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Tisha B'Av: A Holiday of Exile

John Ewing Roberts
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"Who knows why tomorrow is significant for Jews?" The teacher of our Jewish and Christian study group answered his own question. "It's Tisha B'Av, the ninth day of the month Av." Educator Michael Wegier, now director of Jewish renewal for the United Jewish Israel Appeal in London, explained this day of mourning. Twice enemies destroyed the Temple on the same day of the month, the ninth of Av—the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E. and the Romans in 70 C.E.

This year Tisha B'Av falls on Aug. 7; the holiday begins at sundown Aug. 6.

Other disasters also befell Jews on Tisha B'Av. Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492. Deportations from the Warsaw Ghetto to the Treblinka concentration camp began in 1942. The Bar Kochba revolt was crushed in 135. The First Crusade was declared in 1095. England expelled its Jews in 1290. The first major violence between Jews and Arabs in the 20th century took place in Tel Aviv in 1929. In 1994 a bomb killed 86 people in the Jewish Community Center in Buenos Aires. All on Tisha B'Av.

My current teacher, Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin, spells out the meaning of the destruction of the Temple in her beautifully presented book *The Tapestry of Jewish Time—A Spiritual Guide to Holidays and Life-Cycle Events*.

"The Temple was the place where heaven and earth met... a symbol of God's love for and devotion to the Jewish people. As long as the Temple stood, so the Jews thought, God stood with them. To lose the Temple was to lose more than the Jews' physical, political and economic center. It was to lose the affection and favor of God. It was, in short, to be rejected by God."

Without the Temple there was a hole in the heart of the world. Jews asked: "What about the Covenant? Was it broken or still intact?"

The prophets of the exile answered that the destruction was punishment, not abandonment. Isaiah 40 begins: "Take comfort, take comfort, my people, says God. Tell Jerusalem to take heart, proclaim to her that her time of service is accomplished, her guilt paid off."

Today Jews have a wide range of approaches to Tisha B'Av. The Orthodox build up to the day with a three-week mourning period—no weddings, no parties, no cutting of hair. For nine days before Tisha B'Av there is no eating of meat or drinking wine (except on the Sabbath) and no wearing of new clothing. On Tisha B'Av itself there is fasting, no washing, no sexual relations and no laughter or idle conversation. Black cloth covers the Ark where the Torah is kept in the synagogue. The book of Lamentations is read accompanied by prayers of mourning.

The Orthodox pray for the rebuilding of the Temple and the reinstitution of animal sacrifices. But in non-Orthodox congregations Tisha B'Av receives less notice, points out Rabbi Charles Arian, my colleague at Baltimore's Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies. Instead of longing for the rebuilding of the Temple, Conservative and Reform Jews see prayer and Torah study "not as an inferior substitute for sacrifice but as an improvement."

Conservative Rabbi Mark Loeb of Baltimore's Beth El Congregation finds it odd "to grieve so intensely in an age when Jews can now literally stand at the Western Wall," the part of the Second Temple's retaining wall that was closest to the Holy of Holies. He understands Tisha B'Av as "a very positive occasion for Jews to recall the tragic dimensions of our people's history.... Tisha B'Av enables us to connect with the totality of Jewish history and to recognize that we have managed to transcend suffering and to affirm a capacity to rekindle light even in the face of darkness."

Rabbi Floyd Herman of Har Sinai Congregation in Owings Mills, Md., the oldest continuously Reform congregation in the United States, summarizes a concept of Har Sinai's founding rabbi, David Einhorn. Tisha B'Av for liberal Jews ought to be a day of rejoicing rather than a day of mourning. The Temple had to be destroyed and the Diaspora had to occur so that the Jews could spread their message throughout the world.

Ophir Yarden, former director of the Melitz Center for Interfaith Encounter with Israel, sees ambivalence among Jews over Tisha B'Av. He notes the dissonance between the tradition of mourning and the feelings of many Jews

over the rebuilding of Jerusalem. Yarden, now a student at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, cites the Talmud's claim that the Temple was destroyed due to "baseless hatred amongst Jews." "We certainly have plenty of that," he cautions.

Michael Wegier says the significance of Tisha B'Av has grown for many Jews in recent years. "Today I relate to it very seriously... It is a time when I think not only of the destruction of the Temples, but also of all suffering and persecution."

What will happen this year in Jerusalem on Tisha B'Av? The focal point may once again be the area Jews call the Temple Mount and Muslims call the Haram al-Sharif or Noble Enclosure. Today the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa Mosque stand on land that is the third holiest site in Islamic tradition and the holiest in Judaism. In the past there has been violence when a group known as the Temple Mount Faithful tried to enter and lay the cornerstone for a new Temple.

Will they try again? I hope not.

What will this Christian do Thursday, on Tisha B'Av? I will go on line and click on <http://www.aish.com/wallcam/> or <http://www.kotelcam.tv/> for live pictures of the Western Wall. I will pray that no one—Jew, Muslim or Christian, Yasser Arafat, Ariel Sharon or the Temple Mount Faithful—engages in provocative acts on a day so rich in meaning. I will read Lamentations and pray for peace. I will give thanks in Rabbi Cardin's words that "For 2,000 years, the holiday of exile has captured and rekindled the secret of hope when the logical response was despair."

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