

THE GOD EXPERIENCE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Parashas Devarim is always Shabbos Chazon, the Shabbos before Tisha B'Av. To begin with, it has the word "Eichah" in it, an allusion to "Eichah," or "Lamentations" that we read on Tisha B'Av. It is also a recounting of the sins of the Jewish people while wandering through the desert, and which led to their various different punishments.

Of course, it was the sin of the spies, as the Talmud states, that led to the destruction of both temples on Tisha B'av, and a host of other national tragedies. It was THEIR "baseless crying," God said, that has resulted in the many reasons WE'VE had to cry since then.

Tisha B'Av is not an easy day for our generation. It is hard to relate to. We know why we observe it, at least intellectually. We don't know why we observe it, emotionally. The temples were destroyed long ago, and quite frankly, who today really misses them?

It is amazing how long a person can cry over something they really want, but can't have, or they lost and can't get back. It is remarkable what they will say to try and recover it, sometimes over and over again. Boredom is not even an issue.

The kinos which we say on Tisha B'Av, on the other hand, are another story. Aside from the fact that they are written in a way we no longer speak, or write, they are about history to which we no longer relate. Who today even went through the Holocaust? They are someone else's words written in a poetic manner to inspire us to feel something we have difficulty feeling, especially on an empty stomach.

For the last couple of months I have been working on a project called, "The God Experience." A hashgochahdik experience on a Motzei Shabbos compelled me to write a Perceptions on the topic, and that, over the weeks that followed, evolved into a book. When I published the book, I thought I was done.

I was wrong. Even as I wrote the last chapter it felt as if I was not finished. Having a God Experience is what life is all about. It is an ongoing thing that one should try to improve with each passing day. The potential for one is everywhere and at all times. There had to be more to say about it, and there was. It is resulted in "The God Experience, Part 2."

Even as I uploaded the file to Amazon to print, I already felt stirrings to publish a Part 3, and maybe a Part 4, etc. It's not that I already know what to write about. It's more like something inside me says,

"The God Experience is not something finite you can put between two covers and then walk away. God is infinite, and any experience of Him should be infinite as well."

But it's not for so many people. Even if they even have a God Experience it is limited to a couple of moments, maybe a day or so, like Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Beyond that, it's as if God moved on, so why don't they as well?

I once dovened in a minyan in which many people did not spend all that much time in their Shemonah Esrai. Fine. Who says you have to? If you are optimally connecting to God through a shorter Shemonah Esrai, why extend it unnecessarily.

What I found fascinating though was how a couple of people who all year round, including on Yom Kippur, dovened an average Shemonah Esrai, Motzei Yom Kippur all of a sudden took their time. While other dovened "normally," these few people stayed well past the end of the minyan and extended their fast in prayer.

I get it. It is the first prayer after a serious day of repenting and atoning, and they want to show God their sincerity. Perhaps they want to show themselves as well. They had come closer to God that day, and they want to show that parting from God is such sweet sorrow, as it should be.

Then what about the rest of the year? A person may walk away and say, "Well, that was great and I hope God enjoyed it as well. But as for the rest of the year, it's just not my way . . ." God may, on the other hand, say, "Wait a second. You just showed Me AND you how you can pray! What about the rest of the year?!"

Yeah, what about the rest of the year? That's just the point. That day was Yom Kippur. That prayer was on Motzei Yom Kippur. The rest of the year is, well, just that: the rest of the year. It's different, much less . . .

Important?

Not at all.

Inspiring?

More like it.

It must have been what it was like when a person visited the Temple, at least the first one. A person didn't just KNOW that God was real. They FELT that God was real. The experience lifted and carried a person the entire time. Focusing on spirituality was the easiest thing in the world.

Then a person had to go home again. He could live a hundred miles away from Jerusalem, and it could be some time before they had a chance to return. Praying in his minyan back home was certainly nothing like praying at the Temple, or even close to it.

Even today, thousands of years after the destruction, praying at the Kosel is a different experience.

Just knowing what once occurred on top of the Temple Mount is VERY inspiring. I find the Kosel to be one of the most distracting places to pray, even more than an airport, yet I have my best dovenings there. All I have to do is recall that Avraham bound Yitzchak just above me, and I am easily snapped into the proper intention.

I have come to realize that the Temple is only gone physically. Only? Isn't that everything? It is a tremendous amount, but no, it is not EVERYTHING. Granted, it was a whole different world and God Experience when the Temple existed. You didn't have to do very much to relate to God. You just had to plug into the God Experience that already existed. It was SO much easier.

Tisha B'Av does not only mourn the loss of the Temple. It also reminds us that we have to do the work to recreate it, first spiritually, and then physically. We have to put God back into reality. We have to create an emotional connection as well as a physical one. This will recreate the reality of a Bais HaMikdosh, and be the merit to finally receive the physical one as well.

It should be so now, so that this Tisha B'Av will be turned into a day of rejoicing instead of one of mourning.