

THE UNIVERSAL RELEVANCE OF TISHA B'AV

by Yosef Ben Shlomo Hakohen

Dear Friends,

On the Fast of Tisha B'Av, we mourn the destruction of our Holy Temple, a destruction that led to our long and painful exile from the Land of Zion. During the 19th century and during the 20th century, there were Jews who argued that the fasting and mourning of Tisha B'Av was no longer relevant. In 19th century Germany, some reformers argued that the new civil rights granted to Jews had made Tisha B'Av outdated. In their view, the primary reason for the mourning for the Temple and Zion was the loss of our civil rights; thus, now that some of our civil rights were being restored in the new Germany, there was no longer any reason to mourn. In the second half of the 20th century, there were Zionists who argued that since we have a Jewish state, Tisha B'Av should be abolished. In their view, the primary reason for the mourning for the Temple and Zion was the loss of our political sovereignty; thus, now that we have our own country, flag, and army like all the other nations, there is no longer any reason to mourn.

In an article written in 1855, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch describes the attempt of one "modern" rabbi to abolish Tisha B'Av:

"One evening on the Ninth of Av, the Rabbi of a small town in South Germany had his synagogue brilliantly lit up and invited the members of his congregation to attend in their best clothes. This was the night when over the whole face of the earth, wherever a small group of Jews form a congregation and come together for prayer in the House of God, light, cheerfulness, and festive mood are banished from the gathering. Every person who calls himself a Jew sits mourning on the ground, and the Lamentations of Jeremiah over the orphaned city of God find an echo in every Jewish breast. And it was on this evening that the preacher mentioned mounted the pulpit and raised a loud protest against this sadness and this mourning and this yearning for Palestine. He accused the millions of his mourning brethren in the whole world around him of treason and enmity toward the state and fatherland (where they were now living), and he called upon his dismayed congregation, in contrast to these millions, to show by means of a festive celebration their

repudiation of the out-of-date yearning for Palestine...Jerusalem, he said, was here. Palestine was now situated on German soil." (Collected Writings, Vol 1)

Rabbi Hirsch writes that those who wish to abolish Tisha B'av totally misunderstand the primary reason for our mourning. They do not realize that Jewish tears are shed and Jewish hearts grieve over the withdrawal of the Divine presence from our Land, which our sages refer to as the "Exile of the Shechinah." They forget that the Temple was the place where the Shechinah was revealed. They forget that the entire Land of Zion is to be a Sanctuary for the Shechinah. And they forget the universal and spiritual goal of Zion, for the Sanctuary of the Shechinah is destined to bring light and life to all humankind:

"It will happen in the end of days: The mountain of the Temple of the Compassionate One will be firmly established as the head of the mountains, and it will be exalted above the hills, and all the nations will stream to it. Many peoples will go and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Compassionate One, to the Temple of the God of Jacob, and He will teach us of His ways and we will walk in His paths.' For from Zion will go forth Torah, and the word of the Compassionate One from Jerusalem. He (the Messiah) will judge among the nations, and will settle the arguments of many peoples. They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation will not lift up sword against nation, and they will no longer study war." (Isaiah 2:1-4)

When we yearn for the resurrection of Zion, teaches Rabbi Hirsch, we are not only yearning for our own renewal; we are also yearning for the renewal of the entire world. Rabbi Hirsch therefore makes the following, passionate protest to the reformers who would abolish the mourning for Zion:

"Does Israel alone scan the future for a sorely needed deliverance? Does only the Jewish salvation depend on the resurrection of Zion? Ask the states themselves whose jealously guarded interests you think it your duty to defend: ask these very states if they consider themselves to have reached the summit of human attainment, if they feel themselves already in possession of the magical wand of paradise which will bring the world eternal joy and peace. As then how much consolation they are bringing into the slums, how much joy to the poor. Have they been able to lift up the downtrodden, to banish wretchedness, crime and vice, to give strength to the lowly and humility to the highly placed? Ask them whether they have been able to banish the curse from this earth, when God had intended that it be blessed, whether they have already discovered even the rudiments of a political system which unites justice and love, and where saintliness and earthly joy can dwell side by side without conflict." (Collected Writings, Vol 1)

Rabbi Hirsch adds: "Does the telegraph convey only, or even mostly, tidings of joy and peace throughout the world? Does the locomotive transport only wares of blessings and salvation from one land to another? Does the light of knowledge, the magic of technology, bring the world to the peak of happiness? Has the formula been found for resolving the contradictions of science so that, like the seven-branched menorah of Zion, the heavenly lights are turned towards the earthly and the earthly towards the heavenly, fusing into one flame which illuminates on high? Has the formula been found for turning man-made bread into the show-bread of God's blessing, each person having sufficient for himself and the wherewithal to help his neighbor, as well as the incense of contentment and cheerfulness that goes with it?"

Rabbi Hirsch then observes: "The persecuted, despised, misrepresented Jewish people is not the most unfortunate on earth, the one most in need of deliverance on earth. The whole earth is thirsting for deliverance. Sorrow and misery in hovels and palaces, in cities and states, arouse messianic yearnings in every heart. It is not only the Jewish people whose redemption depends upon the rebuilding of Zion, and surely, their confident expectation that the redemption will indeed come about is not the least valuable dowry which the Jew brings with him into the community of nations."

In this spirit, during the afternoon service of Tisha B'Av, we chant the words of the following Divine promise:

"I will bring them to My sacred mountain, and I will gladden them in My house of prayer; their elevation-offerings and their feast-offerings will find favor on My Altar, for My House will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples." (Isaiah 56:7)

Shalom,

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