

THE THREE WEEKS AND TISHA BE-AV

The period called the Three Weeks begins with the fast of the seventeenth day of Tammuz, when the Babylonians breached the walls of Jerusalem. It concludes with the fast of the ninth of Av, known as Tisha be-Av. It is traditionally a time of mourning. According to tradition, both the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E. and that of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E. occurred on the ninth day of the month of Av. After the First Temple fell, Jews were sent into exile in Babylonia. Following the destruction of the Second Temple, Jews were exiled from their land and scattered through the world in what has been known ever since as the Diaspora.

In days past, and for a minority of Jews today, the days of mourning were accompanied by hope for the restoration of all we have lost: the rebuilding of the Temple, the reinstatement of the sacrificial cult, the return of the Davidic dynasty, and the regathering of all Jews in the Promised Land.

Exile and Diaspora

Exile and *Diaspora* are distinct terms. *Exile* emphasizes a state of alienation—from our land and from God. In Bible and Talmud, the Promised Land is vouchsafed to the people as long as they are loyal to the covenant. Exile is the result when God punishes the Jewish people for its sins. *Diaspora* emphasizes the dispersal of the Jews to other lands. Still negative, it does not have the theological connotations of

punishment and alienation, which is why this term has become more widespread in modern times.

Sometimes, Jews felt part of the surrounding world and the hope for a return to Israel seemed a distant dream. At other times, particularly facing persecutions, that hope must have felt like a fervent imperative. At still other times, this vision of the future seemed so ideal that it was linked to the notion of a messianic period when each Jew would sit under a fig tree at peace in the land of Israel.

In the daily liturgy and at particular moments such as the Three Weeks, Jews express the wish for the restoration of all that was—Temple, nation, and land. Yet, for many contemporary Jews, the idea of restoration is problematic. Rebuilding the Temple and reinstating sacrifices is no longer a goal for the vast majority of Jews. It goes without saying that the current political situation makes it impossible to destroy the mosque that sits on the Temple site, but in fact most elements of the Temple service are actually distasteful to modern Jewish thought. The ancient priesthood was hereditary and hierarchical and excluded women from its ranks. And we shrink from the idea that sacrificing animals and sprinkling their blood on the altar are the best means to atone for sin. Few Jews today would prefer a Davidic king to democracy and Diaspora Jews resist the idea that authentic Jewish life can only be restored if all Jews return to the Promised Land.

Questions of state and land have also been challenged by the founding of the State of Israel in 1948. That hope—central to the Three Weeks and repeated daily in the liturgy—has been fulfilled, at least partially. In light of the existence of a Jewish presence in the Promised Land, should we continue our practice of mourning during the Three Weeks? Many have argued that we should not. Though the dream of centuries has not been perfectly realized, many Jews believe we should now celebrate the achievements of the Zionist dream.

My approach is more metaphorical. While we should cease mourning for a destroyed Jerusalem and celebrate the astounding turn of events that brought about the modern state, we should recognize that we are still in exile. We live in an unredeemed world. Exile continues in an existentialist sense and all Jews—in Israel and in the Diaspora—are

in exile. In this way, all human beings are in exile. Therefore, it seems appropriate to cease mourning for ancient and outmoded forms while acknowledging that we live in an unredeemed world.

One possibility is to stop observing the mourning practices of the Three Weeks with one important exception: its concluding fast day. The fast day of the ninth of Av (Tisha be-Av) would still be observed because the destruction of the Temple and the beginning of the exile, which Tisha be-Av commemorates, still have mythic meaning. They reflect our reality of brokenness and alienation. Actually we have been in exile from the moment we left the Garden of Eden. We were in exile in our many Egypts and while we wandered in the deserts of this world. All of this happened to us and continues to happen to us. Our feeling of God's abandonment is not only a memory, but an ongoing experience despite the existence of the State of Israel.

This new paradigm requires a new understanding of Tisha be-Av that reflects its place in the festival cycle. We have stood at Sinai and received the Torah. But no sooner do we hear God's commandments to have no other gods and make no graven images than we make a golden calf to worship. The Golden Calf is *the* sin in the Torah. It is the ultimate symbol of estrangement, alienation, and disappointment. The glory of Shavuot is past; Tisha be-Av reminds us that we remain wanderers in the wilderness. Tisha be-Av represents the dark night of the exile. As such, it is linked to all the catastrophes in Jewish history, including the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. It is the low point in the Jewish year.

Laws and Customs of the Three Weeks and Tisha be-Av

The period begins with the minor fast day of the seventeenth of Tammuz. It is customary not to hold weddings or other joyous events during the Three Weeks. The cutting of hair is forbidden. Beginning with the first day of Av, the mourning practices intensify. Swimming and washing clothes are prohibited; eating meat is permitted only on Shabbat.

Tisha be-Av is a full fast day (like Yom Kippur), beginning at sunset. (For all the other fast days in the Jewish calendar, there is no fasting at

night. The fast begins with sunrise.) As on Yom Kippur, eating, drinking, sex, and wearing leather are all prohibited. Uniquely, since Torah study is a joyous activity, it is expressly prohibited on Tisha be-Av. We are only permitted to study those sections of the Bible or the Talmud that talk about the destruction of Jerusalem.

We behave as mourners on Tisha be-Av. We sit on the floor or on low chairs while the Book of Lamentations is chanted as part of the evening service. For this service, we use candlelight or dimmed lights. In general, the musical modes for the day are sorrowful. There are special liturgical poems, called *kinot*, recited at both the evening and morning services. These poems recall the destruction of the Temple or other tragedies in Jewish history. Just like mourners before a funeral, we refrain from wearing *tallit* and *tefillin* for the morning service. As recovering mourners, we become more hopeful by the time of the afternoon service. *Tallit* and *tefillin* are worn and we add a paragraph of consolation to the *amidah*. Tisha be-Av ends on a somber but positive note. On the Shabbatot following Tisha be-Av, we read special prophetic readings of consolation. We look forward to the reconciliation promised by the High Holidays.