

# KIBBUTZ CONVERSATION

*by Rabbi Avi Shafran*

Tisha B'Av - which falls this year on July 24 - always brings back the personal memory of a conversation between two teen-aged cousins more than thirty years ago. It took place on the outskirts of a non-religious kibbutz in the Galilee, on a hill overlooking a lush valley.

The two boys, one born and bred on the kibbutz, the other an American newcomer to the Holy Land visiting before the start of his Jerusalem yeshiva's academic term, had first met only days earlier.

They had been speaking about family, personal experiences, and sundry things their very different lives nevertheless had in common. And then, the observant boy mentioned, entirely in passing, the imminence of the Jewish fast day.

"We don't observe Tisha B'Av on the kibbutz," his cousin interjected. "The Temple's destruction isn't really relevant to our lives here."

The American boy hesitated a long moment before asking, "Do you observe any Jewish day of mourning?"

"Yes," came the reply. "Yom HaShoah."

Another pause, this one even longer. The yeshiva student knew that Tisha B'Av is the national day of Jewish mourning - that it encompasses many a tragedy - in a sense, every tragedy - in Jewish history. Not only was the first Jewish Holy Temple destroyed on that day (2429 years ago), and the second one, (1939 years ago), on the very same day, but the rebel Jewish forces at Betar were annihilated by the Romans, several decades later, on Tisha B'Av as well.

He knew, too, that the expulsion of Jews from England in 1290 C.E., and from France in 1306 C.E. and from Spain in 1492 C.E. all took place on Tisha B'Av as well. He also knew that on Tisha B'Av 1914 Germany declared war on Russia, turning a regional European conflict into what came to be known as World War I, arguably the genesis of what would culminate, two and a half decades later, in Germany's "Final Solution." But somehow it didn't seem the right time for history lessons.

So, instead, he asked his cousin, "Is your commemoration of the Holocaust important to you?"

"Absolutely," came the reply. "The Holocaust underlies our very identity as Israelis and as Jews."

The American weighed the wisdom of saying what he wanted to, and then decided the blood-bond

was strong enough to handle it.

"Will you expect your children to pay its memory the same respect that you do?"

"Of course."

"To feel the same sorrow, to have the same determination to remember that you feel?"

"Of course," the Israeli replied. "My generation will see to it that our children recognize the importance of the Holocaust, how it defines their identity, how important it must continue to be to all Jews."

"And will you expect them, in turn, to transmit the same conviction to their own children - and theirs to theirs?"

"Absolutely. Forever. It is that important."

The American swallowed hard, then spoke.

"Just like the earlier attempts to destroy our people and its faith were to our own ancestors - those we commemorate and mourn on Tisha B'Av."

Nothing else was said for the moment. The two young men walked back to the kibbutz in silence.

It could well be argued that a large part of what characterizes Jewish "Orthodoxy" is a heightened sense of history. Not only of its vicissitudes and tragedies for our people, but, most importantly, of the seminal Jewish moment, the singular event that bequeathed us our mandate to cherish, study and observe the Torah - the revelation of G-d to His people at Sinai.

That mass-experienced and painstakingly transmitted event, the meeting of G-d and man in the Sinai desert, lies at the very foundation of the Jewish people and the Jewish faith. It is the ultimate Jewish historical memory.

All Jews who aspire to the appellation "observant" are, in essence, the keepers of Jewish history, recent and ancient, and are entrusted with the mission of sharing the memory of the Jewish past - both its nadirs and its apogee - with all their fellow Jews.

Should the Messiah continue to tarry, G-d forbid, a day may well come when all testimony of the events of the 1930s and early 1940s will be indirect, arriving only through books and films, or third-hand accounts.

The facts, though, of what happened during those years, the horrible details of Jewish Europe's destruction, will endure, because there will always be Jews determined to hold fast to our history - its entirety. Jews determined to maintain the memory of what happened sixty-odd years ago.

And 1939 years ago.

And 2429 years ago.

And 3319 years ago, in the Sinai desert.

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