

Devarim / Chazon, 5780 – Rabbi Dr. Zev Wiener

If rates of smartphone browsing during Kinnot are any indication -- not to mention attendance at Kinnot in the first place -- Tisha B'Av doesn't seem to speak to many contemporary Jews. And in all fairness, it's hard to get worked up over a building that was destroyed thousands of years ago. But the reality is that, like everything in Judaism, if we are willing to look deeply and sincerely, there is no Jewish practice that is devoid of profound relevance and meaning. Even Tisha B'Av.

On a mystical level, the Beit HaMikdash was the physical embodiment of the shared collective soul of the entire Jewish people. It expressed the spiritual truth that although you and I look like different entities in the physical world -- I'm me, you're you, I'm here, you're there -- in the higher spiritual worlds, we are actually one, and that awareness of this oneness allows us to connect to the Divine Presence in the deepest of ways.

The Beit HaMikdash expressed this spiritual fusion more than anything else in the world. The eleven spices of the Ketoret, for example, represented the union of all different types of Jews into a single beautiful aroma (see Keritut 6a), with aroma being symbolic of the soul (see Berachot 43b). The Korbanot Tzibbur, communal offerings, allowed for a single animal to be offered on behalf of every soul of the Jewish nation, thereby fusing us into one. In a similar fashion, the Aron Kodesh, which was the centerpiece of the entire Mikdash, required the literal contribution of every single Jew in its construction (see Ramban Shemot 25:10), and rested upon the Even Shtiyah, a single foundational stone, from which the rest of the world was created (Yoma 54b) -- symbolic of the unity of the world. This role of the Mikdash is further alluded to in the Mishnah (Avo t 5:6), which teaches that when the Jewish people would bow in the Mikdash, space would expand, and there was miraculously enough room for everyone: in expressing the spiritual oneness of all Jews, the Mikdash transcended basic dimensions of physical space and everyone could fit comfortably.

While our existence in a physical world perforce requires some practical measures of distinction -- for example, your property is not mine for the taking simply by virtue of our spiritual oneness -- we must nonetheless live with an internal awareness of the true essence of things, as this awareness carries far-reaching ramifications regarding how we relate to each other.

Many people mistakenly think that the holier one becomes, the more removed or distant one must become from other people. After all, an exalted life of coming

close to G-d perforce means leaving simpletons behind. But in Judaism, it is exactly the opposite. The closer I come to G-d, the more I perceive His essence in every person that I meet, and feel a deep connection and concern for him or her. Indeed, the Torah does not merely command “Love your neighbor,” or even, “Love your neighbor excessively.” The Torah instructs, very specifically, “Love your neighbor *as yourself*” -- literally as yourself, because your neighbor is a part of yourself. While rock stars and celebrities may make themselves aloof and inaccessible to others to pad their egos, truly holy people recognize that inaccessibility and aloofness cut them off from the very source of what makes them so holy.

Spiritual oneness is the sine qua non of השראת השכינה, the resting of the Divine Presence. It is for this reason that the Talmud (Sotah 17a) teaches that when a husband and wife live together in oneness, the Divine Presence rests among them; but that when there is discord between them, fire consumes them -- exactly like the Mikdash. Indeed, it was this specific relationship between השראת השכינה and spiritual oneness that so deeply captivated the admiration of Bilaam. As the Talmud (Bava Batra 60a) explains, Bilaam observed the Jews’ tents arranged in a manner so that no one looked into another's tent. No one was peering for dirt to spread or comparisons to be made -- there was only a transcendent sense of tranquility and oneness, with each person genuinely happy for his or her neighbor, never wanting to see anything bad. In light of that, Bilaam reflected, “ראוין הללו שתשרה עליהם שכינה” -- such people are indeed deserving to have the Divine Presence rest upon them, the loftiest state of existence in this world.

When the Talmud relates that baseless hatred destroyed the Mikdash, it does not merely mean that in retaliation for our baseless hatred, Hashem decided to destroy the Mikdash. Rather, it means that baseless hatred was itself the Churban, the destruction. The state of divisiveness, fracture, discord, is by definition a state in which one cannot experience the Divine Presence. The burning of stones and mortar was merely a postscript. This Churban is one of the central tragedies that we mourn on Tisha B’Av, and is no less relevant or painful now than it was millenia ago.

As the Talmud (Yerushalmi Yoma 1:1) teaches, the ongoing absence of a Mikdash signifies that we have not succeeded in rectifying the shortcomings of earlier generations. This principle is felt even more palpably this year, when Hashem has literally banished us from His מקדש מעט, the Shul, and it would be a terrible spiritual failing to not reflect considerably upon this this year. We apparently have not managed to recreate a level of spiritual oneness -- of not looking into each

other's tents, of wanting only the true best for each other -- that would justify the Divine Presence to rest among us. Unfortunately, some people still experience a sense of excitement when they learn of a marriage that's failing, a family whose finances are struggling, or a person who's struggling with mental illness, because this juicy gossip gives them a false sense that they themselves are doing better. Such a reaction, by definition, demonstrates a perspective of "other" towards a fellow Jew, which is itself a form of Churban, essentially stomping on the rubble of the Beit HaMikdash. Perhaps this year, when we recite the Kinnot alone, we can reflect upon the Churban in all its facets. Recitation is valuable, no doubt, but even more valuable is thoughtful and honest reflection on our own role in the destruction, and our sincere attempts to begin to rebuild.