

Yom Kippur, Tisha B'Av and the Fight for Israeli Democracy

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There are six fast days in the Jewish calendar. Four of them are minor fasts, meaning you fast from sunrise to sunset. And two of them are major fasts, meaning you fast sunset to sunset. One of those major fasts is today, Yom Kippur. And the other is Tisha B'Av, the ninth of the Hebrew month Av.

Tisha B'Av and Yom Kippur. Two days of twenty-four-hour abstinence. I'd like to explore these two holy days: their differences, how they are linked to one another, and why it matters.

Yom Kippur is a day of atonement, forgiveness and hope.

Tisha B'Av is a day of sorrow, mourning and grief.

Yom Kippur is our petition for a second chance, to be sealed in the Book of Life. We pray אָרְבֵינוּ מִלְכָּנוּ, our parent, our benevolent God, be gracious to us, answer us. We pray to a God who listens and saves.

Tisha B'Av commemorates destruction. We read from the Book of Lamentations, אֵיכָה, *alas! Is there any agony like mine... the LORD afflicted me on this day of wrath! ...[God] has left me...in constant misery.* Tisha B'Av's God is one who punishes, turns away, damns.

On Yom Kippur, the synagogue is filled with music and majesty. A community of soul-searchers. When the Temple stood in Jerusalem, over two thousand years ago, it was on Yom Kippur, and *only* on Yom Kippur, that the High Priest would enter the Temple's Holy of Holies and pray for the people.

Tisha B'Av is a day of anguish and heartbreak, on which worshipers wail over the calamities that darken our history. The First Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed on the Ninth of Av, Tisha B'Av, in 587 BCE. The Second Temple was also destroyed on the Ninth of Av, in 70 CE. Tisha B'Av in 1290 was the date the Jews were expelled from England. Tisha B'Av in 1492 was the date the Jews were expelled from Spain. Tisha B'Av in 1914 was the date the First World War began. Tisha B'Av in 1942 was the date the first killings started at Treblinka.

On Yom Kippur, white garments reflect purity and renewal.

On Tisha B'Av, it is sackcloth and ash.

On Yom Kippur we affirm our faith that repentance, prayer, and charity can annul a severe decree.

On Tisha B'Av the severe decree has already been dealt. We sit in ruins.

But here's a similarity. On Yom Kippur, rather than blaming others for the pain and suffering in the world, we own up, proclaiming our own accountability. We say עלֵנוּ הַטְּאָה וְשִׁקְטָנוּ, for the sins we have sinned. Even though the whole litany of sins were not committed with our own hand, we acknowledge our communal responsibility.

On Tisha B'Av, despite it having been the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar who destroyed the First Temple, and the Roman Emperor Titus who destroyed the Second, the rabbis say it was because of baseless hatred between Jews. Outside aggressors may have besieged, breached, battered and burnt the temple, but it was our own divisiveness that made us vulnerable in the first place. We are responsible for the fissures in our own foundation. We are responsible for the weakening of our walls. The fortress was already fragmented by our own infighting, fanaticism and hate.

Yom Kippur has always been profoundly meaningful to me, even as a child: the resonance of communal voices lifted on choir wings, the spiritual wooziness of praying and fasting all day.

Tisha B'Av, on the other hand, hasn't ranked as high for me. Tisha B'Av has never necessitated us renting Royce Hall. We've never had to tell anyone to pick up their Tisha B'Av tickets at will call.

But this past Tisha B'Av felt different. This past Tisha B'Av, which began the evening of July 26, people in Israel were holding signs that said: "Nebuchadnezzar. Titus. Netanyahu." This past Tisha B'Av, headlines in Israel included:

The Catastrophe of Tisha B'Av Is Much Too Real in Israel This Year

This Tisha B'Av Is About Reclaiming Judaism From Extremists

On the Eve of Tisha B'Av, Israel Risks an Unforgivable Process of Self-Destruction

Jewish historian Shulamit Magnus wrote about being at the Western Wall, two days before Tisha B'Av, joining a mass assembly of protesters before marching to the Knesset.

"We passed...the southern extension of the Western Wall," she wrote. "There, the huge boulders that were part of King Herod's magnificent Temple, a wonder of the ancient world, still lie where they were hurled by the Romans. ...we awaited the outcome of a Knesset vote... only to hear of its final passing with stupefaction and crushed hearts."

She continued: "For those who have had difficulty in the past in summoning up felt memory of catastrophe on Tisha B'av, this year, it [was] easy."

Netanyahu's Knesset had passed the law striking down the reasonableness standard of review, the doctrine the Israeli Supreme Court uses to review the common-sense ethicality of the Knesset's legislation. The reasonableness standard has only ever been used about once a year. But it allows the court to veto a decision by the Knesset based on strict ethical standards of

reasonableness. Using a standard of reasonableness is practiced in British law and has been part of the Israeli legal system since its establishment.

Without the reasonableness standard, which enables the Supreme Court to annul overreaching laws, there are no checks and balances to the governing party. Israel doesn't have a constitution to enshrine human rights, equality, freedom, or to protect citizens from state-enacted religious coercion. Israel doesn't have a House and a Senate to provide checks and balances for each other, or, for that matter, a combined Congress that provides a check against the Executive, the president. And Israel has a coalition government, which affords out-sized power to smaller extremist parties needed to reach the critical number necessary to form the government.

An extremist Israeli government without any checks and balances could do anything. It could segregate all beaches between men and women. Force all businesses to close on Shabbat. Make women cover their hair. Defund Reform Judaism. Expand the settlements. It could prevent Israeli Arabs from voting. Allow Jewish housing to be built on private Palestinian land. Pass a basic law that permanently exempts Haredis, who will soon make up 20 percent of the population, from army service. Take away non-Orthodox Jews' right to return to Israel. All of these things have already been proposed. And Netanyahu, motivated by his desire to stay out of jail, is making deals. With xenophobes, homophobes, scoundrels and Jewish supremacists.

One of those Jewish supremacists is the far-right Minister of National Security, who when he was younger was considered too fanatical to be allowed into the army, who has expressed support for the ethnic cleansing of Arabs from Israel, who for years had a photo in his living room of Baruch Goldstein, the gunman who in 1994 massacred 29 Palestinian people while they were praying in their mosque in Hebron. On this past Tisha B'Av, this Minister of Security provocatively, flagrantly marched upon the Temple Mount, the location of First and Second Temples, where now stands the Al-Aqsa Mosque, a flashpoint in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The rabbis say that the Temple was destroyed because of baseless hatred *between Jews*. Doniel Hartman called Tisha B'Av "a loss that we in our tradition attribute to an inner self-destructive dimension in Jewish society."

What is the inner, self-destructive dimension in Jewish society? More than just the old adage: two Jews, three opinions. Or the joke about the Jewish man on a deserted island who builds two synagogues, one in which to pray, and the other because he would never step in that one. We are stiff-necked, opinionated, vocal and questioning, and thank goodness for that. Healthy debate is good. Arguments for the sake of heaven. But when it comes to talking about Israel? We get vicious. Self-righteous. We hurl accusations at one another. Historically, those who criticized Israel were too often accused of disloyalty, of Jewish anti-Zionism, heresy.

Over the last eight months, hundreds of thousands of Israeli citizens, have protested the judicial overhaul. And the protests are a sea of Israeli flags. Blue and white stripes and Stars of David as far as the eye can see. And the sound of HaTikvah, and signs printed with the words from the National Anthem, לְהִיְוֹת עַם חֵפְזִי בְּאֶרֶץנוּ, "to be a free people in our land."

This isn't about abandoning Israel, or disloyalty, or Jewish anti-Zionism. This is about love of country. This is hundreds of thousands of people carrying their national flags high, loving their country so deeply that they have taken to the streets, and remained there every Saturday for forty weeks, to take back their country from extremists and fundamentalists and to re-assert the sanity of centrists. This is a movement of people wanting our miraculous start-up nation to survive and thrive, a Jewish state that exemplifies our highest values and ideals. Not a theocracy. A Democracy, for we were strangers in the land of Egypt.

This is a movement of people who want to uphold the words of the Israeli Declaration of Independence which say, "The State of Israel...will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions."

This is a movement of people who want to prevent what Matti Friedman calls the "Lebanonization of Israel," referring to the plight of Lebanon, which once was the Paris of the Middle East, until it devolved into corruption and zealotry. Friedman said, "It can happen to Israel. It is happening now."

There is a legend that long before the Temple stood, there were two brothers who farmed on that site. One had a large family, and the other lived alone. At harvest time, the brother who lived alone thought his brother, with his big family, could surely use more grain. The brother with the big family thought: my brother doesn't have anyone helping with his fields, he could surely use more grain. Each went to the other's home in the quiet of the night and left extra grain in the other's pile. Each morning each brother was surprised to see the same amount of grain in their pile. This went on until one night the brothers bumped into each other. They instantly understood what the other was doing, wept and embraced. Their brotherly love lit the sky and God selected this site for the Temple.

Brotherly love builds temples, and hatred between brothers destroys it. How do we learn to talk with one another about our shared love for Israel, while being able to express our dread and dreams, our fears and philosophies?

Israeli-American Artist Gili Getz, a military photographer and the president of American Friends of Combatants for Peace, has toured the US with his acclaimed one-man play titled "The Forbidden Conversation". The play explores Gili's journey to understand how we talk about Israel, the most complex, sensitive, contentious, divisive topic in the Jewish community.

He says that "the time to train that muscle of communal ability to hold different views and be able to express them in a communal setting is now."

On Friday night, October 13, Gili Getz will be bringing "The Forbidden Conversation" to Temple Isaiah. Following the play, Gili will facilitate a conversation about Israel, in which different viewpoints are invited and encouraged. (Yes, it is the same night that the Taylor Swift movie and the Exorcist movie come out in theaters, but I hope you will come to Isaiah!)

Also, every Friday night, at 5 p.m., before services, we have a discussion about the latest news in Israel, how we understand it, how we might respond, and we welcome you to join, to train that muscle of communal ability to hold different views. You may have seen the banner in the Royce Hall lobby, which will hang proudly in the front courtyard of the temple, which reads “Democracy Here, in Israel and Everywhere.” And Isaiah members have joined the Sunday morning demonstrations put on by the organization UnXeptable in front of the Israeli consulate on Wilshire, protesting the assault on the Supreme Court. Rabbi Jaclyn led a trip to Israel this summer, and we’re planning another in 2025.

Israelis are reaching out to American Jews like never before, begging the American Jewish community to champion the fight for Democracy.

Daniel Gordis said, “Whether you are right or you’re left, religious or secular, an immigrant or a native, doesn’t make any difference... This is about the moral nature of this country. If the Jewish state can be flirting with fundamental racism, misogyny, and people [outside of Israel] don’t have something to say about it, then we are not a peoplehood... Don’t abandon the Zionist project at this critical moment. We’re begging the Diaspora to become involved... to make it clear that we are a worldwide Jewish people committed to justice, morality and making Israel the kind of country [of which] our children and grandchildren can continue to be proud.”

The Judicial Overhaul has become a lightning rod for many issues in Israel that have festered for decades: increasing settler violence, the widening gap between the rich and the poor, religious fundamentalism, reproductive freedom, LGBT rights, Palestinian rights, immigrant integration, poverty in the north, corruption in leadership... everyone wearing their broken heart on their sleeve, desperate to be heard.

And the more we don’t listen to everyone’s stories and concerns, the more vulnerable we become. On Tisha B’Av we remember that outside aggressors may have burned the Temple, but it was our divisiveness that made us vulnerable in the first place. The fissures in our foundation are now exposed, and it is upon us to participate in its repair. To not stand idly by while Democracy is besieged, its walls breached, its pillars battered. This crisis is the unraveling of the best of Israel: its conscience, its heart and its spirit.

We are a reform synagogue. And yes, Reform Judaism is a liberal movement. But, our ideals are not modern. Our progressive ideals date back to the 6th century BCE, when after the First Temple was destroyed, the prophet Isaiah, after whom our synagogue takes its name, said: “Is this the fast I desire, a day for men to starve their bodies? Is it bowing the head like a bulrush and lying in sackcloth and ashes? No. This is the fast I desire: To unlock fetters of wickedness. To let the oppressed go free; To break off every yoke. It is to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the wretched poor into your home; when you see the naked, to clothe [them], and not to ignore your own kin. Then shall your light burst through like the dawn.”

Brotherly love builds temples, and hatred between brothers destroys them.

Talmud says the Messiah will be born on Tisha B'Av. And Yom Kippur concludes with a triumphant *tekiah gedolah*, the shofar “ringing loud and long,”² with the promise of heralding the messianic age, a time of peace for all.

On this fast day, we remember what it is we actually stand for. לְהִיזוֹת עִם הַפְּשִׁי בְּאַרְצֵנוּ. To be a free people. To be a free people and to defend the freedom of other people. In our land. In Israel. In this land. In America. In all lands. To lift our voices against tyranny. To stand against the rising tide of political fanaticism. To rise up out of the ashes of despair, to resist the self-destructive dimension, and to come together with communal responsibility, determination, and against all odds...hope.