
Tishah B'Av – A Day of Many Meanings

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On January 12, 1933, my father acquired a slender Hebrew volume that contained the lamentations (*sefer ha-kinot*) for Tishah B'Av according to the Ashkenazic rite. At the time, he was the young associate rabbi of one of the major Jewish communities in Germany. I know the date, because he had a lifelong habit of adorning every book that came his way with the date of purchase. Each year when I open this simple heirloom to recite its hoary dirges, I am overwhelmed by the startling fact that just eighteen days later Adolf Hitler came to power as the duly elected chancellor of Germany. Lamentations were to be the leitmotif of the next twelve years.

Toward the end of the *Amidah* (the silent devotion) of the afternoon service, the Ashkenazic rite of my father inserts a petition of artless literalism based on a graphic analogy between Temple practice and personal piety. The text reads:

Master of many worlds, it is surely known to you that when the Temple stood a sinning person would bring a sacrifice, offering up only its fat and blood, and You in Your great compassion would forgive. Now as I sit in fast with my own fat and blood diminishing, may it be Your will to regard them as if I were offering them before You on the alter and may You find me acceptable.

But these words strike a discordant note, because Tishah B'Av has nothing to do with individual salvation. It is not a carbon copy of Yom Kippur, the other twenty-four hour fast of the Jewish calendar. If the intensity of the latter is focused on the fate of the individual Jew, the concern of the former is fixed on the fate of the nation. The two fast days are meant to balance and compliment, not replicate each other. The Ninth of Av is a reaffirmation of the centrality of community, peoplehood and *klal yisrael* in Judaism. It promotes the supreme value of self-sacrifice for benefit of group survival and calls for loyalty to an ancient and divine cause that far transcends the significance of self.

Furthermore, Tishah B'Av is no longer about any single historical calamity. The Mishnah at the end of the second century of our era had already started on the path of attributing misfortunes other than the destruction of the two Temples to the Ninth of Av. Over time, the fast was to absorb and

commemorate the horror of countless calamities down to the Spanish expulsion and beyond. Layers of history steadily enriched its contents and expanded its meaning to reflect the fundamental reality of Jewish existence that exile is not a geographic location but an existential truth. Indeed, the state of homelessness is an ever-present danger to all illusions of power, permanence and impregnability.

This evolution of Tishah B'Av had a profound side effect. It served to limit the days of public mourning. It resisted the understandable claim of every generation of victims to its own day in the calendar. The psychic health of the community would be impaired by a calendar cluttered with commemorations of dark times. Judaism had long recognized the wisdom of restraint for the individual mourner. Less appreciated is its effort to protect the community from excessive mourning by rendering Tishah B'Av as a vehicle of multiple meanings.

The final message of the fast, though, is far from melancholy. Commemoration is the act of a living community. The calamities of the past did not bring the Jewish saga to an end. Tishah B'Av is ultimately a celebration of national fortitude, faith and survival. Neither 1492 nor, 1648, nor 1933 with all their protracted suffering, drove the Jewish people from the stage of history. In our reverence for the torment of our ancestors, we give expression to our own resolve and resilience. Each summer, as I recite the lamentations of Tishah B'Av in the tear-strained volume of my father, I offer living proof of the failure of Hitler's "final solution."