

# Understanding the Mo'ed of Tisha B'av

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*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 בַּחֲנֹרִי; גַּת דְּרָף ה'  
לְבַתוֹלֵת בֵּת-יְהוּדָה.  
**אִיכָה א:טו**

The Navi Yirmiyahu refers to Tisha B'av as a *mo'ed*, which usually connotes a holiday. At first glance, it seems puzzling to call Tisha B'av, the day that personifies all the destructions and devastations of our people, a holiday. How can we possibly refer to it as a holiday? I would like to suggest two different approaches to this question.

## First Approach

The term *mo'ed* literally means a meeting, an encounter. Hashem tells Moshe, "I will meet you there," referring to the area in the Mishkan (the Sanctuary), where Hashem will communicate with Moshe on an ongoing basis (Shemos 25:22). The Jewish holidays are called *mo'adim* (Vayikra 23:2) because on these occasions, the Jewish nation encountered the Shechina (the Divine presence) in a most tangible way.

The 31st Kinah is based on the Midrash<sup>1</sup> that focuses on the tragedy of the destruction of the Bais Ha-mikdash, and our being exiled from Jerusalem, by contrasting this to the exodus from Egypt. Understandably, the latter is infused with excitement and optimism, and the former with bitterness and melancholy. But as we sense the sharp contrast, we also become aware of a commonality of both circumstances—that in both circumstances, one is able to see and sense the presence of Hashem, directing, orchestrating and facilitating each event.

The Exodus was accompanied by open miracles. The ten plagues were not only punitive to the Egyptian people, but educational for the slaves, soon to become the Jewish nation. They saw and felt God's caring and love for them, by their being spared the plagues, and many other open miracles, culminating with the splitting of the Red Sea.

The destruction of the Bais Ha-mikdash and the exodus from Jerusalem, in no less a way, had His imprimatur on the events. The Midrash contrasts the conditions of the two exoduses. When

<sup>1</sup> *Yalkut Shimoni*, Eicha 1026.

we left Egypt, and spent 40 years in the desert, Moshe summarizes their miraculous survival by "you did not lack a thing (Devarim 2:7)." It is interesting to note Rav Yosef Salant's comments<sup>2</sup> that this might very well be the reason for the law on Sukkos that a *mitzta'er*—one who is uncomfortable—is exempt from the sukkah, as the mitzvah of sukkah is to help us relive the comforts we miraculously experienced in the desert. When we left Yerushalyim, Yirmiyahu depicts the exact opposite: "the young children ask for bread, and no one gives it to them (Megilas Eichah 4:4)." Yet the faith of our people was not compromised. They did not ask, "where is God?" The extreme circumstances, the overflowing kindness and benevolence on the one hand, and the extreme judgments of tribulations on the other, brought them to "*Odecha ki anisanai*, I thank you for Your persecuting me (Tehillim 118:21)," for reminding me that the close bond is still there.

There is a famous teaching of the Kotzker Rebbe<sup>3</sup> who tries to understand the punishment for the serpent who was told that he would eat dust his entire life (Bereishis 3:14). Why was this considered a punishment if he was allotted a life supply of sustenance and nourishment? The Kotzker Rebbe answers that God was closing the door on the serpent, saying: We no longer have a relationship. You have your sustenance and you no longer need me. When God punished His people in the extreme, He was showing his involvement with us, though it might be characterized as "*meitzitz min ha-charakim*, peering through the lattices,"<sup>4</sup> without being seen. He is there, and our faith in Him was not diminished one iota, as we knew with absolute surety that it emanated from Hashem.

The daily declaration of our pledge of allegiance, the Shema Yisroel, bolsters this faith. The name Hashem is understood to mean the characteristic of kindness and mercy. The name Elokim denotes judgment and retribution. The concluding Hashem Echod, Hashem is one, is our commitment of faith that it all emanates from One source, whether through kindness and mercy or through judgment and retribution. At times, He manifests Himself as Avinu, our loving father, and at times as Malkaynu, our King, but our faith in Him remains steadfast.

The Talmud<sup>5</sup> tells a story of Reb Yochanan ben Zakkai that took place shortly after the *churban* (the destruction of the Mikdash and Yerushalayim). Reb Yochanan ben Zakkai and his students were leaving the holy city, and he noticed a woman gathering pieces of barley from within the dung of the donkeys of Arabs. Upon seeing the rabbi, she asked for assistance, that he give her charity and food. The rabbi asked her name and she told him that she was the daughter of Nakdimon, the son of Gurion, one of the wealthiest Jews in all Israel. Reb Yochanan ben Zakkai's immediate response after crying, upon assessing the situation, was to say "*ashreichem Yisroel*," how fortunate is the Jewish nation, "when they fulfill God's will, no nation may dominate them, and when they are derelict in their keeping of His Torah, they are subservient to a low nation, and moreover worse, to the animals of a lowly nation."

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<sup>2</sup> *Be'er Yosef*, Vol.2 page 58.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in *Emes M'Kotzk Titzmach*, pg. 42.

<sup>4</sup> Shir HaShirim 2:9. In contrast to *mashgiach min hacholonos*, observing through the windows, where both parties can see each other and are aware of their presence, when He is peering through the lattices, He is looking, but we can't see Him.

<sup>5</sup> *Kesuvos* 66b.

Rav Chaim Friedlander<sup>6</sup> notes that the extreme contrast in the life of this woman personifies the fate of the Jewish nation. There is no average way of life, or norm for the Jewish nation. Either we are on top of the world, or we are at the other extreme. In both situations, leaving Egypt and Jerusalem we sensed His presence.

Moreover, Chazal are teaching that just as during the Exodus, the written Torah reiterates time and again<sup>7</sup> that the people believed in Hashem, they knew that He was determining their destiny; similarly, at the time of the *churban*, destruction, the faith of the downtrodden people is highlighted.

The Talmud<sup>8</sup> relates that 400 Jewish youths were being transported by boats for immoral purposes after the *churban*. They had one question, namely, if they jumped overboard, thereby taking their own lives, would they still merit Olam Habbah, their share in the world to come? Hashem illuminated their eyes, as their leader cited for them the verse, "I will bring you back from the depths of the sea (Tehillim 68:23)," and they all demonstrated their belief and died *al kiddush Hashem*, sanctifying His name. As the Jewish nation sang the song of deliverance to Hashem upon crossing the Red Sea, they sang songs of allegiance, and upon drowning themselves at sea, they reaffirmed their faith. This contrast is a living fulfillment of "Of kindness and justice do I sing (Tehillim 101:1)," which the Talmud<sup>9</sup> interprets to mean that if I am dealt kindness, I will sing, and if I am dealt punishment, then too I will sing. The Jew responds with song and appreciation of His intimate involvement, being the beneficiary of His *chesed*—endless kindness, and sings with the same enthusiasm of His involvement in receiving His stern judgments and punishments. In both situations, the *mo'ed* encounter is tangible.

During the period of the Bais Ha-mikdash, we experienced *ha'oras panim*, the light of His countenance, the fulfillment of "in the light of the King's countenance is life (Mishlei 16:15)," and at the time of the *churban*, they sensed "Jerusalem sinned greatly, she has therefore become a wanderer (Megilas Eicha 1:8)." As the Exodus from Egypt elevated them to experience the closeness, the special relationship between man and His Maker, the identical feelings of closeness were experienced when they forsook their Maker, and felt *hester panim*, the hiding of His countenance.

Similarly, the Midrash<sup>10</sup> recalls the story of the mother (Chana) and her seven sons, all of whom refused to bow to idolatry, and offered their lives instead. Tragedy had not divested them of their faith and belief in Hashem. Hence, Tisha B'av is a *mo'ed* when we reflect upon the personal close relationship of Am-Yisroel and Hashem, as experienced through the long bitter *galus* (exile).

The Talmud<sup>11</sup> records that an apostate turned his back on Rabbe Yehoshua, intimating that Hashem has forsaken the Jewish nation after the *churban*. Rabbe Yehoshua responded by raising his hand ready to strike. He thereby demonstrated that by chastising and punishing, God still

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<sup>6</sup> *Sifsei Chaim, Mo'adim* vol.3 pg. 248.

<sup>7</sup> Shemos 4:31 and 14:31.

<sup>8</sup> *Gittin* 57b.

<sup>9</sup> *Berachos* 60b.

<sup>10</sup> *Eicha Rabbah* 1:50.

<sup>11</sup> *Chagiga* 5b.

shows His fatherly-heavenly connection with His people. This is the message of the *mo'ed* of Tisha B'av—to bolster our belief in Hashem.

## Second Approach

There is a second approach to understanding the term *mo'ed* in reference to Tisha B'av. On the three pilgrim festivals, we not only came to His Temple *liros-v'leira'os*, to see and be seen. We were the recipients of Divine blessings at that time. First, upon coming to the Bais Ha-mikdash, the kohanim were busy taking the pilgrims on tours, showing how Hashem loves and has a special rapport with B'nei Yisrael.<sup>12</sup> This was demonstrated by the *keruvim* embracing each other, the freshness of the 12 loaves of the show-breads, and the *Ner Ha-maaravi*—the middle branch of the Menorah that constantly burned beyond the other six lights, all portraying the closeness of Hashem with His people.

In addition, we received on Pesach an outpouring of *cheirus* (freedom). We not only remembered the historical past, but were endowed with a special blessing—*shefah* (Divine flow) characteristic of *cheirus*, enabling the individual to have a healthier, more wholesome optimistic outlook on life.

On Shavuot, we not only recalled the Revelation, we relived it. Every Amidah is concluded with the supplication that the Temple should be rebuilt speedily in our days, that we should be granted a share in the Torah. What is the connection between the rebuilding of the Temple and receiving a share in the Torah? It was through the Bais Ha-mikdash that we received greater understanding and wisdom to appreciate the Torah.

On Sukkos as well, the biblical mitzvah of taking the four species during the entire week of Sukkos in the Mikdash and Yerushalayim was an experience of connecting with Hashem, as the verse states, "and you shall rejoice before Hashem, your God, for a seven-day period (Vayikra 23:40)." There was a tangible state of awareness of being in the presence of Hashem.

To further illustrate the knowledge that the Bais Ha-mikdash imparted, Rav Eliyahu Lapian<sup>13</sup> cites from the *Toras Ha-Olah* of the Ramah the following incredible (yet historically anachronistic) exchange. After Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the Bais Ha-mikdash, the philosopher Plato entered the ruins and found the prophet Yirmiyahu sitting and crying bitter tears over the loss and destruction of the Holy Temple. The philosopher asked the prophet why was he crying over sticks and stones. Yirmiyahu responded, "as a philosopher you probably have some unresolved issues and perplexing ideas; ask me any of your uncertainties." Plato asked and Yirmiyahu answered each question with such absolute clarity, that Plato was not sure if he was communicating with a mortal or an angel. Upon noting Plato's astonishment, the prophet said, "all my wisdom comes from these sticks and stones."

These sticks and stones, which were the source of incredible wisdom, are also the focus of the following Midrash. The Midrash<sup>14</sup> asks: How could Asaph begin the 79th Psalm which depicts

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<sup>12</sup> *Chagiga* 26b.

<sup>13</sup> *Chochma U'musar* pg. 293.

<sup>14</sup> *Eicha Rabbah* 4:14.

"the nations have entered into Your inheritance, they have defiled the sanctuary of Your Holiness, they have turned Jerusalem into heaps of rubble," with Mizmor L'Asaph, literally a song by Asaph? Wouldn't it have been more appropriate and understandable to write a "Lamentation by Asaph?" The Midrash answers that Asaph rejoiced in the fact that Hashem, in His anger, could have destroyed His unfaithful nation. Instead, He poured and directed His wrath and anger on the physical structure, on the sticks and stones, and spared the nation.

At first glance, our practice of mourning on Tisha B'av is baffling and counter-intuitive. On the one hand, it is most understandable, the sequence and gradual intensification of mourning, starting with Shiva-Asar-B'Tammuz, three weeks of no haircuts and no weddings, the nine days beginning with Rosh Chodesh, the *shavua shechal bo*, the days immediately prior to Tisha B'av, erev Tisha B'av, the day preceding the fast, and finally the night and morning of Tisha B'av, sitting low on the ground, not yet donning the tefillin. However, when we reach *chatzos*, midday, our practice becomes perplexing. At *chatzos*, the Romans set the Bais Ha-Mikdash ablaze. One would have expected that this would be the most grievous intense time of mourning. Yet at this time, we rise off the ground and sit regularly after *chatzos*. The Vilna Gaon<sup>15</sup> explains that this is actually a time of consolation, of appeasement for the Jewish nation, as at this time He vented His anger towards the physical structure and spared the nation. Hashem had a choice, either destroy the people or the Sanctuary. He chose the latter, and for this Asaph and the Jewish people find optimism on Tisha B'av.

Why did Hashem have to make a choice between the nation and the Mikdash?<sup>16</sup> We see from the orderly presentation of the Torah, that a prerequisite for the building of a Mishkan, to merit the Divine Presence, was the acceptance of Torah. This acceptance of the Torah is found in *Parashas Yisro*. Yet at the end of *Parashas Mishpatim*, immediately prior to the *parshiyos* discussing the construction of the Mishkan, the Torah<sup>17</sup> returns to discuss the preparations for the Revelation, and provides us with the declaration of the people of *na'aseh v'nishma*, we will do and we will listen, (i.e. study). The prerequisite for Shechinah was our commitment to do, to live and observe Torah.

Thus, it is understandable that which Rav Chanina ben Dosa taught,<sup>18</sup> "anyone whose good deeds exceed his wisdom, his wisdom will endure, but anyone whose wisdom exceeds his good deeds, his wisdom will not endure." In the above text, the author does not bring any proof or substantiation for his teaching. In *Avos d'Rav Noson*,<sup>19</sup> the author cites *na'aseh v'nishma* as the basis for his teaching. Rabbeinu Yonah, in his commentary on this Mishnah, adds that even the genuine resolve and commitment to perform the mitzvos and all their components and nuances is graciously looked upon On High as if the individual has already performed these meritorious acts.

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<sup>15</sup> *Bi'ur Ha-Gra, Orach Chaim 555:2.*

<sup>16</sup> This idea is based on the writings of R. Shimshon Pinkus, *Galus U'nechama* pp. 53-63.

<sup>17</sup> See Rashi 24:1.

<sup>18</sup> *Avos 3:12.*

<sup>19</sup> *Avos d'Rav Noson 22:1.*

Case in point: the Bais Ha-mikdash was the source of incredible wisdom. Unfortunately, at the time of the *churban*, the Jewish nation was lacking in their performance of Torah.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, this great flow of wisdom, energy and sanctity did not have proper receptacles, individuals to receive this Divine gift. Hashem could either strike down the recipients for their unworthiness, or shut down the supernatural flow. Fortunately for us He chose the latter.

Rav Shimshon Pinkus suggests<sup>21</sup> a novel understanding of the term *mo'ed* in reference to Tisha B'av. Unlike all other festivals in which man approaches the Shechinah and benefits from basking in His shadow, on Tisha B'av, God approaches man and scrutinizes and judges whether man is ready for the restoration of the Shechinah, the Divine flow of wisdom. Is he still in a state of—“his wisdom exceeds his actions,” or perhaps and hopefully, his actions, demeanor and *weltanschauung*, reflect his changed status to that of—“one whose actions exceed his wisdom.” The *mo'ed* of Tisha B'av is thus understood in a most personal way, of *Hashem* coming to visit *us*.

The Rambam<sup>22</sup> gives us an ideal day in the life of the average Jew. He is engaged in business for three hours of the day, and the other nine hours are devoted to the spiritual pursuits of Torah study and the performance of good deeds. Granted, our lifestyle is so dramatically different, but we must utilize the teachings of the aforementioned Rabbeinu Yonah, that our true resolve and desire should be to spend much more time in the *bais ha-midrash* (study hall), to be involved in family and *chesed* in a greater fashion, so that our true nature and identity warrants His gift of enriched *chochmah*.

Tisha B'Av is a *mo'ed*, both in terms of understanding our close connection with God and in terms of God coming to us to scrutinize our actions. We live in a time of exceptional *chochmah*. In the Torah world, there has been a great proliferation of seforim and articles, relating to all areas of Jewish life, philosophy and observance. In the secular world, we have witnessed and participated in a burst of technological advancements: medical advancements, space explorations and computer technology, all of which have added greatly to the enriched standard of living and quality of life that we enjoy. On Tisha B'Av, we must ask ourselves two sobering questions. First, do we recognize the hand of God in our successes and challenges? Are we able to see that God is watching over us and orchestrating these events? Do we have the same level of trust in God as those who personally experienced the *churban*? Second, has this age of *chochmah* produced greater, more refined people? When God scrutinizes us on Tisha B'Av to see if “our wisdom exceeds our actions,” what will He find? The *mo'ed* of Tisha B'Av is an opportunity to ask these questions and hopefully come up with answers that will help us merit the rebuilding of the Bais Ha-mikdash.

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<sup>20</sup> *Yuma* 9b.

<sup>21</sup> See note 16.

<sup>22</sup> *Hilchos Talmud Torah* 1:12.