

Tonight begins Rosh Hashanah, but first I want to talk about Tishe B'Av, the 9th day of the Hebrew month Av. Tishe B'Av is a Jewish day of mourning associated with the Babylonian Destruction of the First Jerusalem Temple in the year 586 BCE. It is also the day when the Second Jerusalem Temple was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70. And, it is said, the Jewish expulsion from Spain took place on the 9th of Av, 1492.

But I do not observe Tishe B'Av; I do not fast or mourn on that day. The historical events associated with Tishe B'Av may be considered disasters for some, but, to me, those events all demonstrate the remarkable resiliency of the Jewish people and the historic opportunities that might never have been realized without exile.

But, why was this year different from all other years? This year, I happened to be in Berlin the week of Tishe B'Av, and I found myself visiting the Pergamon Museum. The main museum was under renovation, much of it closed to the public, but a key display remained open---the Gates of Ishtar. These are the monumental gates and gateway to the ancient city of Babylon.

I stood at the Ishtar Gates in the Pergamon Museum. I imagined my ancestors in 586 BCE led into captivity from the modest backwater of Jerusalem, marching their way in the barren desert from the Jordan River to the Euphrates. Suddenly in the distance they saw in the intense sunlight, a brilliant blue, massive structure shimmering and rising out of the sands. They were led along that triumphal processional boulevard lined with walls decorated in brilliantly colored bas relief of mythical wild animals.

It must have been a sight to behold; the walls were covered in lapis lazuli glazed bricks which made the façade appear as if it was covered in jewels. Alternating rows of bas relief lions, dragons, and aurochs representing powerful deities formed the processional way. The take away was that Babylon was protected and defended by the gods, and one would be wise not to challenge it. The magnificent gate, which was dedicated to the Babylonian goddess Ishtar, was once included among the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. The Processional Way was a red and yellow brick-paved corridor over half a mile long with walls over 20 yards tall on each side. It was this grand, monumental processional way that led to the temple of Marduk.

These gates were the first things the exiles of Jerusalem 586 BCE must have seen as they entered the great Capitol city of Babylon. Surely they were mourning their fate and doubting their future and the future of their people and faith. They had worshipped the Hebrew God in the Temple of Jerusalem. God "resided," if you will, in the Holy of Holies built upon the Temple Mount. But all that was destroyed. To the conquered defeated captives it must have seemed that Judaism had come to an end at the hands of the mighty Babylonian army. But Judaism didn't die. Instead, it was re-born.

Though they were in Exile from Jerusalem, it would be in Babylon that Judaism would undergo one of its earliest creative transformations. They discovered that the personal, tribal God of Judea could be encountered anywhere. God was universal, not limited to one earthly location. Judaism was transformed from a religion of Monolatry—my God is the greatest and mightiest of all other gods—Mi Chamocha baElim Adonai—to monotheism—there is only one God—universal, everywhere, for everyone. Shma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad.

Babylon was where they also developed major concepts of Jewish religion. There, Judaism began the slow transformation from Temple sacrifice to Torah, study, and synagogue. Rabbis and teachers would eventually replace a dynastic system of priests.

Psalms 137 says: "By the waters of Babylon, there we sat, sat and wept, as we remembered Zion. How can we sing a song to the Eternal in a strange land?"

The Prophet Jeremiah answered: "Seek the peace/well-being of the city to which I have exiled you, and pray to the Eternal on its behalf, for if it prospers, you too shall prosper" (Jer. 29:7)

I was struck by the idea that here I was, 2,700 years later, standing at the reconstructed ruins of a mighty civilization, the Babylonian Empire of Nebuchadnezzar. In 586 BCE, one could stand at the mighty Gates of Ishtar and imagine Babylon lasting forever. A Judean exile from destroyed Jerusalem would have been justified to put on sack cloth and ashes and assume that Judaism had come to a dead end. Yet here I was, a rabbi of Judaism, 2,700 years later, representing a vibrant culture and civilization. History allows for irony.

While Babylon was the first exile, exile remained a continuing motif of Jewish history. Let us jump forward to the year 70. Rome destroyed Jerusalem once again. The Second Temple was now in ruins. Judea was defeated by the overwhelming military power of the Roman Empire. Thus began the second great exile following the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70.

I imagine that many of you have been to Rome, and you undoubtedly visited the Coliseum and the Forum. Just up the cobble stone road from the Colosseum is the Arch of Titus. If you haven't personally visited, I imagine you have seen images of it. There is the bas relief of the Temple Menorah and other sacred implements being carried into exile from Jerusalem by the Roman Legion. The year 70 could have been another dead end to Jewish life, but it was not to be. Rabbinic Judaism developed and focused on learning, law, and interpretation. We are the inheritors of Rabbinic Judaism. It was the beginning of the "modern" Jewish world.

I suppose that fewer of you have been to Grenada, Spain. If not, you should go. One of the world's most beautiful buildings is the Alhambra Palace on a hilltop in Grenada. In 1492, in the throne room of the Alhambra, Ferdinand and Isabella signed the edict of expulsion of the Jews of Spain, ending the great Jewish Spanish community that had been there since Roman times. It was the final end to the Golden Age of Judaism on the Iberian Peninsula.

The exile from Spain was a tragedy, but, once again, Jewish life did not die. This newest exile took the Jews east to Constantinople and the Ottoman Empire. Some went south to North Africa, or north to Amsterdam and soon west to the New World. In all those places Jews were able to prosper in ways unimaginable under the rule of the Catholic Spanish monarchs.

In the East, in the Ottoman Empire, in the ancient Land of Israel, some of the refugees from Spain settled in the small hilltop town in the Galilee, the village of Tsefat. This would be the center of a flowering of the Jewish Mystic tradition led by Rabbi Isaac Luria—The Ari, or lion. They created Kabbalat Shabbat, and wrote poems and songs such as Lecha Dodi. We sing those songs every Friday night, as do Jewish communities scattered around the world.

In the North, there was the Amsterdam of Spinoza and mercantilism and trade. Others would go south to Fez and Rabat or northeast to Sarajevo and the Balkans.

Most astonishingly and with great consequence for us, some of these exiles ventured to the New World, to the Dutch Caribbean islands or New Amsterdam, then to Newport, and Charleston, Savannah, and Philadelphia. These were the early beginnings of Jewish life in America that would lead to the true miracle of a modern dynamic American Judaism. For most of us here, the entry point would be later at Castle Garden or Ellis Island.

I do not need to retell the remarkable story of American Jewish life. There has never been in all history a more vibrant, dynamic, creative Jewish community than this one. This is not just the most prosperous and successful Jewish community, but America itself has achieved much of its own success due to our contributions—and the contributions of all its immigrants over these 600 some years. We have adopted the words of Jeremiah that I referred to earlier: "Seek the well-being of the city of exile. If it prospers, so too will you prosper."

The concept of Exile has been among the central themes that I have returned to over my years as a rabbi. Unlike the Zionist thinkers who denied the validity of the Diaspora experience, *Shililat Ha Golah*—I have offered an alternative view. I have found great flowering of intellectual, economic, and theological life in the demands of being global and cosmopolitan. I believe Judaism has responded to the unique challenges of being separated from a specific homeland. That is not to deny the value of the great miracle that has been the Jewish state of Israel. But, over nearly two thousand years, Judaism has also prospered in a world of diversity.

Exile has brought us to America. With its many flaws, this country has truly been a blessing to us, and, like Abraham, we, and all immigrants, have blessed America with talent, energy, loyalty, and creativity. That is why I do not mourn on *Tishe B'Av*.

Let me now return to Berlin and the second week in August. I did not go to Berlin with the purpose of visiting the Gates of Ishtar. I had done that before - nor to experience the rebirth of exciting Jewish life in Berlin itself - though I saw that as well. I had a specific mission to be in Germany this summer. A group of fifteen Reform rabbis went on a very short study mission organized by IsraAID, a remarkable organization focussing on disaster relief throughout the world. IsraAID is a nongovernmental, independent organization. They have responded to immediate disasters and crises in Nepal, Japan, South Sudan, Sierra Leone, and elsewhere. They were on the Isle of Lesbos bringing immediate aid to refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Most recently, they have been working in Italy following the earthquake in Amatrice and even in Baton Rouge, Louisiana in response to devastating flooding there. In Berlin, they are engaged in continuing aid and support for the refugee community and for those who serve them. This is perhaps the greatest humanitarian crisis of our generation.

It was a privilege to get to know the people from IsraAID. They were uniformly young, most under 30. They were Israeli Jews, Palestinian Citizens of Israel, Druze Israelis, Christians, Jews, and Muslims. We met American college kids spending their gap year as volunteers working with IsraAID on programs for the refugees as well as for German children learning about the stories of the exiles. There were some Jews of Berlin and Israelis living in Germany. There was one 85 year old Jewish Holocaust survivor who spends one day a week at a community center teaching German to Syrian children.

Many of you have seen the IsraAID video, "Island of Tears." (Please see link below.) It is also on our website. Some of the scenes show Syrian refugees coming ashore on a Greek Island, 100 or 150 people crammed onto a Zodiac rubber raft. They are greeted on the beach by young rescue workers, doctors, nurses, social workers. All of them wearing T-shirts with Stars of David on them. They offer food, water, and medical aid. Many then make their way to the Balkans and then to Germany. IsraAID workers are now in Berlin, working in shelters and community centers. They are training others, teaching German, computer skills, helping with job searches, and childcare, offering much needed psychological support for those who have experienced the trauma of war and terrifying escape. We visited a community support center for LGBTQ refugees.

Who were these Syrian refugees? Our assumptions, prejudices, stereotypes were often wrong. Many of them are middle class and educated. Many spoke English or German. Nearly all of them hoped to stay in Germany or Europe. While the Germans hoped the war would end and the Syrians could eventually return back home to the Middle East, most of these exiles wanted to begin a new life. Their greatest desire was to escape the terror and war.

Why do we care? Why would a bunch of young Israelis - Jews, Muslims, Christians, Druze - care about Syrian refugees? Why did a group of American Reform rabbis, from throughout the US, care about these same refugees? It is our narrative, our story, our memory, our teaching. How do we remember our own past? Why do we remember our past? We were exiles. We were strangers in a strange land. We were outcasts in the Land of Egypt, and in countless lands since then. We remember the plight of exiles, dispossessed, and refugees. We are commanded to fight for the rights of the stranger, to protect the outcast, to provide for the homeless, the landless. We knew Egypt and Babylon, Rome and Spain.

And we here today must remember our own experience in America. We know the results of fear and xenophobia which shut the gates to America after WW I and in the early 1920's, and we are profoundly aware of the tragic consequence when America was not a shelter for the Jews of Europe about to be sent to their death. The arguments that were made then might seem familiar to us today. The echoes resonate in today's headlines. There were those then who claimed that there might be dangerous spies or terrorists among the refugees from Europe. In the early years they pointed to Emma Goldman among the Jews or Sacco and Vanzetti for Italians. The anti-immigration forces raised fears of organized crime or Irish terrorists. They said: Lock the gates. Turn inward. America First. In the late 1930's, Charles Lindbergh, Henry Ford, and Father Charles Coughlin claimed that German spies might be hidden among the Jewish refugees attempting to escape Hitler and the Nazi death machine. They claimed that Jewish refugees were a danger to American security. Phrases and terms like "poison mushrooms" or "poison Skittles" all sound the same to my ears.

Tonight begins Rosh Hashanah. We are here in America, in Wilmette, the North Shore. We are truly grateful for our many gifts and privileges, not the least is our freedom to be who we are and our opportunity to define our future, each and every year. We look to the New Year, and we are taught that we can control our fate. We can choose the path of our own spiritual quest. But we also gather as a community during these Ten Days of Awe to connect to our ancient teachings, to remind ourselves of our traditions and our history. How did we get here? Where did we come from?

Arami Oved Avi: A wandering Aramean was our father---we are the children of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob, Leah and Rachel. We trace our roots back to Babylon and Ur and Nahor, Aram Naharaim --the birthplace of Abraham and Sarah. Nahor is today a place where South Eastern Turkey meets Northern Syria. It is the region that today is Aleppo. (All of you know what Aleppo is.) It is now a place facing destruction, genocide, and death. It is the very location from which so many of the refugees I met in Berlin trace their origin as well. They are the world's outcasts and refugees. And we are connected to them, and to each other, over the millennia.

We too were wandering Arameans, outcasts and strangers. Let us never forget who we were and what we have been called to do and become...in order to remain partners with God in repairing the brokenness of this world, freeing the captive, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger. Abraham was commanded: "Lech lecha." Leave Nahor, your land, your birthplace, the

land of your fathers, and go to a new land. There I will bless you, and you shall, in turn, be a blessing.

Indeed, we are fully aware that we are blessed. But we are enjoined to remember that it is up to us to live a life that will be a blessing to others--those closest to us, but even the stranger and outcast. It is up to us to create a world of blessing for all of God's children. It is up to us to both celebrate this New Year but to be inspired as well to build a world of equality, justice, and peace.

Let this New Year, 5777, be a year of purpose and significance and fulfillment. May that be our blessing.

Amen

Rabbi Samuel N Gordon  
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IsraAid Video – “The Island of Tears”  
<https://vimeo.com/151279276>