

Devarim/Tisha B'Av

August 2022 ---- Rabbi Simmons

You know what I wish that more religions of the world had?

(Well, I mean in addition to putting a priority on peace, and making people kind...)

I wish more religions had a holiday

set aside for us all to be

MISERABLE!

Yeah!

Leave it to us Jews to have a holiday where we intentionally make ourselves physically uncomfortable, we don't eat, we sit on the floor, we don't dance, we don't have sex, and we devote our entire day from sundown to sundown chanting Lamentations and meditating on the worst downfalls and defeats and moments of loss in our collective history. Sounds great, right?

The recruitment notice pretty much writes itself, right?

If you aren't sure what I'm talking about, you are in for a treat.

Or should I say, for a not-treat. Because tonight,

Starting at sundown, we will be observing—not celebrating—the holiday of Tisha B'Av, (which is actually today but if it falls on a Shabbat, we observe it the following day), Tisha B'av, the Ninth of Av, a day set apart for sorrow and woe.

But... I said all of that in a kind of joking way. Let me start this sermon again. This time, in all seriousness.

You know what I *really wish* more religions of the world had?

I wish more religions had a space set aside for us to sit with our emotions, even the difficult ones: to sit with our loss, to sit with our trauma, and to process it together.

I wish more religions had that.

Leave it to the Jews to have a holiday where instead of just focusing on the outside world, or pop culture, or pleasure, we turn our attention inwards and acknowledge that we carry a great pain around with us, a pain that is real, from being

tormented and murdered and pursued throughout the centuries by antisemitism.

A holiday that says that that pain is a central part of our story
To deny this, to pretend that every day and every moment should be happy and light and carefree, is to deny where we came from. It's to deny the reality of the world we were born into. It is not wrong to feel pain when we have been hurt.

And we, as a people, have been really, really hurt.

The observance of Tisha B'av is a gift. It is an invitation from our ancestors to look at the wholeness of who we are: to acknowledge what is difficult. To acknowledge the bitterness of Jewish identity instead of focusing only on the sweet. Tisha B'av is a moment to acknowledge that the booming social success that we Jews have enjoyed in the Diaspora is no accident. It's no fluke. That our survival has depended on the incredible leadership, tenacity, sacrifice (as Rabbi Raskin mentioned earlier today.) We live a life that was built off of the incredible resilience and courage of generations of our

forebears living and reeling in the aftermath of the destroyed Temple, and pogroms, and the Holocaust.

For it was not just a building that was destroyed when the Temple fell—No. Our entire way of life, our religious focus, our customs, our language—everything was thrown into turmoil, and it was not by chance that we have emerged on the other side as the people we are today, but rather by hard work and ongoing reflection and acceptance of the big picture of where we came from.

Tisha B'av is that gift, because it reminds us of the big picture. For better or worse, we still carry the fall of the Temple with us, just as we carry Channukah with us, just as we carry the redemption of the Exodus with us, just as we carry the Holocaust with us, just as we carry Israeli independence with us, just as we carry each and every step of our incredible journey.

But that's not enough. That's not far enough to go on a day like today.

No, it's not enough for us to just sit with the pain that comes from the outside. Not if we want to open our eyes and see the whole picture on this Tisha B'av.

No, it is also no coincidence that on Tisha B'av we are reading from parashat Devarim, which underscores a different kind of pain and a different kind of bitterness that we Jews must live with. This is a pain that comes from within.

We just read this week in Deuteronomy, Chapter 2 verse 34, I quote

וּנְלַכְדָּ אֶת־כָּל־עָרָיו בַּעֲתֵּה הַהִוא וַיַּחַרֵּם אֶת־כָּל־עִיר מִתָּם וְהַנָּשִׁים וְהַטָּף לֹא הִשְׁאֲרָנוּ שָׁרִיד:

“At that time [the Israelites] captured the towns, we doomed every town—men, women and children—leaving no survivor.”

That's right—we, the Jews, showed no mercy, even to the littlest children.

And this wasn't a one-off, as we know all too well from reading our TaNaKh. As our ancestors began our journey into the Promised land, we killed, and killed, and killed. In fact, the verb

that our text often uses, including in this week's *parasha*, as we just heard, is "חָרַם", which goes beyond kill—it means “to utterly destroy”. When the Israelites took Jericho, they didn't even leave animals alive.

This is all to say that some of the pain that we sit with as modern Jews comes from the fact that in our own story, we as Jews, were not always victims, but actually the bringers of death and pain. And there's a voice in my head that wants to say “It's a story! It didn't happen exactly as it's written in these pages!”

But stories matter. Stories bind us together. Stories give us strength in the moments we need it. And stories are what we tell our children to bring them into our tradition.

According to our own telling of our own story, we, as Jews, have also burned villages to the ground, and made children into orphans, and intentionally smashed the sacred objects of other people.

This does not feel good to think about. This hurts to think about.

We also know that this isn't just in the past. As we've heard today, we know that hatred from without still exists. We know that there are those alive today who want to destroy us for who we are, to destroy our way of life. We know that that is real, that hatred from without.

And there is this cognitive dissonance within me, because I know we have to defend ourselves. And the question is: how do we defend ourselves in a way that lines up with our values?

It might feel like a paradox,

And it's a paradox I would like us all to sit with on this Tisha B'av.

I take some comfort in knowing that I am not alone, though, as I struggle to come to terms with the violence that our tradition ascribes to our ancestors. Throughout history, the most well-known Jewish sages and rabbis have similarly wrestled with this question, with the bloodshed. They've read the violence in our Torah, and they have struggled and have come up with a variety of explanations or frameworks to justify it.

Because they know that peace is, ultimately, as we said at the end of the prayer we just read for Israel, PEACE is our ultimate goal, not violence. These sages came up with many explanations, which I would like to share with you.

The Ramban, along with other commentators, takes care to note that the Israelites were commanded by God to leave none alive, and therefore were enacting God's will.

Even Ramban, though, doesn't stop there. Ramban seems satisfied with this explanation, and goes on to say that in at least some of the cases, he believes that the deaths were the fault of the other side, who were aggressive against us first. Rav Hirsch, similarly, concludes that in regards to those living in the Promised land when the Israelites showed up, "Their resistance was the beginning of their downfall."

The Rabak, another commentator, seems distressed by the killings, but ultimately credits the efficient brutality in our Torah as more merciful than the alternative, saying "ולא האריכו ימי" → saying that this way, by killing "המלחמה אלא בפעם אחת"

literally everybody in every town, the war was over in one fell swoop, instead of becoming a drawn-out campaign.

Now, I don't know about you, but none of those explanations quite cut it for me.

These are our ancestors, and this is our story. Our ancestors, who we so strongly identify with as they escape Egypt, and so strongly identify with as they wander, lost in the wilderness, and wrestle with their faith and their destiny. We teach as Jews that when a life is lost, a whole world is lost. How many worlds did our ancestors destroy? And how are we supposed to sit with that story as Jews today?

On Tisha B'av, we Jews rightfully mourn, to this day, the destruction of the Temple long ago and the murders of so many Jews at the hands of other. At the same time, I can't help but wonder about all of the descendants of all of those towns where we killed so many people. Do they still mourn their losses?

.....Let me start this sermon one last time.

You know what I really, REALLY wish more religions of the world had?

I wish more religions had a space set aside to sit with the really uncomfortable reality of what it means to own our own history as human, to inherit imperfect religious movements, to be imperfect descendants of imperfect people, to belong to a people who have made mistakes, and to be trying our best to learn the lessons this life has to offer us.

I wish more religions made the conscious choice to find common ground in our shared pain, in our shared imperfection, and instead of pointing fingers backwards, used the legitimate anguish that we share to build bridges, not walls.

I know this isn't comfortable, but Tisha B'av isn't supposed to be comfortable. However, it IS supposed to be real, and to help us find an honest peace with the Jews we are today.

We have been hurt, and we have also others. Let's make the choice, as we sit with our pain this Tisha B'av, to let that pain break our hearts open and lead us down a path to greater empathy and peace, within ourselves and without.

May we learn the lessons this difficult day has to offer us,
And may the Jewish people be a light to the nations.

Oseh shalom bimromav,

Hu yaaseh shalom.

Aleinu v'al col Yisrael

V'al col Yoshvei tevel

V'imru: amen.

Shabbat shalom.

שיקיימו מצות לא תחיה כל נשמה כאשר צוה ה', Malbim on Joshua 11
ולא ישארו בארץ פן יחטאו את ישראל

ולא האריכו ימי המלחמה אלא בפעם אחת Radak on Joshua 10:42

Rav Hirsch blames the resistance to the Israelites' advances as the reason for their downfall: "Their resistance is the beginning of their downfall." (Deut. 2:31)

Ramban on Deuteronomy 2:34:1

AND WE UTTERLY DESTROYED EVERY CITY, THE MEN, AND THE WOMEN, AND THE LITTLE ONES — who were of the Amorites, and they were commanded thereon, as it is said, *But of the cities of these peoples, that the Eternal thy G-d giveth thee for an inheritance, thou shalt save alive nothing that breatheth.*²⁵⁷ Further, 20:16. Even so, Moses opened discussions with them peacefully, for such is the commandment [that even for the seven nations we were obligated to proclaim peace to them] as I will explain with the help of G-d.²⁵² Further, 20:10. But to Og the king of Bashan he did not proclaim peace because Og had come forth to battle against Israel before they even came

to his city.²⁵⁸ *This is clearly indicated in Scripture: Then we turned, and went up the way to Bashan, and Og, the king of Bashan came out against us (above, 3:1). I have already explained the subject in the section Zoth Chukath.*²⁵⁹