

Finding hope in Tisha B'Av calamities

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How deeply should we grieve on Tisha B'Av?

Next week, on the ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av, my fellow traditional Jews will mourn the destruction of the two Temples in Jerusalem, by the Babylonians in 587 B.C.E. and the Romans in 70 C.E. We will fast, read the Book of Lamentations and recite kinnot — dirges that lament those disasters. (The rabbis have added other calamities, which they suggest also occurred on the same day, but Tisha B'Av primarily commemorates the loss of the Temples.)

Without doubt, the destruction of the Temples — and of Jerusalem, our spiritual and political capital — were two of the most traumatic events in Jewish history and should be remembered.

But I maintain that the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem — and the concomitant dispersal of the Jews living there — by the Romans had several salutary effects. They included saving the Jewish people, enhancing our ability to carry out one of our most important commandments and enabling Judaism to rise to an even higher ethical plane. First, as to our survival as Jews, when the Muslim Arabs conquered Palestine — the Land of Israel — in 640 C.E., they in most cases permitted the small Jewish communities to

continue to live as Jews under Muslim rule. But had the rebellion against Rome and the destruction of the Second Temple and Jerusalem not taken place some 500 years earlier, the Jewish community in the land of Israel would have been much bigger, almost surely too large for the Arabs to permit its continued existence, especially in its own country and in the heart of the Muslim Middle East. Then, Jews might have been given the choice of conversion or death, which in either case would have ended Jewish history.

The Temple's destruction also forced us to undertake one of the Jewish people's primary roles — spreading the word of God to the nations. By dispersing, we were able to influence many more people — including those who followed our daughter religions, Christianity and Islam — than we could have from the tiny state of Judah. (However, having spent 2,000 years sacrificing ourselves for the good of mankind, we are now permitted to return to our homeland with a clear conscience.)

Perhaps most important, our dispersal facilitated the evolution of Judaism from a Temple-based religion of animal sacrifice to a faith based on morality and ethics. The Bible, especially the admonitions of the prophets, seems to indicate that often Jews made the required Temple sacrifices but ignored the ethical provisions of the law. When a religion centers around sacrificial rites, as Temple Judaism did, human nature may incline people to conclude that pleasing God involved paying for that goat to be slaughtered and offered up in His honor, and that making sure that your employees are paid in full and on time and that your starving neighbor has food on his table were of much less importance.

Without the possibility of animal sacrifice, other aspects of the religion, under the aegis of synagogue-based Judaism, were allowed to come to the fore.

As long as our livelihood — and our elevated status — depended on the exclusivity of the Temple, I'm sure that my fellow Levites and the Kohanim would have fought fiercely against the idea of any Jewish institutions, especially synagogues, not under our control. After all, we constituted the Temple elite; elites are always disproportionately rewarded, and people tend to struggle mightily not to lose those special advantages. I'm sure those benefits would have expanded to include many more than those spelled out in the Torah.

We humans are excellent at justifying our selfish actions in selfless terms. For example, public service workers who strike for higher pay often explain their work stoppages as being for the good of the people they serve. You could expect no less from the Temple elite.

Therefore, I believe that only the end of the Temple and its powerful priesthood could have paved the way for a Judaism based on Torah study, acts of loving-kindness and charity. Of course, the destruction of the Second Temple and Jerusalem was a terrible catastrophe for the Jews living there. Josephus, the Jewish-born, Roman chronicler of that period, estimated that 1 million Jews died during the battles for, and capture of, Jerusalem. It was therefore the second worst calamity to befall the Jewish people.

We don't mark Tisha B'Av for that reason, but if we feel the need to commemorate the murder of Jews, why would we reach back 2,000 years for the second worst case when the number one catastrophe in Jewish, and human, history, the Holocaust, occurred only some 70 years ago?

So, on Tisha B'Av, I will mourn the suffering of some 100 generations of Jews — from 70 C.E. to the founding of Israel in 1948 — whose stateless status made them vulnerable to prejudice, discrimination and violence.

But my sorrow will be tempered by my joy that we have survived as a people, resurrected our homeland and witnessed the evolution of Judaism from a religion based largely on animal sacrifice to one whose standards of ethics and morality have become a beacon to the world

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