

The Meaning of Tragedy

For the last three years, ever since the creation of the State of Israel, many of our fellow Jews, good synagogue-going Jews, have been coming to me with a very intelligent complaint. "Why," they ask, "must we observe days of national mourning such as Tisha B'av when we already have a State of Israel? Why cry and mourn over some catastrophe which occurred almost 2,000 years ago when today G-d has helped us and the ingathering of the exiles has begun?" And this, my friends, is a query which is difficult to answer. Why, after all, will it be necessary for us to fast tonight and tomorrow, and observe the other laws of Tisha B'av, when the Jews in Israel now have a healthy, progressive government, which is something for which we have dreamed so long? Of what use is it to remember a past tragedy? In short, what meaning does Tisha B'av have for a Jew of today?

Before we attempt to answer that question, let us make one important observation on the nature of Tisha B'av. And that is, that Tisha B'av is an occasion which requires more than memory. Remembering alone is a dull, passive act. A memory by itself is merely a stagnant picture momentarily projected on the screen of one's mind, and is ~~as~~ overlooked as any dull commercial is overlooked by a typical television audience. It may be entertaining but it means little if anything. No, Tisha B'av does not mean remembering, it means reliving. It means, if I be permitted to paraphrase the Passover Haggada, that

שכל דור ודור חייב להרגיש כי הוא עצמו חיבש בירושלים כפי
 that in every generation every Jew must feel as if he himself lived in Jerusalem as it
 was being destroyed by the cruel invader, as if he himself was one of the faithful
 onlookers who wept endless tears as ^{they} ~~he~~ watched the מקדש הקודש, the Holy Temple,
 go up in flames, desecrated by the inhuman legions of Rome, and then threw ^{themselves} ~~himself~~ bodily
 into those very same flames. Every Jew must feel as if he personally were uprooted from
 his own sweet Palestinian soil and sent off as an exile to some strange country, far far
 from home.

Rabbi Yehudah Halevi, the great medieval poet and philosopher, wrote a poem which he called *שיר לזכרון ציון*, or "An Ode to Zion", which many people regard as one of the most inspired poems written since the close of the Bible, and which we will recite tonight as part of the *אנן*, or traditional lamentations. And in it he expresses what we have been trying to say: that every Jew must feel the national disaster as if it were his own personal tragedy. Writes Yehudah Halevi to Zion:

עניני ציון וציונים, וציון ארץ ציון, כנור וליק

"To wail for your afflictions I am like the jackals, but when I dream

"Of the return of your captivity, I am a harp for your songs."

Inspiring lines indeed! [How well Yehudah Halevi defined the attitude we should take to our national fast days and feast days.] To cry for the affliction of Jerusalem and the devastation of our former glory, you should wail the mournful call of the jackal, in the dark of night ... the eerie wail of a jackal which penetrates the hardest hearts and draws tears from the driest eyes and splits the very heavens themselves. And when it comes to joy and happiness over the good tidings of Israel rebuilt, let your heart become a harp on whose strings the gladness of Zion will pluck the sweet melodies of happiness. This indeed is what is meant by making Israel's sorrow your sorrow and her joy your joy -

"To wail for your affliction I am like the jackals, but when I dream

"Of the return of your captivity, I am a harp for your songs."

The observance of Tisha B'av means, then, not remembering the destruction of the Temple, but reliving it, not recollecting but reexperiencing.

With this introduction, we can now proceed to answer the question we posed at the very beginning. Let us restate that question thus: why is it necessary to relive and reexperience the tragedy of Tisha B'av? And to this question, my friends, we can find three powerful and cogent answers which, I hope, will make Tisha B'av more meaningful for all of us.

First of all, we owe a debt at least of sentiment to the Jewish martyrs of bygone ages. One of the deepest feelings of man is his desire to be remembered after he leaves this world, he wants to live on in the hearts of others, like the sun when even after it has set below the western skies still leaves a soft warm glow for humans to admire. We all know how Jews

of the older generation wanted to "leave a Kaddish", which means - to leave a son who after the parents' death will continue to remember them tenderly. In so many cases the only consolation for a person who felt so near to a cold grave, was the knowledge that there was reserved for him a warm spot in the hearts of a son and daughter who at least three times a year will turn their thoughts to Father and Mother. Oh, I know that there are many sophisticated people who will sneer at all this. But it is these same sophisticates who crowd our synagogues when Yizkor time comes around.

Every person who has lived a noble life [and died for a noble cause] wants to feel that all his toil has not been in vain. He wants to feel that someone in the distant future will some day say, "Here lived and thrived an honest and G-d fearing man." It is the sort of feeling you get when you come upon a place where once there was a great and mighty oak tree which graced its surroundings with its majesty and gave cool shade to the weary traveller, and then the oak died and was chopped down. And you come near that place and see the stump which once was that majestic oak, and you say with a heavy heart and a sigh, "Here there was once a beautiful tree..."

But this is more than just some good advice to be sentimental. The punishment for forgetting people of past ages, is being forgotten yourself by future ages. The penalty for disregarding the agony and grief of a martyr is to have to endure that same agony and grief yourself. Writes Jeremiah in יְרֵמְיָהוּ, the Book of Lamentations: יָדָעְתָּ כִּי יָצָא יְהוּדָה בְּעוֹלָם "Judah was exiled because of יָדָעְתָּ, because of poverty." And the Midrash comments on the word יָדָעְתָּ - כִּי יָצָא יְהוּדָה בְּעוֹלָם, "because of יָדָעְתָּ, the 'bread of poverty', meaning the matzoh - that is, because they ate bread instead of matzoh on Passover." What a profound dictum! Matzoh is יָדָעְתָּ, the poor man's bread, the symbol of the trials and tribulations which our early ancestors underwent in Egypt. And because the Jews in the days of Jeremiah, preparing their Seder tables amidst the joy and happiness of the holiday with all its gay trimmings, ignored the matzoh, the יָדָעְתָּ, the symbol of tragedy and woe, they had tragedy and woe heaped upon their own heads. Because they disregarded the importance of reexperiencing the tragedies of martyrs of previous ages, they were themselves forced to accept the tragic roles of martyrs.

וְעַל הַה' יִשְׁרָאֵל תִּתְּנוּ

with vivid freshness
t who remembers

But actually it is more than a matter of "sweetening present joys". It is rather more a problem of understanding Life itself. Child psychologists now advise parents not to shield their children from every sad and grievous experience. On the contrary, they counsel a strong dose of realism. Instead of telling the child that his grandfather went on a long trip overseas, tell him that he died. Only so will he be adequately equipped to handle agony and grief and tragedy when he is an adult.

President Roosevelt, as you all well know, suffered untold miseries when the paralyzing polio struck him down right at the beginning of his career. A psychiatrist might say that probably the illness had something very definite to do with Roosevelt's liberal orientation in politics. His physical disability was displaced into an absorption with economic disability in others. He learned that there were inferiorities other than those purely physical, and he learned to sympathize with them. Allow me to read to you one particularly striking paragraph from John Gunther's biography of FDR.

"Roosevelt learned what suffering was; he learned compassion... He could not balance on his legs; he did learn to balance with his mind. Maybe he couldn't walk but his feet were certainly on the ground. He learned the need for courage and hence could transmit courage to the nation. In some respects it might also be said that polio was G-d's greatest gift to him. Through the fires of this ordeal he established a power over his own mind that he had never had before, and this gave him power over the minds of others."

Gunther's insight into the life of an individual holds true for nations too. Only that nation whose people feel personally the sorrows of the nation's past can adequately build its future. The history book of a people can have its later pages glow with a halo of great achievement only if it continually mentions the sacrifices recorded in the tear-stained lines of earlier pages.

The story of the prophet Jonah stands out as a classical historical example of a man who found himself unable to face life. He had a fine sensitive soul and a Divine gift of prophecy. Yet when G-d commanded him to go to the people of Nineveh and rebuke them for their wickedness, Jonah ran away, unable to face evil and evil-doers. And what was it in Jonah's background which caused this weakness in facing the realities of life? What made him an escapist? Our Sages say of Jonah -

הוא היה נביא ונביא היה לו חסד

Jonah witnessed the happiness in the courts of the Temple. He saw the beauty and majesty and grandeur and holiness of Jewish life, but he never saw treachery and corruption, he never saw destruction and catastrophe and ruination; he saw the Temple in its glory, but he did not see it in its moments of mourning and destitution. And a ~~man~~ man, no matter how great, who was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, weaned on milk and honey

and exposed only to the pleasant and the sweet, and never the wretched and the bitter, a man of that sort inevitably becomes an escapist and runs away from life. Contrast with Jonah prophets like Jeremiah and ¹Isaiah and Ezekiel, and you will see why they didn't flee from G-d's command to get down into the cesspools of life and lift the people out of their filth and degradation.

Thus by reexperiencing and reliving the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem on every Tisha B'av, we come to appreciate the blessings of G-d and His goodness to our generation, and we are able to better equip ourselves for the mysterious future.

The third reason why I feel that it is imperative for us Jews to relive our national tragedy on this ninth day of Av, even though we have a State of Israel, is that the tragedy we mourn is of today, and not despite the State of ¹Israel but intimately connected with it. In the early part of our history, many years ago, a group of Jews exiled from their homes wept on the shores of the rivers of Babylon, and they raised their right hands and swore an oath which resounded and reechoed through the Halls of Time to this very day:

יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יָדָא, "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand fail". My friends, I fear that we have almost forgotten Jerusalem! I do not mean what we today call the New City of Jerusalem. That is but another Tel Aviv or Haifa transplanted to the suburbs of the real Jerusalem. In our preoccupation and elation with the ~~the~~ mundane matters of the State of Israel, we have almost forgotten that the real Jerusalem, our Jerusalem, the ^Beternal City, lies captive in Arab hands. We have almost forgotten that tonight and tomorrow no Jewish tear will wet the ancient stones of the Wailing Wall. We have almost forgotten ~~that~~ on the sacred soil where once there rose the Holy Temple no Jew will recite the hallowed verses of the Book of Lamentations bemoaning the misfortune of that very same Temple.

How callously indifferent we have become to the fate of our ancient beloved Jerusalem. How empty is a Jewish state without a Jewish capital - like a body without a soul, a person without a personality. For Jerusalem is and shall be our capital in more ways than one. It is also our spiritual center and the source of the Word of G-d. (בְּיָדָא / יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יָדָא. "From Zion shall go forth the Law, & the word of G-d from Jerusalem!")

And who will deny that just as the gates of Jerusalem are shut to the citizens of Israel, so is the Word of G-d, coming from Jerusalem, as scarce as ever.

We Jews today seem to think that we have lost the keys to a renewal of a Jerusalem way of life. We have misplaced the keys to both the physical and the spiritual Jerusalem. How are ~~we~~ we to find them? Sigmund Freud, in his "Psychopathology of Everyday Life", discusses this problem of people who misplace things and cannot find them. And the therapeutic method which psychoanalysts employ nowadays is by coaxing the patient's mind, causing him ^{and ferreting out his most distressing problems,} to recall all the details surrounding the mislaying of the particular object, and then the secret is uncovered almost magically. It is only by getting the patient to recollect his past to the best of his ability that success can be attained. When the first Temple was destroyed, the Talmud tells us, small groups of ^{קטנים וזקנים} young priests, gathered together and in their hands they held the keys to the Temple. And they cried out before G-d, "O Lord of the Universe, because we were not loyal guardians of your Temple, we return the keys to you. ^{אנחנו משיבים לך את המפתחות, ה' אלהינו, ה' אחד.}

The form of a hand then seemed to descend from Heaven and took the keys from them, after which they ~~hurled~~ hurled themselves into the flames consuming the ^{אש} fire.

My friends, it IS a tragedy that we have lost ~~the keys~~ ^{to} Jerusalem, and on Tisha B'Av we mourn this loss, and we review the history of its downfall many years ago. But doing so is more than mourning - it is excellent psychoanalysis. Because, by recalling these traumatic events of 2,000 years ago, we can find the clue to where the keys are. The Talmud gives us the clear answer. When with heavy heart and wet eyes we relive and reexperience the story of the young priests of Jerusalem, we suddenly remember that it was they who on the ninth of Av ^{1,881} ~~many~~ years ago entrusted the keys ~~to~~ ^{to} the Temple and Jerusalem to - the Hand of G-d. There is no other place to look for these precious keys except in the Hand of G-d which has been saving them for us these many years. Only there can we find the keys to the Jerusalem we have come dangerously near forgetting. Only then can we keep our oath,

^{אני אשכחך, ירושלה} if I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand fail.

We have three reasons, then, for observing Tisha B'av today;
ONE, loyalty to the memory of our people's martyrs.

TWO, the dimensions that recall of tragedy adds to our life and joy.

THREE, the loss of Jerusalem today and the keys to its recovery and redemption.

These three reasons are sufficiently cogent to make any man or woman with a Jewish heart feel the pain of his people. Consequently, I expect ~~that~~ every man, woman and child here today, and all your friends who should be but are not here, to come to this synagogue this evening and join your fellow Jews in the traditional reading of the Book of Lamentations. And it will not harm any of us if we will shed a tear or two for the sake of Jerusalem.

וְיִשְׂרָאֵל יִשְׁכַּח וְיִשְׂרָאֵל יִשְׁכַּח
וְיִשְׂרָאֵל יִשְׁכַּח וְיִשְׂרָאֵל יִשְׁכַּח

And may all those who mourn for Jerusalem be aided by our Merciful G-d to see it in its new glory, rebuilt and rededicated to the ancient principles of Israel.

BENEDICTION:

וְיִשְׂרָאֵל יִשְׁכַּח וְיִשְׂרָאֵל יִשְׁכַּח

as they weep sing as they reap.

May all those who plant ~~in tears reap in song~~. May the streets of Jerusalem, so soaked in tears, resound with the song and laughter of old men and young children, thanking the Almighty Creator for His Grace and Goodness, and may the Divine Redeemer come quickly in our days. Amen.