

Tisha B'Av – Impaired Vision

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

This coming Thursday we will observe the saddest and most traumatic day on our calendar, Tisha B'av (the 9th of the Hebrew month of Av). It is on this day that we remember the tragedies and catastrophes which have befallen our people over the last few thousand years. However, the darkness and sadness of this day can be traced to one, singular episode— the Sin of the Spies. Despite the assurances of God and Moshe, we felt compelled to scout out the Land of Israel. The spies came back and delivered their disastrous report, telling the nation that the land was simply unconquerable. These demoralizing words sent the people into a downward spiral. The nation cried, and it is here that the Talmud records a dramatic statement: *"God said, 'You have cried unnecessary tears, I will cause you to cry for many generations to come (Taanis 31).'"* When did this report and Divine response occur? On the 9th of Av. It is the sin of the spies that created the tragic foundation for this difficult day, a foundation which has seen layer after layer of tragedy added to it over the last two thousand years.

But did the punishment fit the crime? I understand that we were ungrateful and lacked faithfulness, but does it not seem disproportionate to condemn every Jew (over the age of 20) to death in the desert and to mark this day for ongoing tragedy? Furthermore, the people tried to do *teshuva* (repent). The Torah relates that the very next morning the people arose early in the morning and ascended to the mountaintop, saying, *"We are ready to go up to the place of which the Lord spoke, for we have sinned."* Moses said, *"Why do you transgress the word of the Lord? It will not succeed. Do not go up, for the Lord is not among you, [so that] you will not be beaten by your enemies (Bamidbar 14:39-41)."* They acknowledged their mistake and tried to right the wrong, yet the punishment was still severe and swift. How are we to understand the nature of their mistake and the Divine reaction?

The Dubno Maggid (Rabbi Yaakov Kranz, 1740-1804) explains this dynamic with a *maschal* (parable). There was a fine young man who was known to be a Torah scholar with sterling *middos* (character traits) who was engaged to marry a young woman from a very wealthy family. One day, as the fathers were sitting down to discuss the financial arrangements for the upcoming wedding, the father of the bride told the father of the groom, *"I am so happy our children are getting married; we will be happy to pay for the wedding. My only request is that you take care of outfitting your son for the wedding. But it is important that you buy him a suit of the finest materials."* To which the father of the groom responded, *"My dear friend, I, too, share your excitement for the upcoming wedding of our children, and I have much appreciation for your generosity. I am a man of virtually no means, and while I can certainly afford a basic wardrobe for my son, I can't purchase the type of clothing you are suggesting."* *"Well, if you can't provide this one small part, then the wedding is off!"* replied the father of the bride. And so, the beautiful match ended. A few months went by, and the father of the bride regretted his hasty decision. The groom was such a fine young man with such refined character; how could he justify breaking off the nuptials over a suit? He contacted the father of the groom and voiced his desire to have their children marry. *"My dear friend,"* replied the father of the groom, *"my son is a very special young man who has much potential. Yet, you were willing to cast him aside because of a suit. Any family that would treat my son this way doesn't truly appreciate who my son is. I no longer wish for my son to be a part of your family."*

The Dubno Maggid explains that when the spies maligned the Land of Israel, it highlighted a fundamental lack of love and appreciation for the Land. This wasn't simply a lack of proper judgment; this sin represented a fundamental lack of understanding of the preciousness and holiness of the Land. A mistake of this magnitude could not simply be remedied by attempting to march on the Land the next day, nor could it be remedied through a simple apology. It would take another forty years of nomadic existence to cultivate an appreciation for a home, for a land, for a destiny. The real sin of the spies was one of flawed perspective and outlook. All they saw were the problems. They failed to see the beauty and good.

Nothing in life is perfect. Everything and everyone have their strengths and weaknesses, but if all I see is what is broken and wrong, I end up appreciating nothing. Many of us have struggles with which we must contend each and every day, but we must be careful that these struggles don't obscure or eclipse our blessings. It is easy to lose oneself in the sadness and despair of difficult circumstances. We must always maintain a healthy disposition and recognize all the beautiful *berachos* and bounty we possess as well.

This lesson has an important interpersonal ramification as well. There is an amazing Gemara.

Rabbi Chiya's wife was a difficult person. Yet, whenever he would come across a nice item, he would purchase it, wrap it and give it to his wife (as a gift). Rav (Rabbi Chiya's student) observed this and said, "Rebbe, why are you doing this? We see how she often mistreats you." To which Rabbi Chiya responded, "It is enough (I have gratitude) that she raises the children (she is a wonderful mother) and saves me from sin' (Yevamos 63a)."



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Apparently, Rabbi Chiya didn't have a storybook marriage. There were complications. Yet, Rabbi Chiya chose to see the beautiful aspects of his wife's personality. Rabbi Chiya realized that in life nothing and no one is perfect, and you must choose through which lens you will view others and the world. People wrong us, people hurt us, but we must learn how to see the positive aspects in the other. This is not just in marriage. The Rabbi Chiya standard must guide and inform all our interpersonal relationships.

Tisha B'Av is a day of tears for all that has been lost. Tisha B'Av is a day when we cry for the dreams which never materialized. Tisha B'Av is a day when we cry for those we have lost and whose absence is acutely felt by our nation. Yet, we must remember that even on Tisha B'Av itself, the mourning practices lessen as the day progresses. Because after we cry and after we mourn, we must remind ourselves that all is not lost. We each have beautiful blessings, each of us is a beautiful blessing. As we dry our tears, we pledge to ourselves that we will not lose ourselves in the abyss of sadness or despair. I will focus on that which is good. I will focus on my blessings. I will strain myself to see something beautiful and positive in every person. I will push myself to actively take stock of my personal blessings. I won't be a spy. I won't live life with a skewed perception. Perhaps, this is the merit we need. If we see the good in the other, ourselves, and the world, maybe this will be the last Tisha B'Av marked with mourning.

May we merit to see the coming of Moshiach, the rebuilding of the Beis HaMikdash, and the drying of our tears.