as a ploughed field, a fox⁶⁸ wandering around it must leave because there is nothing beneficial there for it and the fox takes

ואמר רע"ק ועכשיו שאני רואה נבואתו של אוריה קיימת ששועלים הלכו בה ואין בה ישוב עובדי כוכבים רק כשדה החרושה ואינה זרועה כמ"ש שאין מצמיחה בה כלום שלא יתיישבו בה העכו"ם ... בהר ציון שהיא שדה החרושה ואף שועל שהולך בה שיוצא מבית ק"ק אף לו אין נחת רוח שם

⁶⁴ B'midbar 1:51.

⁶⁵ Isaiah 8:2.

⁶⁶ Michah 3:12.

⁶⁷ Z'chari'ah 8:4.

⁶⁸ The Maharsha references Eichah (5:17-18) where there is a specific lament regarding foxes wandering over the temple mount.

nothing from the mount. For this reason I am laughing because the land was so good and praiseworthy when Israel lived there and now there is no worse land, so much so that even the animals cannot live there. All this is testimony to Z'chari'ah's prophecy that Y'rushalayim will remain unsettled and that no animal will find rest there until the time of the redemption...

Maharsha ad. loc.

שאינ מוציא שם כלום ולכך אני משחק
שהארץ טובה ומשובחת כזו בזמן שהיו
ישראל יושבין עליה ועתה היא ארץ
רעה ממנה שאין לשום ב"ח נחת רוח
בה וכל זה עדות לנבואתו של זכריה
שלא יהיה ירושלים מיושב ואין לשום
ב"ח נחת רוח בה ממנו יתברך ב"ה עד
זמן הגאולה
מהרש"א על מכות כד:

According to the Maharsha, Rabbi Akiva's problem was not that he doubted the prophecies would come to fruition, G-d forbid, but that he was unsure if they had been fulfilled in his time. Uri'ah had pronounced a vision of dire destruction, but had that destruction happened yet? Perhaps there was more to come? Now, however, that the bitter root of devastation had flowered in all its gall, with all the unpleasant details clearly on display, with the Temple Mount ploughed under and foxes sauntering through it, Rabbi Akiva knew that Uri'ah's prophecy had come to pass in his day.

But there's more. The Maharsha explains that Rabbi Akiva isn't just ensuring that all the technical requirements are being fulfilled to qualify his time as that described by Uri'ah. This is not a technical issue, it is causative. Rabbi Akiva posits that there is a **directly proportionate relationship between the level of destruction caused, on the one hand, and the level of redemption which can be achieved thereafter**. Only when we see that the land of Israel, once so bountiful, has been reduced to abject poverty, when even the foxes desert it, only then can we be sure that the final redemption is on its way.

It's almost as if the utter ruin is somehow the seed of the ultimate emancipation. But how and why does this happen?

Reframing National Normality

I believe we can find a credible answer to this question in the Maharal. He opens his analysis of exile and redemption, *Netzach Yisra'el* (The Eternity of Israel) with a challenging idea which echoes the Maharsha's explanation quite clearly.

Furthermore, there is a need to explain exile first, because exile is the evidence and clear proof that there will be redemption.

The reason for this is that there is no doubt that exile is a deviation from the [natural] order – Hashem, may He be blessed, arranged each nation in the place suitable to it and He also arranged [the people of] Israel in the place suited to them, which is the land of Israel. Thus, the exile from their place is an absolute deviation [in the G-d ordained, natural order.]

Now anything which is expelled from its natural setting cannot last in an unnatural setting, it must return to its home. The reason this return must occur is that if it did not, then the unnatural would become transformed into the natural [which

ועוד שיש לבאר ענין הגלות תחלה,
כי הגלות בעצמו הוא ראיה והוכחה
ברורה על הגאולה. וזה כי אין ספק
כי הגלות הוא שנוי ויציאה מן
הסדר, שהשם יתברך סדר כל אומה
במקומה הראוי לה, וסדר את
ישראל במקום הראוי להם, שהוא
ארץ ישראל. והגלות מן מקומם הוא
שנוי ויציאה לגמרי. וכל הדברים
כאשר הם יוצאים ממקום הטבעי,
והם חוץ למקומם, אין להם עמידה
במקום הבלתי טבעי להם, רק הם
חוזרים למקומם הטבעי. כי אם היו
נשארים במקומם הבלתי טבעי להם,

would violate the laws of nature, which are held to be divinely set, unchanging and unchangeable.]

Netzach Yisra'el 1

היה הבלתי טבעי נעשה טבעי, ודבר
זה אי אפשר שיהיה הבלתי טבעי
נעשה טבעי.
נצח ישראל - פרק א

The Maharal's explanation relies upon a teleological view of reality. If the ultimate place of the Jewish people is in the land of Israel, if this inheres within our metaphysical nature, then this is normal! Anything else must be a temporary deviation, a digression, even if it lasts for two millennia. Thus, revisiting the Maharsha, the reason that Rabbi Akiva was so happy when he saw the extent of the devastation of the Temple Mount is now clear: only when the ultimate abnormality has been reached, when we are sure we have crossed the final red line, can we be sure that we are beginning to bounce back, to return to normality. Rabbi Akiva's most dependable guarantee of redemption was that we had reached the outer limits of aberration and had begun the long walk back to our default setting: freedom.⁶⁹ **The key shift in thought lies in redefining what is normal and the net result is that instead of certain processes being painful and difficult, they are in fact natural and easy.**

There are many instances of this type of reasoning in Chazal. To list but a few:

- The Gemara⁷⁰ describes the experience of the fetus, in utero. First the baby is taught the entire Torah and then as he exits the womb, an angel strikes him on the mouth so that he forgets it all. The question here is clear: why go through the process of teaching the whole Torah if it will definitely be forgotten?
It's clear that the Gemara is positing a pre-existing state of normality for every Jew – immersion in Torah – so that the whole of life becomes a journey back to the default setting.
- The Midrash's⁷¹ understanding of the creation of Adam and Chava is that they were created as one creature originally with one half male and the other half female fused back to back, and that the process of creating woman (detailed in B'reishit 2:21) actually entailed dividing the two halves and transforming each into an independent entity. Again, the central thrust here seems to be a reframing of normality – in essence, man and woman are one, the separation is temporary and much of life is spent in the quest for that elusive wholeness.

The Renaissance of Personal and Cosmic Normality

If we employ this paradigm of reframed normality in analyzing the personal *t'shuvah* and growth which Tisha B'Av and this period demand⁷², we arrive at a completely different and empowering view of sin and repentance.

Rav Kook describes *t'shuvah* as follows,

⁶⁹ Please see the Maharal's explanation of this Gemara in *Netzach Yisrael* 26, which echoes the causative element explicitly.

⁷⁰ *Niddah* 30b.

⁷¹ *B'reishit Rabbah* 8:1, cited in Rashi, *B'reishit* 1:27.

⁷² Rambam, *Ta'aniyot* 4:2

T'shuvah is the healthiest feeling of the soul. A healthy soul in a healthy body must eventually arrive at the great happiness of t'shuvah and when it does, it feels the most natural pleasure possible... The entire world must reach a complete t'shuvah. The world cannot remain static – it is always developing and improving and the true, perfect development must bring the world to complete health (both physical and spiritual) and this brings with it the vitality of the light of t'shuvah.

Rav Kook, Orot Hat'shuvah 5:1,3

התשובה היא ההרגשה היותר בריאה של הנפש. נשמה בריאה בגוף בריא מוכרחת היא לבוא לידי האושר הגדול של תשובה, והיא מרגשת בה את העונג הטבעי היותר גדול... העולם מוכרח הוא לבא לידי תשובה שלמה. אין העולם דבר עומד על מצב אחד כי-אם הולך הוא ומתפתח, וההתפתחות האמתית השלמה מוכרחת היא להביא לו את הבריאות הגמורה, החמרית והרוחנית, והיא תביא את אור חיי התשובה עמה...

אורות התשובה פרק ה - הכרחיות מציאות התשובה ופעולתה באדם בעולם ובכנסת ישראל / א,ג

Unless one has a completely different sense of the default setting of humanity, it is difficult to grasp Rav Kook's meaning: why are we assured of an eventual cosmic and personal perfection? To some extent, the reason we find this difficult to accept is that we have accustomed ourselves to believing that the fallen states of the world and humanity, are normal⁷³.

Rav Kook's view is the opposite. 'The world cannot remain static – it is always developing and improving and the true, perfect development must bring the world to complete health...' And regarding each human being, well, we are nothing less than divine – made in the image of a perfect G-d.

If one adopts such a view, any sin, any downfall, can never be anything more than a pause, a detour, which must inevitably end, after which we continue on our normal path – that of physical and spiritual health.

This radically upended paradigm informs much of what Rav Kook taught regarding people, the nation of Israel and the cosmos. A simple example of this is his attitude towards the theory of evolution.

The evolutionary way of thinking, so popular as a result of recent scientific studies, has caused considerable upheaval among many people whose thought had been wont to run in certain regular, well-defined paths. Not so, however, for the select, hard-thinking few who have always seen a gradual, evolutionary development in the world's most intimate spiritual essence. For them it is not difficult to apply, by analogy, the same principle to the physical development of the visible world. It is indeed fitting that the emergence of the latter should parallel the spiritual development of all being, where no step in the gradually unfolding pattern is ever left vacant.

Orot HaKodesh II p. 538:2

מהלך המחשבה של ההתפתחות, שנתפרסמה בכל השדרות, לרגלי למודי הטבע החדשים, עשתה מהפכה רבה, בחוג המחשבות הרגילות. לא אצל יחידי הסגולה, בעלי הדעה וההגיון, שמעולם הסתכלו בסדרי השתלשלות דרגאים, אפילו בההויה הרוחנית המוסקרת בסקירה היותר נסתרה, שאין הדבר זר אצלם להבין במדת ההשואה גם כן באופן זה בדבר ההתפתחות החומרית של העולם המוחשי, שראוי הדבר שתהיה התגלותו מתאמת להשתלשלות הרוחנית של ההויה, שאינה מחסרת דרגה אחת בדילוג וריקניות.

אורות הקודש / חלק ב / עמוד תקלה:2

⁷³ One wonders if this is not somewhat a function of a long exile in a predominantly Christian culture?

As he notes, Rav Kook's fascination with the notion of evolution was not so much due to the particular theory, but because it is an example of this 'way of thinking', this paradigm, whereby the cosmos is simply returning to an already inherent order, splendour and perfection.

Be Normal

Besides the sense of stability that this paradigm engenders, I believe that it balances the generally promethean view we have of *t'shuvah* and growth. There is a great romantic attraction towards the bold image of a lonely man of faith, forging himself *ex nihilo nili* from the bare bones of his being in the fires of antinomy.

On the other hand, there is an equally empowering and levelling view – in which I am already there, already great, already present, if I would but let myself be. And if I have strayed for some reason, then the path back is not torturous but the simplest, healthiest affirmation of just being normal. Instead of perfection being an excruciating uphill climb, it is a smooth ride home.

Collected Tisha B'Av

Insights from YU

Community Rebbetzins

Introduction

Meira Davis

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A Rebbetzin is in a unique position, acquired solely by virtue of being married to a rabbi. She balances raising a family, her own profession and her husband's demanding schedule. In addition she takes her "volunteer" role as rebbetzin very seriously and greatly impacts on the growth of her community by working as a team with her husband and through her own multiple unique contributions to their synagogue.

The Center for the Jewish Future recognizes the invaluable role of this often "unsung heroine". It provides programming for the newer rebbetzins through the Rebbetzin Esther Rosenblatt Rebbetzins Yarchei Kallah where they have the opportunity to meet with seasoned professionals to discuss issues of self, family and community in a safe and supportive environment and to network with each other. Other resources are offered as well.

We are honored to present to you, a collection of articles from our rebbetzins to provide a unique perspective on Tisha B'Av and its themes. The collection represents a variety of styles and perspectives and highlights the humanity, passion and intellectual sophistication of our rebbetzins. May Hashem bless them with success in their many roles.

Yissurim and Teshuva

Naomi Dardik

Rebbetzin, Beth Jacob Congregation, Oakland, CA

The year is 70 C.E. We have been exiled from Israel and the *Beit Hamikdash*, our Temple desecrated and destroyed. We were warned that such destruction would come if we, as a nation, did not do *teshuva* (repentance), but we did not listen. It is difficult to wrap our minds around the horrors that we have seen or heard about. Everybody is either mourning a personal loss, or knows someone who is. We struggle with the philosophical questions around how Hashem lets