

A Brief Reflection for Tisha B'Av

Today is the fast day that is known as Tisha B'Av, the ninth of the Hebrew month of Av. Unfortunately, this fast day in many communities is neglected, despite the fact that the rabbis modeled the day after Yom Kippur. Like Yom Kippur, the rabbis prohibited eating, drinking, washing, perfumes, leather shoes, and conjugal relations. In addition, it is the only fast day which like Yom Kippur begins the night before.

What does Tisha B'Av commemorate? Most importantly, it marks the day which the two Temples were destroyed, the first in the year 586 BCE and the second in 70 CE. When we talk about the destruction of the Temple, we are talking about much more than the destruction of a building. *We are talking about the beginning of Jewish exile, a condition that we still grapple with.*

Growing up in a very traditional home, this concept was reinforced in prayer three times a day. In the houses of many Orthodox Jews, a section of a wall is left unfinished as a constant reminder that this is not our ultimate home. In the three weeks preceding Tisha B'Av life seemed to slow down- we did not go swimming, we did not buy new gifts, and we did not go to concerts and parties. For three weeks we mourned.

I think for most American Jews the notion of mourning over exile is completely unfamiliar. That is because to be put simply, American Jews living in this country do not feel they are in exile. Most feel that America is their home, even if they express a strong connection to Israel. Most think that this sad day is not about them, but about a different world, and therefore find it almost impossible to connect.

So what does exile mean? *In Jewish thought, exile has always been a condition of physical and spiritual alienation.*

Physically, exile meant the end of political sovereignty and self-determination. Many Zionist thinkers identify exile at its root as a state of powerlessness and see all Jewish tragedy as the result. For powerlessness has led to a history of calamities, right down to our own age. Many rabbis objected to the very notion of Yom Hashoah, because for them it was subsumed under the theme of Tisha B'Av. Indeed, it was the clearest manifestation of the dangers of exile. (During the Tisha B'av service, Kinnot are read, which are poetic dirges written throughout Jewish history. The most recent Kinnot deal with the Holocaust, and are now almost universally read in Orthodox synagogues.)

With the loss of political sovereignty a critical dimension of Jewish identity was lost as well. To be a Jew is more than the celebration of 'life cycle events', but means the active participation in the national life of the people with all that entails. Judaism is more than something in the home or synagogue, but something of the street, the market, the government. With the rise of the Zionist movement, there has been a return to this earlier sense of Jewish identity. While one may discuss the role of religion in the national life of Israel, no Israeli citizen who considers themselves Zionist sees their Jewish life as a

function of their personal life; it is their civic, national, and historical identity. In exile we need to walk 'into our Judaism'; in Israel Jewish living is the fiber of life.

However, the exile from Israel was more than a physical calamity; it was a spiritual one as well. Exile has led to spiritual powerlessness, for God as it were abandoned his Temple, a metaphor for the imminent presence of God in this world. We too often think that this world in front of us is all that there is, but there is so much more. Imagine what the world would be like if each of us could see infinity in the blade of grass, could feel the breath of God every time we inhaled or exhaled, could look into another's eyes and experience awe. (There are people like this, and I have met them.)

With spiritual exile everything is hidden and concealed. The world is much less than it truly is, and instead we are overwhelmed with glitz and glamour, gadgets and toys. However, all this reveals an underlying sense of boredom. Many youth cannot even imagine another existence, and this is the deepest exile one can experience- the exile of not even knowing one is in exile.

Physical and spiritual exile- the causes of untold suffering throughout history. It is truly as story of loss. The last of the kinnot states:

Wail O Zion and her cities
Like a woman suffering from birth travail
And a maiden girded in sackcloth
Lamenting for the husband of her youth
(Eli Zion, R. Eliezer Ha-Qalir)

Note that the wailing comes from Zion, not from us. Will we listen to Zion's wailing? Rabbi Eliezer Ha-Qalir felt it intensely, every day of his life. Can we but for a moment access these sentiments?

Today, as we work on behalf of Jews around the world, I would ask you to stop for a minute. Listen to the voice of Jews who lived thousands of years ago, and listen to the pleas of our brethren today. Listen also to the wailing within each of our hearts, a yearning to return to Zion, return to completeness, return to healing, return to God. Think of what in your Jewish life is missing, and how you might want to grow.

And then respond.

Have a meaningful day.

Fred

PS- If you are interested in more information, I suggest you Google Tisha B'Av on line. My favorite sight is YUTorah.org, but chabad has some nice material as well.