

The Limits of Mourning

Introduction

Tish'a B'Av is the saddest day on the Jewish calendar. History is full of catastrophic events that befell Jews on that day. In particular, the First and Second Temples were both destroyed on that day.

Two thousand years ago, the Mishnah recalled that, on Tish'a b'Av:

- The spies Moses sent to scout the Promised Land brought back a largely negative report, which demoralized the Israelites and caused God to decree forty years of wandering in the desert.
 - The first Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE.
 - The second Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE.
 - The Bar Kochba revolt against Rome failed when he was killed in the destruction of the city of Betar, in 135 CE.
 - Finally, Jerusalem was razed a year later, and the Exile began.
- [Taanit 4:6]

Since then, many more catastrophes happened to us on this fateful day.

Their timing may have been accidental or intentional – we don't know:

- In 1095, Pope Urban II announced the Crusades, to free the Holy Land from Muslim domination -- but they killed tens of thousands of Jews on the way and there.
- In 1242, 24 cartloads of handwritten Talmuds burned in Paris
- In 1290, decree expelling all Jews from England signed
- In 1492, decree expelling all Jews from Spain, including my own ancestors, signed
- In 1626, Shabtai Tzvi, the false messiah, born. He dashed the hopes of millions of Jews and severely disrupted their lives.
- In 1914, World War I began, with Germany declaring war on Russia. It led to World War II and the Holocaust, and facilitated the Communist Revolution, which ushered in 70 years of darkness for Soviet-dominated Jews.
- In 1941, Goering the Nazi ordered the implementation of the Final Solution -- the Holocaust.

How do we mourn?

We mourn these events every year on the 9th of Av. This is how this mourning is conducted.

-In the three weeks leading up to Tish'a b'Av, we must not play or listen to music, conduct weddings, shave or cut our hair, or wear new clothes.

-In the nine days prior, we must not eat meat, drink wine, or wear fresh clothes.

-On the day itself, we must fast all day. Before the fast, we must eat hard-boiled eggs and simulated "ashes". We must not wash, apply lotions, wear leather shoes, have sex, or even greet one another. We must sit on the floor or on low stools and read the Book of Lamentations under dim lights. We must refrain from learning or discussing anything that is not sad, even Torah.

Is the mourning imposed on us?

Is it the rabbis who are forcing us to mourn? No! That's what a lot of *people* want, sometimes *over* the objections of the rabbis! The Book of Esther says about the fast days:

[The Jews] decreed for themselves and for their seed the matter of fasting and lamenting. [Esther 9:31]

The rabbis had to convince the people to mourn *less*. The Talmud testifies to that:

Our Rabbis taught: When the [Second] Temple was destroyed... large numbers in Israel became ascetics, binding themselves not to eat meat or drink wine.

-Rabbi Yehoshua... asked them: My children, why do you not eat meat or drink wine?

-They replied: Shall we eat meat which used to be brought as an offering on the altar, now that this altar has ceased to exist? Shall we drink wine which used to be poured as a libation on the altar, now that this altar has ceased to exist?

-[The rabbi] said to them: If that is so, we should not eat bread either, because the meal offerings have ceased.

-They said: [That is so, and] we can subsist with produce.

-[He said:] We should not eat produce either, because there is no longer an offering of first fruits (*bikkurim*).

-[They said:] Then we can manage with other produce.

-[The rabbi said:] But we should not drink water either, because there is no longer the ceremony of the pouring of water [*Simchat Bet HaShoevah*, performed on Sukkot when the Temple was standing].

-To this they could find no answer, so he said to them: My children, come and listen to me. Not to mourn at all is impossible, because the blow has fallen. To

mourn too much is also impossible, because we do not impose on the community a hardship which the majority cannot endure...

-The Sages therefore have ruled as follows. A man may paint his house, but he should leave a small area bare [in a visible place]. A man may prepare a full-course banquet, but he should leave out an item or two. A woman may put on all her ornaments, but leave off one or two...

[Bava Batra 60b]

In other words, go on with your life, but create small reminders here and there.

You might think that mourning should stop when the consequences of what is being mourned have been erased. If so, they should have stopped mourning and fasting on Tish'a b'Av during the Second Temple period, which lasted 586 years, since the Temple had been rebuilt. But they didn't!

[Rambam on Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:3] They kept right on fasting. Why? Because that is what the people wanted. Here is the story.

Four fast days commemorate the destruction of the First Temple: The Tenth of Tevet, Tish'a b'Av, the Fast of Gedalia, and the 17th of Tammuz. After the Jews returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the Temple, they wondered: Should we continue to mourn or not? With independence regained and the Temple rebuilt, should we still weep or should we be glad? The prophet Zechariah said to be glad, but the people refused!

[People were asking:] Should I weep... separating myself, as I have done...for ...

[the] seventy years [of exile in Babylon]...? [Zech. 7:3-5]

The Lord of Hosts said as follows: The [four fast days] shall become to the house of Judah days of joy and gladness, and cheerful feasts. [Zech. 8:19]

God said to rejoice on Tish'a b'Av! So why didn't we? The Talmud answers:

What is the meaning of [that] verse? ... When there is peace, [these days] shall be days of joy and gladness; when there is persecution, they shall be fast days; when there is no persecution but yet not peace, [these fasts are optional]. [They asked:] If that is the case, [should the fast of] Tish'a b'Av also [be optional]? Rav Papa replied: [No.] Tish'a b'Av is in a different category, because several misfortunes happened on it... [Rosh HaShana 18b]

However, some rabbis had different opinions. The great Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, the compiler of the Mishnah, was in favor of less mourning, but was overruled. [Meg. 5a-b]

The observance of Tisha B'Av has increased steadily through the centuries, both in the number of Jews observing it and in the severity of the strictures.

In a 2010 survey, 25% of Israelis reported they fast on Tish'a b'Av, and another 50% said they do not fast but will not engage in recreational activities. Early Reform Jews ignored the day, but today many Reform congregations observe Tisha B'Av as a sad day.

Find a silver lining?

Rabbi Akiva looked for a silver lining and found it:

Long ago, [after the destruction the Second Temple], Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah, Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Akiva... were coming up to Jerusalem together, and just as they came to Mount Scopus they saw a fox emerging from the Holy of Holies. They fell weeping [except] Rabbi Akiva who laughed.

They said to him: "Why are you laughing?"

[Rabbi Akiva] said: "Why are you weeping?"

They said to him: "A [holy] place... has now become the haunt of foxes, and we should not weep?"

He said to them: "Here is why I am laughing. [The prophecy of Micah says:]

Because of you, Zion shall be plowed like a field, [and Jerusalem shall become heaps of rubble.] [Micah 3:12]

[But the later prophecy of] Zechariah says:

Thus says the Lord of Hosts: Old men and old women shall again dwell in the streets of Jerusalem [and every man with his staff in his hand for the fullness of days. And the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets.] [Zech. 8:4-5]

As long as [the first prophecy of doom] had not been fulfilled, I was uncertain whether the second one [of a bright future] would be fulfilled. But now that [the first] prophecy has been fulfilled, it is quite certain that [the second] will also be fulfilled [in the future]!"

They said: "Akiva, you have comforted us! Akiva, you have comforted us!"

[Makkot 24a-b]

Moreover, contrasting all these catastrophes with the fact that we Jews are still here reinforces our faith.

Jewish optimists believe everything that happens is for the good, even if we can't see it right away. The Talmud quotes rabbis as saying: *Gam zu le-tovah* – "This, too, is for the good". It is not a bad attitude to have, if it does not lead to resignation and passive acceptance.

The proper Jewish response to bad times is certainly to remember and mourn, then to move on and look for the light at the end of the tunnel.

Conclusion

Evidently, people feel deeply that some days of mourning are necessary to balance the joyful celebrations. The remembrance of bad events is necessary, but must be positive. It must not be done to make anybody feel guilty or to incite towards vengeance. It is useful because it reminds Gentiles of our tortured history. Also, it must never be given as a reason to stay Jewish. The Jewish philosopher Emil Fackenheim may have famously said: “Do not give Hitler a posthumous victory!”, but I disagree. Recalling disasters is not a good reason to stay Jewish, and may even turn some Jews away from Judaism.

The Book of Lamentations concludes with the line that closes the Torah service:

הַשִּׁיבֵנוּ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ [וְנָשׁוּבָה] (וְנָשׁוּבָה) חֲדָשׁ יָמֵינוּ כְּקֵדֶם

Hashiveinu Hashem elecha, venashuva. Chadesh yamenu k'kedem.

Bring us back to You, O God, and we shall come back. Renew our days as of old. [Lam. 5:21]

May this be the last Tish'a b'Av we spend in mourning.