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*“This is why I weep
and my eyes
overflow with tears.*

*No one is near to
comfort me,*

*no one to restore
my spirit.*

*My children are
destitute*

*because the enemy
has prevailed.”*

— Lamentations 1:16



Photo: David Cooper 2015

Tisha B'Av: A Time to Weep

A story is told about the famous French leader Napoleon Bonaparte as he was traveling through a Jewish town in Europe. He entered a synagogue, where he saw men, women, and children, all sitting on the floor, weeping and reading from ancient texts. The room was almost completely dark, and the atmosphere was gloomy.

“What great misfortune occurred?” Napoleon wanted to know. He assumed that something terrible had just happened to the Jews. The Jewish officer with him knew otherwise. He explained, “It is the ninth of *Av* on the Hebrew calendar. On this day, every year, Jews around the world gather to mourn the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.”

Napoleon asked, “When did that happen?” The officer replied, “2,000 years ago.” Shocked, Napoleon declared, “Any people that still cry for their land and their Temple after 2,000 years, will surely merit seeing both returned to them.”

While part of Napoleon’s prediction has come true, and the Jews have returned to Israel, the Jewish people still suffer bitterly from persecution, both within Israel and abroad. Moreover, the main cause for our weeping – the loss of the two Holy Temples, both destroyed on the ninth day of the Hebrew month of *Av* – has not been rectified. We have not rebuilt the Temple; we have not restored our relationship with God, and that is why we weep.

Tisha B'Av, literally, the ninth day in the Hebrew month of *Av*, is the darkest day on the Jewish calendar. We read the Book

of Lamentations which begins “*Eicha . . .*,” literally, “How can it be?”

We lament the dramatic change that the Jewish people underwent when they were exiled from their land and the Temple was destroyed. Jerusalem, once the city of joy, had been transformed into a city of mourning. The Jewish people, once admired, esteemed, and a great spiritual people, had been reduced to exiles, poor and helpless. Most tragic of all was the shattered relationship with God, where at one time, the Jews enjoyed a unique and powerful connection to the Lord.

We cry out, “How can it be?” How did such a dramatic turnabout occur? How can it be that over 2,000 years later, the Jewish people are still suffering so deeply? How can it be that after so many years, we still haven’t restored our relationship with God? As we read in Lamentations, “*This is why I weep and my eyes overflow with tears.*” On this one day a year, we cry for every tragedy there has ever been.

As we will learn in this month’s *Limmud* study, *Tisha B'Av* is a day with ancient roots, usually occurring in July or August on Western calendars, that goes back before the destruction of either Temple. It’s a day that has reverberated throughout history in the most tragic manner.

The Jewish sages teach that with every generation that has not seen the Temple restored, it is as though that generation destroyed it. To that end, we will also explore what spiritual sin caused the destruction of the Temple and how we might earn the privilege to see it restored in our lifetime.



Tears for Nothing

That night all the members of the community raised their voices and wept aloud.

— Numbers 14:1

The tears we shed on *Tisha B'Av* are primarily associated with the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE and the Second Temple in 70 CE; however, the origins of this tragic day go back centuries earlier.

The year was 1313 BCE when the Israelites were on the threshold of entering the Promised Land. Two years earlier, they had been freed from Egypt through God's powerful miracles, including the 10 plagues and the parting of the Red Sea. They had already experienced the revelation of God at Mt. Sinai and received His Word in the *Torah*. Indeed, they had been blessed with many of God's loving miracles.

Before entering the land, Moses had sent out 12 spies to bring back a report about the land. When the spies returned, all but two of them gave a bad report about the land. They determined that the land was unconquerable.

That night, the ninth of *Av*, "*all the members of the community raised their voices and wept aloud.*" They cried because they wanted to return to Egypt. They cried about their circumstances. But ultimately, they cried for nothing because God had already shown them that with

Him, they could do anything.

According to our Oral Tradition, that night God decreed, "Tonight they cried for nothing, so in the future I will give them a reason to cry!" Those words sealed the fate of generations to come. Both the First and Second Temples were destroyed on *Tisha B'Av*, marking the most agonizing and painful periods for the Jewish people, resulting in an exile whose ramifications are still felt today.

In 133 CE, the few remaining Jews in Israel rebelled against the Romans. The rebellion was finally squelched on *Tisha B'Av* and hundreds of Jews were brutally butchered. Exactly one year later, the Temple Mount was razed so that a pagan temple could be erected. In 1290, again on *Tisha B'Av*, the Jews were expelled from England. In 1492, on *Tisha B'Av*, the Jews were kicked out of Spain. World War II and the Holocaust were the direct results of World War I which began, of course, on *Tisha B'Av*.

God has given us many reasons to cry on this fateful day. However, when we learn to rectify the sin of the spies and instead live in faith, God will wipe every tear and put an end to all the tragedies. May we deserve that time to come speedily in our days!

think about it...

1. It has been said that "tears are the sweat of the soul." What we cry about tells us what we really care about. What brings tears to your eyes? What has moved you to tears most recently?
2. Why do you think that the rabbis set aside a day for crying and mourning tragedies? What impact might this posture of mourning make on a soul's ability to understand, embrace, and have peace with the decrees of God throughout the year?
3. When Rabbi Akiva saw the destruction of the Temple, he was able to see the good in it. What good can you find looking back in something that seemed bad at the time in your past?
4. Like many of us, there are undoubtedly situations in your life that upset you. Which of those situations are worthy of tears, and what other things, ultimately, didn't really matter? If it's helpful, make a list to see where you might be spending time worrying and fretting over things that don't matter in the end.
5. *Tisha B'Av* is a day of mourning, but also a day of self-reflection. As we witness tragedies and atrocities around the world, what are the things that you mourn the most? What are ways that we as individuals, communities, and as a society, can change for the better?
6. The origin of *Tisha B'Av* is the sin of the spies, which triggered a huge loss of faith among the children of Israel. What faith-less voices of doom are you tempted to heed in your life? What areas of your life are challenging your faith right now? How might you increase your faith and trust in God in this area?

Tears That Count

*The hearts of the people
cry out to the Lord.
You walls of Daughter Zion,
let your tears flow like a
river day and night;
give yourself no relief,
your eyes no rest.*

*Arise, cry out in the night,
as the watches of the night begin;
pour out your heart like water
in the presence of the Lord.
Lift up your hands to him
for the lives of our children,
who faint from hunger
at every street corner.*

— Lamentations 2:18–19



The Jewish sages teach that after the destruction of the First Temple, the prophet Jeremiah accompanied the Israelites to the Euphrates River, at which point he informed them that he was returning to Israel to stay with the few remaining Jews there. The people began to weep inconsolably. Jeremiah said to them, “I testify in the name of God that if this sincere cry would have transpired when we were still in our homeland, the exile would never have come about.”

Indeed, there is an appropriate time to weep. There is an opportune time to cry out to God. *Tisha B’Av* is one of those times. It’s a time to cry sincere tears of repentance and longing for God. It’s a time to regret past mistakes and to long for a better future with a restored relationship with God. These are the tears that God desires, and the tears that can open doors to salvation.

When the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt, it wasn’t until they cried out to God that the wheels of salvation began to turn. Similarly, our personal redemption, and that of the world, will come about when we turn to our Father in heaven and cry out to Him with sincere heartfelt prayer.

According to Jewish tradition, after the destruction of the Holy Temple, all the gates to heaven were locked, except for the Gates of Tears. However, if the Gates of Tears are never locked, then why should there be any gates at all? The answer is to keep out all the insincere and inappropriate tears.

Interestingly, the Hebrew word for “crying” is numerically equivalent to the Hebrew word for “heart.” (All Hebrew letters have numerical values, and in Judaism, when two words have the same numerical value, it means that those two words are intrinsically connected to each other.) This teaches us that true tears come directly from the deepest parts of our hearts. When our tearful prayers come directly from our hearts, they go straight to heaven.

Tisha B’Av is a time to weep for what really matters in life. We weep for the shattered relationship between God and His children. We remember that all evil in this world is a direct result of the loss of God dwelling in our midst. As we read in the Book of Lamentations on *Tisha B’Av*, “pour out your heart like water in the presence of the Lord.” As one rabbi once said, “The Gates of Tears were never locked. What a shame if no one bothers to walk through them!”

apply it

1. Think of a place where you have felt God’s presence most strongly. Now imagine that place was destroyed and you could never go there again. Take a moment to imagine how you might mourn the loss of that special place.
2. Cry out to God with tears that count! See God as your loving Father and don’t be shy about pouring out your heart to Him, telling Him your troubles, concerns, and sorrows. Conclude by asking for and thanking God for His assistance.
3. Errors in judgment like the sin of the faithless spies often come from fear. Next time a challenging situation arises, resolve to choose faith over fear. Choose a Bible verse, such as Joshua 1:9, Psalm 23:4, Psalm 27:1, or Isaiah 40:30, and memorize it for those situations.
4. Appreciate all that you have in your life right now. This week, every night before you go to sleep, think of three things that you were thankful for during that day.
5. Read Ecclesiastes 3:1–8. How would you describe the time of life that you are in right now? How does knowing that God has set a “time for everything” help or encourage you?
6. Think of one thing that you can do to make your community a better place, specifically to help those who suffer and mourn. Maybe it’s serving in the local food pantry, providing help to a family who has experienced great loss, or helping an elderly neighbor who has no one to look after him or her. Inspired by *Tisha B’Av*, you can be a beacon of hope for someone who needs to see God respond to his or her mourning by His love through you.



Tears of Hope

*Those who sow with tears
will reap with songs of joy.*

— Psalm 126:5

A story is recorded in the *Talmud* that took place after the destruction of the Second Temple. When Rabbi Akiva and his colleagues came to Mt. Scopus and witnessed the Temple's destruction, they tore their clothing in mourning. When they got to the Temple Mount itself and saw foxes running around where the Holy of Holies once stood, they cried. But Akiva laughed.

"Why are you laughing?" the rabbis asked. "Why are you crying?" Akiva replied. The rabbis explained that they were looking at the holiest place in the world and "now foxes run through it! How could we not cry!" Akiva replied, "That is why I am laughing."

He continued, "One prophet said, *'because of you, Zion will be plowed like a field* (Micah 3:12). Another prophet said, *'Once again men and women of ripe old age will sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each of them with cane in hand because of their age. The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there'* (Zechariah 8:4–5). Since the words of one prophet have been fulfilled, I now know that the words of the other prophet will also be fulfilled." To this the rabbis exclaimed, "You have comforted us, Akiva, you have comforted us."

Notice that the rabbis said "you have comforted us"

twice. The first time meant that Akiva taught the Jewish sages to be comforted by the bright future that would surely come. The second time indicated that Akiva had also taught them that the present was good as well. Often, destruction is necessary for construction.

According to Jewish tradition, the tragedies of *Tisha B'Av* will give way to the messianic era, when the Third and Eternal Temple will be erected, and God will be recognized as the one, sovereign King. When we cry out to God on *Tisha B'Av*, we move further along on the road of repentance and closer to God.

The Hebrew word for father is "Av," the name of this month. While God punishes us like a father disciplines his child, God also cares deeply for us and desires reconciliation with His children.

In the Book of Lamentations, recited on *Tisha B'Av*, we read, "Let him bury his face in the dust— there may yet be hope" (Lamentations 3:29). While we mourn on this day, it is also a day of hope. The tears that we shed on this day water the seeds of redemption. On this day, we join the psalmist and pray that "Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy."



Customs and Rituals Observed Today



We read from the Book of Isaiah, chapter 40, beginning with, “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.” The time of healing and hope has begun.

On the ninth day of *Av*, we observe a 25-hour fast and we mourn for the loss of our Holy Temples and for all other tragedies, both personal and collective. However, the day doesn’t just come in an instant; it essentially begins three weeks earlier on the 17th day of the Hebrew month of *Tammuz*. On that day in history, Jerusalem fell, paving the way for the destruction of the Temple, which occurred exactly three weeks later.

Like *Tisha B’Av*, the 17th of *Tammuz* has also seen many Jewish catastrophes and is considered an ominous day. The entire three-week period leading up to *Tisha B’Av* is known as “between the straits,” a difficult and historically dangerous time for the Jews. The name is taken from the Book of Lamentations which reads, “All her persecutors overtook her between the straits” (1:3, KJV).

On the 17th of *Tammuz* we observe a fast from dawn until dusk, ushering in the three weeks of mourning. During this time period, known as the Three Weeks, we minimize enjoyment and celebration. Among our customs, we refrain from scheduling weddings, listening to live music, shaving, or getting haircuts. When the month of *Av* begins, we decrease our joy even further. For nine days, the custom is to refrain from pleasures including drinking wine, eating meat, wearing freshly laundered clothing, and bathing in warm water for the sole purpose of enjoyment.

Then just before the sun sets on the eighth day of *Av*, as *Tisha B’Av* is about to begin, we end our pre-fast meal with a traditional meal of mourning consisting of bread and a hard-boiled egg dipped in ashes. Sundown marks the official start of *Tisha B’Av*.

Until sunset the next day, we do not eat, drink, wear leather shoes, apply soothing oils, or engage in marital relations. Many observe a custom to sleep on the floor or without a pillow. Until mid-day, we sit on low chairs or on the floor, just as one does when mourning the loss of a close relative.

Both at night and in the morning of *Tisha B’Av*, Jews gather in the synagogue to read the Book of Lamentations out loud and recite *kinot*, elegies that have been written throughout the generations recounting the many tragedies that have befallen the Jewish people. The day is filled entirely with introspection, mourning, and prayer.

Once *Tisha B’Av* has concluded we get up and embark on a new path. At first, we still observe the restraints of the Three Weeks for one more day because the Temple burnt through the 10th of *Av*, but then all constraints are removed. On the following Sabbath we read from the Book of Isaiah, chapter 40, beginning with, “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.” The time of healing and hope has begun.

