
On the Liturgy of Tishah B'Av

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Every Jewish holiday has its own distinct character, and usually the synagogue prayer service for the holiday is modified in some way so that we can express the distinctive nature of the holiday and its special themes. Sometimes these themes are expressed through special prayers that are recited on those holidays, while sometimes the themes are expressed through omissions of prayers normally recited on ordinary days.

The liturgy for the fast day of Tishah B'Av, however, may be unique on the Jewish calendar in that there is a palpable tension between the liturgical additions and the liturgical subtractions. To understand Tishah B'Av, we must examine both our words and our silences.

One message of Tishah B'Av is embodied in the prayers and Biblical readings that are added to the service, most notably the book of *Eikhah* (Lamentations). The dominant theological message of this book is evident in almost every verse: the destruction of the city of Jerusalem was a punishment for the sins of the people of Israel. In the final verse of Lamentations, we cry out: "Take us back, O Lord, to Yourself, and let us come back; Renew our days as of old." The theological message of the book is that when we return to God and repent from our evil ways, we can return to our pre-exilic status. God's punishment, however harsh, was justified, and Tishah B'Av reminds us of God's power and the necessity of obedience and repentance. Many of the *kinot* address similar themes and embody a similar theology.

But the words tell only part of the story of Tishah B'Av. The special silences of Tishah B'Av, created by the liturgical omissions, give us quite a different picture of our theological stance on this day:

Silences suggesting a state of mourning

- The Full Kaddish on Tishah B'Av following the chanting of *Eikhah*/Lamentations and, again, at the conclusion of the morning service, omits the line beginning "*Titkabbel t'zlot'hon...*"—the line that asks God to accept the prayers of all of Israel. Without this line, the Full Kaddish is identical to the mourner's Kaddish, reminding us of our status as mourners on Tishah B'Av. In fact, the same change is made to the Full Kaddish in a shivah house (house of mourning). The tradition of sitting on the floor and low stools on Tishah B'Av also evokes the image of mourners who are sitting shivah.

Silences suggesting a reticence to confess our sins

- *Avinu Malkeinu* ("Our Father, our King, we have sinned before You") is recited on every other fast day but is omitted on Tishah B'Av. Similarly, the *Tahanun* penitential prayers, recited on most weekdays and almost every other fast day, are skipped on Tishah B'Av. Certainly the book of *Eikhah* and the *kinot* state that the calamities that befell us on Tishah B'Av were punishments for our sins, but the omission of *Avinu Malkeinu* and *Tahanun* seem to indicate otherwise. Perhaps we refrain from apology because we are not convinced that we are the source of our own misfortune.

Silences evoking our somber mood

- *Tallit* and *Tefillin* are traditionally not worn on Tishah B'Av morning; their accompanying blessings are omitted.
- When Tishah B'Av falls on a Saturday night, the *havdalah* ceremony that usually brings Shabbat to a close is reduced to the blessing over the flame.
- The *Shir Shel Yom*, the special Psalm for each day of the week that the Levites used to sing in the Temple is traditionally omitted from the morning service on Tishah B'Av.
- Some Ashkenazic communities omit two blessings of the *Birkhot HaShahar*, the list of blessings at the beginning of the morning service: *she'asah li kol tzorki* (Blessed are You...who has provided for all my needs) and *oter yisrael b'tifarah* (Blessed are you...who crowns Israel with glory). These omissions suggest that Tishah B'Av is a day when Israel's crown has fallen (see Lamentations 5:16) and our needs are neglected. (Additionally, these blessings are associated with wearing leather shoes and putting on the *tefillin shel rosh*. The second blessing is recited at *Minhah*, when the *tefillin* are worn.)
- The study of Torah is prohibited on Tishah B'Av, except for passages that focus on themes of destruction. Rabbinic literature cites one opinion that all the passages from the prayer service that are taken from the Torah or rabbinic literature, including *Elu Devarim*, *Rabbi Yishmael Omer*, and *Shirat Ha-Yam*, should be omitted on Tishah B'Av. The *Sh'ma* is the one exception.
- Collections of regional *minhagim* (customs) present a variety of additional liturgical silences on Tishah B'Av in different Jewish communities. For example: Some communities omit *Mizmor L'todah*—the Psalm of Thanksgiving (Psalm 100). Some Sephardic communities omit *hagbah* (the lifting of the Torah scroll and showing it to the congregation), seemingly expressing that on Tishah B'Av, we are unwilling to over-exert ourselves physically or emotionally to honor the Torah. One collection of *minhagim* records that, whereas it would normally be one of the duties of a *gabbai* to walk around the neighborhood calling people to come to synagogue, often using a clapper or door-knocker to wake people up, this practice should be suspended on Tishah B'Av morning.

A medieval index of prayer customs, *Sefer Ha-Manhig*, indicates that Jews on Tishah B'Av until *minhah* are analogous to *on'nim*, people who have endured a loss in the family but have not yet buried their dead*. Such people are supposed to devote their entire energies towards burying their relative, so they are declared exempt from every other positive commandment in Jewish tradition, including prayer, blessings before and after meals, and the study of Torah. Some authorities write that not only are they exempt from such practices; they should refrain from fulfilling these *mitzvot* even if they want to do them. It is considered inappropriate to offer words of comfort to such people, as the wound remains so raw that the words of comfort would be ineffective.

Sefer Ha-Manhig continues that beginning at *minhah*, we are analogous to *aveilim* - people who are in mourning, but since the deceased has been buried, we are now receptive to words of comfort, and once again we are obligated to perform the commandments. This explains why many of the liturgical omissions from the morning of Tishah B'Av re-appear at the afternoon service, including *tallit* and *tefillin*, *Shir Shel Yom*, and the *Titkabbel* line in *Kaddish Shalem*.

According to this analogy, our liturgical silences mean that we are in such a deep stage of mourning and sorrow that we are too preoccupied to pray in the regular way.

The writings of Rabbi David Blumenthal, a Conservative rabbi and a professor of religion at Emory University, point us towards a more troubling analogy. Whereas God is usually portrayed in the Bible and in Jewish texts as fair and loving, there are passages in the Bible and in Rabbinic literature in which God plays a role that is analogous to that of an abusive parent. Jewish tradition often responds to these passages by acknowledging our dependence upon God and emphasizing God's general justness and goodness, but also by registering a protest against God's unjust actions. Perhaps the silences of Tishah B'Av are an adoption of a posture of disconnectedness, as an example of such a theological protest.

On the whole, the words of Tishah B'Av are conciliatory and apologetic. The silences of Tishah B'Av are where the anger is expressed, giving a fuller perspective to the mixed emotions of the day.