

### Context

For many years, the fast of Tisha B'Av was not marked, and was barely even discussed, in Reform Judaism. In the last 2 or 3 decades, synagogues have begun to re-engage with the themes and customs of this time of mourning. As well as classical forms of commemoration, some synagogues have also used this as an opportunity to reflect upon other tragedies that have afflicted the Jewish community throughout history, and some also include other human disasters, too.

As **Rabbi Josh Levy**, Rabbinic Partner at **Alyth** reflects here, there is much to mourn, but perhaps it is not the destruction of the Temple that should be at the centre of our observance as Reform Jews.

### Content

*Mi-she-nichnas Av, m'ma'atin b'simchah* - From the time that Av enters, we reduce in joy.

This phrase from the Mishnah, the compilation of Jewish legal traditions from about 200 CE, instructs us that from the beginning of the month of Av we are to reduce the amount of happiness and celebration in our lives. On the first day of Av, we begin the immediate run up to the primary day of mourning in the Jewish calendar, Tisha B'Av (the Ninth of Av). On this day, we fast, read the book of Eicha (Lamentations), and chant kinnot (dirges) to commemorate ancient tragedies that befell our ancestors, especially the destruction of the Temples in Jerusalem in 586 BCE and 70 CE by the Babylonians and Romans respectively.

So profound is the mourning of this day that not only do we mourn on Tisha B'Av, but its ripples go out into the calendar. The nine days is a period in which many Jews do not hold celebrations, do not shave, do not listen to music, do not eat meat or drink wine, perhaps do not even bathe, except on Shabbat. Our haftarot in advance of this day are 'haftarot of rebuke' to alert us mentally to the forthcoming fast. The haftarot following the ninth of Av are 'haftarot of comfort', designed to bring us gently out of our mourning.

As a Reform Rabbi, this period in our calendar brings with it great complexity.

While Tisha B'Av has become a day of general commemoration – it has hoovered up other sorrows over time – at its heart is mourning for the destruction of the two Temples. These were events that demand our attention, events of a horror that, until the twentieth century, was unparalleled in Jewish history. This idea is powerfully expressed in a sermon by the Orthodox Rabbi Norman Lamm. He wrote that “Tisha B'Av does not mean remembering, it means reliving... that in every generation, every Jew must feel as if he himself lived in Jerusalem as it was being destroyed... as if he himself was one of the faithful onlookers who wept endless tears as they watched the Beit HaMikdash go up in flames, desecrated by the inhuman legions of Rome... Every Jew must feel as if he personally were uprooted... and sent off as an exile to some strange country, far, far from home”. This historical aspect of the day has great resonance – that we mourn the sufferings of our ancestors.

Yet the mourning of Tisha B'Av is not only historical and personal but also theological, and here it gets more complex. In theory, we are also mourning a moment in the relationship between God and Israel. Babylon and Rome were understood as being the instruments of divine will. The destruction was not merely painful but our just desserts. When we mark Tisha B'Av, we are marking a moment of divine punishment of Israel – that is the complex message of Eicha, and of the haftarot we read in this period. And that theology is certainly not my theology. I do not mourn because God punishes.

And it gets even more complex when we think about the focal point of the mourning – the Temple itself. This was not only a symbolically important building, not only a source of great pain – physical and metaphorical - in its destruction. The Temple was the place in which, to the ancient Israelite mind, communication with God took place. The destruction of the Temples was the removal of the ability to communicate adequately with God. The Temple represented the pinnacle of human closeness to God. The Talmud tells a story that when the first Temple was destroyed, groups of young priests gathered with the keys to the Sanctuary in their hands. They ascended a roof and declared: "Ruler of the World! Since we have not merited to be trustworthy custodians, let the keys be given back to You." They then threw the keys toward Heaven. Something like a hand emerged and received them, and the priests threw themselves into the fire. Those were not just keys to a building, but the key to the human relationship with God.

But this I do not believe.

I do not mourn for the loss of the Temple.

In fact, theologically, spiritually, I would argue that the destruction of the Temples was probably the most important thing to happen to Judaism in our history. It completely changed the model of our religious life for the better.

The model of Judaism lost in the destruction of the Temples was one in which God is the preserve of one location – the Temple in Jerusalem; one caste – the hereditary priesthood; in which communication is done through a medium that was narrow, that did not require one's whole self, and which ultimately could not have survived – sacrifice.

As a result of the loss of the Temple, Judaism evolved to a form in which all can be in relationship with God irrespective of where we are or who we are, in which the relationship is expressed not through killing of animals or giving of crops, but through prayer and through the way in which we live our lives.

So, while in parts of the Jewish world the Temple is still considered to be the pinnacle of the human relationship with God, this is not our view. For us, Tisha B'Av does not articulate a hope that we might one day deserve the reward of its rebuilding. The aspiration for rebuilding may be expressed repeatedly in the liturgy used by Orthodox and Masorti Jews, but we do not believe that such a view has a place in a modern prayer-book.

The move from Temple was a good thing. Without the events of 586 and 70, it may not have taken place. So Tisha B'Av, despite the very real mourning, the very real sense of pain it conjures up, is also the anniversary of something extraordinarily positive.

This period in our calendar *is* a time to reduce in joy. But we need to be careful about what it is that we mourn. We should mourn the suffering and destruction that our ancestors experienced at one of the most terrifying moments in our history. Their pain was exacerbated by their understanding of what was going on – their sense of punishment and theological loss.

But as a Reform Jew, I do not mourn for the loss of the Temple. On Tisha B'Av there is a part of me that knows that this is also the anniversary of one of the most positive developments in our rich, complex history.

## ***Contemplation***

The journey of a Jewish year takes us through a variety of emotional states, including reflection on past tragedies and mourning. As Reform Jews we seek to appreciate what was lost in the destruction of the Temple without hoping for its re-establishment.

And, there is more to Tisha B'Av than this: As the summer begins and we look forward to holidays and sunshine what might be the benefits of walking the journey of mourning? As the heat becomes at times unbearable in the Middle East we might explore what it means exist on the brink of life and death. This is the final event of the Jewish calendar before Elul leads us up to the High Holidays – could it also be a way of beginning to unpack our grief, act against human suffering, and bring change in the New Year?