

Thoughts for Tisha B'av 2020

Merging Tisha B'av and Corona

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It is that "time" again. The entire world is mired in an international health crisis which doesn't distinguish between Jew and non-Jew- the virus impacts and infects everyone alike. Not only are our health vulnerabilities equivalent but, ultimately, our fates are interwoven. This pandemic can only be controlled or managed if all citizens exhibit responsible behavior. The fate of Jews and non-Jews are completely co-dependent. Even Israelis realize that our ability to surmount this pandemic is tethered to the broader ability of the world's population to flatten the curve. This microscopic virus has unified humanity and created a unique sense of shared experience between Jew and non-Jew.

By contrast, this coming week we mark a very Jewish event- another Tisha B'av without our full return to Yerushalayim and without the construction of our Mikdash. Beyond mourning the loss of land and Mikdash, we mourn the after-effects of our dismissal from Israel: two thousand years of harsh exile, cruelty and suffering. Mourning these tragedies feels very parochial and extremely "national". We mourn events which specifically affected Jews and Jewish history and we lament for our uniquely Jewish suffering throughout the ages. The sorrow of Tisha B'av reflects the tragedy of two thousand years of Jewish exile- an experience which is distinctively ours and in no way relevant to an international audience.

Can these two discrepant experiences- Tisha B'av and the corona crisis- be merged? How can Tisha B'av be flavored slightly differently this year during the corona crisis? Tisha B'av, apparently, is pivoted upon historical tragedies unrelated to the health crisis of 2020. It would seem that Tisha B'av mandates a shift away from the universalism of the corona crisis to a more narrowly Jewish experience; perhaps we are meant to take a break from the corona struggle for 24 hours so that we are free to focus on the Jewish anguish of Tisha B'av.

However, there is danger in divorcing Tisha B'av from the worldwide crisis enveloping us and occupying our day to day thoughts. Mourning is

an intensely personal and emotional experience and failure to assimilate our Tisha B'av into our current reality can yield a lifeless and even bifurcated mourning experience "comes and goes" and remains insulated from our general experiences. How can Tisha B'av of 2020 be recalibrated to address our current struggles? Tisha B'av shouldn't be altered but some of its themes may be reframed during this very challenging year.

Though the attack of Yerushalayim and the routing of the Mikdash were directed at the Jews, there were tragic global consequences on this day as well. Several phrases in Eichah evoke memories of Man's original expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Chief among these phrases is the word "Eichah" itself, with which Yirmiya begins his lament. The word Eichah arouses memories of the word "Ayeca"- G-d's inquiry and indictment of Adam and Eve as they are expelled from the Garden. The day Jews left Yerushalayim the world was expelled from its utopian potential and descended into a very dark place. Tisha B'av constituted a second fall of Man from Paradise.

When Jews live in Israel, centered upon the Temple in Yerushalayim, the entire world is a better place to live. Prophecy provides direct access to the will of G-d and to future events. Sacrifices and rituals assure the direct delivery of Divine prosperity for all mankind. The world operates based on a "predictable" system of cause and effect: sin invites suffering and religious virtue yields welfare. This more systematic and methodical world is easier to navigate. Human suffering and crisis can be defused or entirely avoided through careful moral introspection and improvement. This version of the world is less random, less vulnerable and less uncertain. A world in which the presence of G-d is palpable and sweeping is a better world for all mankind. This was the world of Jews living in a Yerushalayim hinged to a Mikdash.

Destroying Yerushalayim was self-destructive to humanity and soon thereafter, the world was plunged into a period of regression, and deterioration. Soon after the destruction of the second Temple a one-thousand-year period of futility commenced. In the immediate aftermath of Tisha B'av humanity suffered through the Dark Ages- lasting roughly between 500-1000. In broader sense, however, the entire 1300-year period after the Roman conquest of Yerushalayim was

characterized by futility, darkness and suffering. It took humanity 1300 years to climb out of the hole it dug for itself by destroying Yerushalayim and thereby dimming our planet. In the modern era, humanity has partially recovered ushering a world of science, progress and freedom – a world which has also facilitated the return of the Jewish people to their homeland. As history veers toward its redemptive conclusion and the restoration of Yerushalayim, the state of human affairs has improved dramatically; events in Yerushalayim deeply affect the general human condition.

Had the Beit Hamikdash not been squandered, humanity would have enjoyed a world "closer to perfection"- less vulnerable to war, to strife, to poverty, to human suffering and, yes, less vulnerable to strange viral pandemics. We hope and pray that humanity will continue to innovate solutions to this current pandemic, but ultimately, the world will still remain broken until the final gathering in Jerusalem. Until the world is realigned, suffering of all different kinds will continue. The current crisis is a direct result of what happened that day in Yerushalayim and sadly the Jews are "at fault"! We were chosen as G-d's agents in this world to represent him and to inspire the world toward monotheism and morality. Sadly, we were punished for our moral failures and forced to abdicate our homeland and our Mikdash. We are partially responsible for plunging the world into this subpar reality. On Tisha B'av let's mourn our departure from Yerushalayim and the day the entire world went dark. This year is darker than most and hopefully our mourning will be more relevant and resonant.

However, the corona crisis doesn't only demand a reframing of Tisha B'av but also offers unique mourning experience. I am often posed the following question: How can a person honestly mourn for the restoration of a world they don't actually yearn for. The modern world feels very comfortable and we generally, seem well-off- both materially and religiously. How can an honest person mourn a reality and a condition they are comfortable with and unwilling to replace with an alternate Messianic reality? If we are honest, some aspects of the future world for which we wait and pray for are inconsistent with, and even abrasive to, modern sensibilities. Do we really covet the return of monarchy to replace democracy? Is the prospect of sacrificing animals

really that enticing?

Successful Tisha B'av mourning requires an "imaginative leap" to admit that our world isn't perfect and that our sensibilities, though highly progressed, are not absolute. Tisha B'av requires us to see beyond our current "comfortable reality" and imagine a different world which operates under different terms and is driven by different values. Each year Tisha B'av challenges us to see beyond our own world and glimpse a different one. If anything, the past six months have proven how flimsy and imperfect our current world truly is, and hopefully this year it will be easier to look past it, easier to mourn our world and easier to dream of a better place. Most of us during the pandemic have become far less comfortable in our modern world and certainly less confident in modern Man. Perhaps this year we will be even more successful in freeing our minds to imagine realities other than the one we currently inhabit.