

The Meaning of Tisha B'Av to Us: A Black Rabbi's Perspective

By

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For Black Jews the meaning of Tisha B'Av is never far away. It is not merely a remote holiday commemorating the destruction of the temple in 586 BC and 70 AD. The fact that the temple was destroyed on the same day—the 9th of Av—suggest that it was not an accident. Just as lightening does not strike the same spot twice, calamity does not follow a people by coincidence. For us, destruction, captivity, and the loss of our ancestral heritage has been a recurring and defining experience.

The reason a permanent homeland with one unified temple has been so important to the Jewish people is because for most of our history we have been nomadic, differentiated from within and segregated from without. From the time that G-d told Abram to “Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house” (Gen 12:1) we have been a people in search of a home. The very word “Hebrew” עברי in its most basic definition connotes this transitory and peripatetic trait. The forces that push us in the direction of G-d and toward each other and conversely away from G-d and against each other are like the currents of a tide, a seemingly endless cycle. From the completion of the Temple by King Solomon in 953 BC until the division of Israel following his death was a very brief moment of only twenty-three years

when the people, the nation, and the temple of Israel stood harmoniously.¹ Dislocation is the norm of our existence.

History also teaches us that internal divisions led to greater separation and alienation. It is interesting that we solemnly commemorate the destruction of the temple in 586 BC by the Babylonians rather than the loss of ten of the tribes of Israel during the Assyrian exile which occurred over a century earlier in 722 BC. Is the loss of a building more important than the loss of most of the Jewish people? Or, is it that in the prioritizing of oppression that Jews are want to do, we are less sympathetic to the tribes carried away in the Assyrian exile because the Northern Kingdom separated itself and therefore “deserved” its destruction more than those lost in Babylonian exile? And, why didn’t the Kingdom of Judah do more to help Jews who were fleeing death and captivity?² As we mourn and fast on Tisha B’Av, let us remember all the victims of Jewish exile and take responsibility for their descendants where ever they may be.

*By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.
There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for
songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the
songs of Zion!" How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign
land? Psalm 137:1-4*

¹ In 930 BC the Northern Kingdom consisting of ten tribes split away.

² 2 Kings 17:23. The Assyrian Exile was also a divine act.

“For the children of Israel walked in all the sins of Jeroboam which he did; they departed not from them; Until the LORD removed Israel out of his sight, as he had said by all his servants the prophets. So was Israel carried away out of their own land to Assyria unto this day.”

On Tisha B'Av we consider how all of these exiles are connected. Each blow to the Jewish people sent refugees into the world to continue their wandering alone. Many of the dispersed of Israel naturally found themselves in the nearest parts of Africa. Over the centuries, Jews from these locations followed established trade routes as either the merchants, their human cargo, or as willing travelers to the more distant kingdoms in southern and western Africa. The patterns of assimilation that have been so carefully documented among Jews of Europe repeat themselves in Africa; i.e. Jewish identity is lost through a combination of religious suppression, forced conversion, and intermarriage with the dominant populations. By the fifteenth century only a few but highly distinctive elements of their Judaism remained such as the practice of circumcision among some tribes, prohibitions against the eating of pork, agricultural festivals that correspond to Sukkot and Shavuot, and the presence of Hebrew words for G-d in several African languages.³ Hence, following this line of logic, historical evidence, and scriptural prophesy, it is plausible—if not highly probable—that a certain number of Africans of Jewish descent were captured in the Arab slave trade and then European slave trade that continued for over five hundred years and resulted in over twelve million Africans being taken to the western hemisphere. There they were forced to worship alien gods and cut off from the God of Israel.

Black Jews know what it mean to loss touch with your land, your people, your language, your culture, your history. Tisha B' Av is very important to us. It reminds us of the harshest consequences of prolonged exile. It is not the vengeance of an angry God, it is the just punishment of a backsliding people; a people whose forebears rebelled against G-d but whose

³ The most comprehensive study of this pre-Islamic Jewish presence is by, Joseph J. Williams, *Hebrewisms of West Africa: From the Nile to Niger with the Jews*. New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1930. See also Windsor, Rudolph R. *From Babylon To Timbuktu*. First Revised ed. Philadelphia: Winsor's Golden Series Publication, 1969.

descendants will be redeemed because “Israel is my son, even my firstborn” said God to pharaoh. (Exodus 4:22).

Yet we his chosen people strayed from his commandments and as a reward for our transgressions lost what was most precious and dear. This long nightmare of separation and estrangement should make those of us who have been found, returned, and restored, more thankful, more appreciative, and more grateful.

Our commemoration of Tisha B’Av recalls all the suffering of our people in the ancient land of Israel, it embodies the persecution of our people in Europe, and it includes over two thousand years of painful wondering. It connects the slavery of Egypt with the European slave trade. The Nile, the Mississippi, and the oceans that connect them across time and space are filled with the tears of our people. The pogroms of Russia are bonded through us to the state sponsored slaughters that occurred in Tulsa, Oklahoma (1921); Chicago, Illinois (1919); Wilmington, North Carolina (1898); Rosewood, Florida (1923) and Springfield, Illinois (1908). These sites mark some of the places on the map of our human history where our people shed their blood. The Warsaw Ghetto in Poland is inextricably bound in our souls with the ghettos of Watts, Detroit, Newark, and Harlem.

Hallowed places like Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Buchenwald, which are remembered for the suffering that our people endured there during the Holocaust, stand in our memory along with the forgotten places where our Jewish ancestors were taken into captivity at Goree Island, Senegal; Bridgetown, Barbados; Kingston, Jamaica; and Jamestown, Virginia. History records that the European slave trade in Africa began on August 8, 1482. Traditionally Tisha B’Av occurs between late July and early August. It is difficult to know for certain the exact date of

Tisha B'Av in the year 1444 due to complex changes in the Gregorian calendar over time and other assumptions that must be made in these calculations, yet the period includes a time frame that is normally considered sacred during the proper observance of Tisha B'Av.

“Thou shalt betroth a wife, and another man shall lie with her: thou shalt build an house, and thou shalt not dwell therein: thou shalt plant a vineyard, and shalt not gather the grapes thereof. . . Thy sons and thy daughters shall be given unto another people, and thine eyes shall look, and fail with longing for them all the day long: and there shall be no might in thine hand. . . Thou shalt beget sons and daughters, but thou shalt not enjoy them; for they shall go into captivity. . . And the LORD shall scatter thee among all people, from the one end of the earth even unto the other; and there thou shalt serve other gods, which neither thou nor thy fathers have known, even wood and stone.” Deut 28:30-64

Tisha B'Av is not a faint memory for us. It is an ongoing reality as the majority of those Jews who were lost and exiled over the centuries are still lost and exiled. We remember them, mourn for them, pray for their return, and work daily for the return of the entire scattered House of Israel. On this and every Tisha B'Av we pray that the promise of a merciful God will soon be fulfilled.

“When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come upon you and you take them to heart wherever the LORD your God disperses you among the nations, . . . then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you. Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the LORD your God will gather you and bring you back.”
Deut 30:1-4