

TISHA B'AV AS A HOLIDAY

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Tisha B'Av as a Holiday ¹

"There was no Jewish holiday like the day the *Beis Hamikdosh* was destroyed." [2] Holiday? Is this some awful mistake? It is difficult enough to find a bit of consolation on our national day of mourning for the loss of the *mishkan Shechinah*, and the endless succession of horrors and outrages that have befallen us as a people. How can we possibly call it a holiday?

But it is indeed. The very despair of Tisha B'Av yields dividends that are cause for celebration.

Who wins the favor of the king? The easiest example we could find is that of a beloved prince, whose every accomplishment and talent reflect positively on his father, and who therefore brings him much honor.

Ironically, however, someone who brings the king no honor at all may win more intense favor. Should the prince be mentally insufficient, he will arouse powerful feelings of closeness in the king. Realizing that his son cannot look out for himself, and depends completely upon his father for protection and care, the king is overwhelmed by compassion.

We readily understand the parallel to Tisha B'Av. We reached the nadir of our national existence when we forced the *Shechinah* to withdraw from its chosen abode. Our complete helplessness leads to feelings of compassion in Hashem, as it were, that surpass those of the actual holidays.

The Torah calls us *banim*, children of Hashem. Fatherly love comes in different forms. The most obvious is the love shared at close range. Separate the father from the son, and the love is now compounded by yearning, by the gnawing pain of distance. If we push further yet, we can detect another variety of love, still stronger than the others. Imagine a child deathly ill, desperately in need of surgery. The father is a surgeon, and only he can save the child. The child pierces his heart with his cries. When he places the blade of the scalpel against the tender skin of the child, the parent might as well be cutting into his own flesh. The love that the father feels at that moment is the strongest of all the contradictory and tempestuous emotions. Seeing the child in dire peril, realizing its utter helplessness, save for the intervention of the father - these produce a love beyond any other situation.

This is Tisha B'Av, and this is why it is a "holiday" like no other. The love of HKBH for *Klal Yisrael* is without condition and without bounds. In our moment of greatest weakness, and greatest

vulnerability, the compassion of our Father is moved as on no other day. He displayed this love through the paradoxical embrace of the *cheruvim*,^[3] signifying the closeness between Hashem and *Klal Yisrael* at a time we might have expected Him to emphasize separation and distance.

An entirely different argument explains the holiday-like character of Tisha B'Av from another perspective. We find very little spiritual consistency in our world. Not all places and times are created equal. To the contrary, they all appear very different.

We have no trouble isolating places that are holier than others - including ten different levels of ascending holiness within the Land of Israel. On the other hand, Mitzrayim is seen by Chazal as "ervas ha- aretz," or the most debased and spiritually deprived place on earth.

There are times of average *kedushah*, greater *kedushah*, and greatest *kedushah*.

These distinctions are all for our good. If they were not, they would not exist!

We can readily understand at least one of the dividends of a world of changing and shifting *kedushah* potential. We try to take advantage of the opportunity that the special days of the year hold out for us. We push ourselves to anticipate them, to prepare for them, and to act differently on them. Contemplate the value of attaching ourselves to HKBH not on the special days of the year, but on the ordinary ones. Then consider the value of doing the same at times that we are particularly distant from Hashem. Swimming against the spiritual current is a most powerful exercise!

Now consider what transpired at the time of the *churban*. Jews became aware that enemy soldiers were not only on Har Habayis, but had entered the *Kodesh Kodoshim*. Ordinarily, only the *Kohen Gadol* would enter, and only on Yom Kippur after elaborate preparation, and as part of a complex *avodah*. Yet now the enemy impudently entered and defiled it, mocking the Temple, its people and its G-d.

No greater insult to national pride could be contemplated. Their personal despair was now compounded by national disgrace and degradation. All who understood what had happened were tortured, broken souls. Those souls still longed for Hashem, wanted desperately to feel close again, even though - or because - they sensed that they had fallen into a spiritual pit.

Hashem cherishes the soul that is broken and turns to Him. He reacted to a nation of broken souls by displaying the *cheruvim* locked in embrace, as if at time of great closeness. And indeed it was. *Klal Yisrael's* yearning for Him when He appeared distant led to His reasserting His commitment to them. This is the stuff a *moed* is made of - a time of special encounter and discovery. Tisha B'Av was indeed a holiday.

It is no coincidence that the Torah reading for the first Shabbos in the Three Weeks is Pinchas, which contains the musafim for all the holidays of the year.

This *moed*-quality of Tisha B'av expresses itself in several ways. The *sefarim hakedoshim* call our

attention to a remarkable identity. The most concentrated YomTov season we know occurs in Tishrei. Altogether, there are twenty-two days inclusive between Rosh Hashanah and the end of the Tishrei holiday period. The same number of days form the period of mourning for the *Beis Hamikdash*, between the Seventeenth of Tamuz and Tisha B'Av.

This is not coincidental, say the sefarim hakedoshim. It was meant to be. Once we grasp the notion that Tisha B'Av has *moed* properties, we are somewhat better prepared to accept that the relationship between these periods is not coincidental, but deliberate and tight. The next step is still a bit of a shock.

If the periods are parallel, then each day in the Tamuz-Av period is paired with one in Tishrei. Tisha B'Av - the last day of the summer group of 22 - is matched with Simchas Torah, the final day of the Tishrei holiday period. The joy of Simchas Torah, through which we sing and dance our way to an affirmation of our love of Hashem's Torah, has a parallel in Tisha B'Av! In the midst of their despair and darkness - or more accurately because of it - Jews learned on that day that Hashem's love for them was unending and unyielding. They understood that Hashem was still with them, and in no lesser degree than when they merited His closeness by performing as He expected.

Are we then to turn Tisha B'Av into a joyous occasion? Of course not. But the joy modifies our practical *avodah* on that day. Consider the contrast between two of the *gedolei chassidus*. The *Saba Kadisha* would fall to the ground at the day's beginning, weeping with outstretched limbs, and continuing to weep this way the entire day. (A doctor who observed this remarked that he had thought it humanly impossible for a person to cry so much.) The Magid of Kozhnitz, however, would occupy his day inspiring *chizuk*, banishing the fog of gloom and desperation that can easily lead people to lethargy in their *avodah*.

One of his own *meshalim* helps explain his behavior. A small but elite group of musicians were kept in the employ of a king. They weren't called upon too often, at least not when things were going well for the king. When the world began to weigh heavily upon the king, however, and he began sliding towards melancholy, they sprang into action to cheer him up.

On Tisha B'Av, said the Magid of Kozhnitz, the King's heart is heavy. All those who love Him will want to gladden the heart of the King Who followed His people into exile.

It seems that the Kozhnitzer must have been a member of the Hashem's special elite group. Other Jews have to figure out their place, each one according to who he is. While all must mourn, we must also find within our *avodah* a way to go beyond the mourning. For some, it will be in the form of resisting the natural tendency to become depressed and crushed. For others, it will be a reaffirmation of Hashem's kingship, expressing undying loyalty and devotion to Him even at the worst of times, keeping the *Keser Malchus* firmly in place.

1. Based on Nesivos Shalom, Bamidbar, pgs. 196-199
 2. Medrash, cited by Ohev Yisrael. The medrash applies this thought to Eichah 1:15, "He proclaimed a moed against me." The plain meaning of the verse has moed in the sense of "set time," i.e. Hashem appointed a set time to visit His destruction upon us. However, the medrash takes note of the fact that moed also has the specific connotation of a holiday, a set time for rejoicing.
 3. Yoma 54B
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