

WHY I LIKE TISHA B'AV

by Rabbi Emanuel Feldman

Tisha B'Av is not everyone's favorite day, but it is one of mine -- not because it is enjoyable, but because of what it represents.

I like Tisha B'Av because of what it says to me about Jews: that we are a people that remembers and knows its past leads to a future.

There are many more Italians in the world than Jews. Yet no one laments for Rome. There are many more Greeks than Jews. The Acropolis and the Parthenon are tourist's attractions, but does anyone mourn because of their destruction?

Babylonia, Persia, Assyria, the glory of ancient Egypt -- who remembers, who sheds a tear, who cares?

I like Tisha B'Av because only a people that can weep will someday learn to laugh.

And I like Tisha B'Av because I need it.

In the midst of all the affluence and creature comforts, I need to remove my leather shoes, and dim the lights. I need to fast and not to indulge myself. I need to read Lamentations and weep for my people's martyrdom, for its bloody history. I need to focus outward.

I need Tisha B'Av because it reminds me of what it is to be a Jew; and that Esau hates Jacob, Pharaoh oppresses Israel, and Haman wishes to destroy us; and that the empires of the world abhor the Jew because he belongs to "a nation that dwells alone."

I like Tisha B'Av because it teaches something profound; that for Judaism, historical events are not just history, not just events. "History" and "events" take place at a point in time -- but in Judaism, once an event occurs it goes on being part of us. It is a new awareness, cognition, an ongoing perception, a new consciousness.

When you suddenly achieve a new insight, it remains part of you. On particular days in our history the awareness of joy as an element of life (Sukkot), or of Godliness (Rosh Hashana), or the consciousness of nearness to God (Pesach) first entered the universe. On Tisha B'Av the elements of tragedy and disaster were introduced to us.

A man once said to me: "Why bother with an event that took place 2,000 years ago? Why mourn, why sigh? We have modern Israel, we should rejoice."

Is there a country more concerned about daily security than Israel, or one that has more bitter experience of friendly countries growing cold and distant at the slightest provocation?

No other countries have to struggle daily over the sovereignty of their ancient capitals. No other countries are restricted in their right to visit and worship at their ancient holy sites in their own land.

One of the main reasons for the original destruction of the Temple and our exile from our land -- baseless hatred among Jews -- still exists among us. Tisha B'Av is a good day to ponder unity and tolerance.

I like Tisha B'Av because it contains a message of profound hope and faith. On this day, our Sages tell us, the Messiah was born. How profoundly insightful, how ironic, how just -- on the day of destruction, redemption began. The end was also the beginning. "Give us joy in accordance with the days of our suffering," says the Psalmist.

On the Sabbath preceding Tisha B'Av we read the first chapter of Isaiah, the chapter of rebuke. On the following Shabbat we read the fortieth chapter of Isaiah: "Comfort ye, comfort ye, My people." Just as the tears are real, so will the comfort be real.

With plain, solid assurance like that, is it any wonder that I like Tisha B'Av?

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