TISHA B’AV
Reacting to Criticism

Chief Rabbi of South Africa, Rabbi Dr. Warren Goldstein, explains how we can leverage Tisha B’Av to give and receive criticism in a more sensitive and effective way.

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H
ow is it possible to be genuinely kind to someone and to hate them at the same time?

Remarkably, this is what the Talmud seems to say regarding the spiritual cause of the destruction of the Second Temple:

“During the Second Temple period, the people occupied themselves with Torah, Mitzvot and lovingkindness. Why was the Temple destroyed? Because they acted with Sinat Chinam – senseless hatred.”

How is this possible?

The Netziv suggests an answer: “As a result of the senseless hatred in their hearts that one harbored for the other, they suspected all those who did not follow their path as a G-d-fearing Jew of being a Sadducee and a heretic.”

If you were part of my community of believers and followed my customs you were accepted, but if not, you were rejected.

Sectarianism reigned supreme prior to the destruction. There were many distinct sects – Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots and Sicarii – and more factions within these sects. If you were part of my faction, specific ideological group and community, you were worthy of endless kindness. But if you were part of another sect whose values and beliefs threatened mine, you were scorned and hated. There was no middle road. Only black and white. Either you’re ideologically with me or against me.

Thus the hatred and infighting in Jerusalem were so disastrous on the eve of destruction that Josephus describes the society as “a great body torn in pieces.”

How do disagreements deteriorate into such deep hatred?

In the War Scroll, found near the Dead Sea in the caves of Qumran, we can perhaps detect an answer. The text – probably written by the Essenes – describes its followers as “the sons of light” and all others (including fellow Jews) as “the sons of darkness.”

This changes the rules of discourse.

We are no longer debating views or ideas. We are delegitimizing the other as a person. It is no longer about perspectives but about the person – vicious ad hominem attacks. It’s no longer about right and wrong, but about you and me. All who think and act like me are ‘good’ and bring spiritual light and morality to the world and all who disagree are ‘bad’ and immoral, invoking spiritual darkness. When I am absolutely right and you are absolutely wrong; when the other is totally disqualified and seen as part of ‘the dark side,’ we are treading dangerously close to the abyss of senseless hatred.

How blessed we are to have a renewed Jewish society in Israel. We face many challenges here and around the world as to how best chart the way forward. These issues are often extremely divisive because they touch the very essence of Jewish life and destiny. This is particularly true during the prolonged election period in Israel. Respectful democratic discourse often descends into sharp divisiveness, delegitimization and demonization.

The Torah hints to the cure of this destructive phenomenon when it tells us that Aharon the High Priest passed away on Rosh Chodesh Av, the first day of the month of Av. At the onset of what would become the most tragic time in Jewish history – the first nine days of the month of Av culminating in Tisha B’Av – we are charged to recall Aharon’s life and legacy. More than anyone else in our history, he was the national peacemaker, always doing everything he could to create peace and harmony between fellow Jews, despite salient differences and painful personal disputes.

At this time of year when we reflect on what the Sages tell us is the spiritual cause of the destruction of the Temple – senseless hatred – we should evoke Aharon’s memory and aim to strive for its cure.

1 Yoma 9b.
2 Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, HaEmek Davar, introduction to the book of Genesis.
3 The Jewish War, Book 5:1.
4 Interestingly, this is the only yahrzeit date mentioned explicitly in the Torah – that Aaron died on the first day of the 5th month. (Bamidbar 33:38). Remarkably, this appears in Parashat Masei which is read every year around Rosh Chodesh Av.
5 Avot DeRabbi Natan 12.

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MOURNING FOR THE PAST

Napoleon Bonaparte was once traveling through a small Jewish town in Europe.

He happened to enter a synagogue on Tisha B’Av and saw people sitting on the floor and weeping. Napoleon asked why the people were crying. An enlightened Jewish French officer told him that the Jewish people had a custom to gather once a year to fast, pray, and mourn for the destruction of their Temple.

Napoleon asked, “When was this?”

“Over 2,000 years ago,” said the officer.

“Wow!” said Napoleon. “A nation that cries and fasts for over 2,000 years for their Temple will surely be rewarded with its rebuilding.”

We Jews definitely excel in our ability to continue mourning for what was lost so long ago. Yet as the years pass and the memory of the Mikdash fades – and particularly as we return to Israel and enjoy the restoration of so much of our glorious past – we need to continue mourning for the still missing Beit HaMikdash and address the implications of its continued state of churban (destruction).

AN IMMINENT FUTURE

That said, I believe we are unique in a second important way, a way also critical to why we have survived so long in exile and why we have miraculously returned to our Land. Many nostalgize their past but we Jews always saw it as part of our future – our immediate future. For thousands of years Jews may have lived far from Yerushalayim with no realistic hope of return, but they always believed that their return was imminent.

Many exiled peoples long for their lost lands, but because they (and for sure their children) see this past as no more than history, they (and for sure their children) ‘move on’ and assimilate into their new surroundings. In contrast, the core of our people retained its distinct identity amidst both hostile and friendly environments because we believed we were soon to be redeemed. Because we were about to return to Yerushalayim we never belonged anywhere else.

Our belief in our imminent return is expressed in the language of the Ani Ma’amin, belief in the coming of Mashiach, “even though he is delayed, despite all this I await his arrival every day.” In our daily prayers we go even further by saying that we pine for G-d’s salvation – יְשִׁיעָתְךָ קִוִּיתִי ה for 40 days – or not just every day, but all day.

Not only have we seen Yerushalayim as part of our imminent future, we always saw ourselves as connected to it in the present. The Talmud tells us that anyone who aspires to see Yerushalayim is considered as having been born there.

Based upon this source, Shmuel Agnon opened his Nobel Prize acceptance speech with the following words – “As a result of the historic catastrophe in which Titus of Rome destroyed Jerusalem, and Israel was exiled from its Land, I was born in one of the cities of Exile. But I always regarded myself as one who was born in Jerusalem.”

And in the words of another Jewish Nobel Laureate, Elie Wiesel, “When a Jew visits Jerusalem for the first time, it is not the first time, it is a homecoming.”

May our continued anticipation of our complete Redemption, inspired by its having begun, give us the strength to sustain our independent identity and merit its completion in the form of the rebuilding of the Beit HaMikdash.

1 Also see the Ran on Shabbat 31a. He teaches that one of the questions we are asked upon arrival in Heaven is whether we anticipated Redemption. We are expected not only to anticipate Redemption but to anticipate it in our own days.

2 This tfilla’s language goes further than its source – the language Ya’aakov used in his blessings to his sons is (Bereishit 49:18).

3 Ketuvin 75a.

4 Rav Yosef Chaim Zonnenfeld (Chief Rabbi of Yerushalayim) used this Gemara as justification for allowing one to write on his birth certificate that he was born in Jerusalem. But I always regarded myself as one who was born in one of the cities of Exile. (Chief Rabbi of Yerushalayim) used this Gemara as justification for allowing one to write on his birth certificate that he was born in Jerusalem.

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Eliyahu is generally associated with our doors on the eve of Pesach as we wait for him to herald the Geula. The Shulchan Aruch\(^1\) teaches a mnemonic device (known as a”t ba”sh) through which to remember special dates of the year based on the first holiday of the Jewish calendar – Pesach. The first day of Pesach is parallel to the day of \(Tav\) = Tisha B’Av (i.e. they will always fall out on the same day of the week). Additionally, two things are associated with potential redemption (as Mashiach is born on Tisha B’Av\(^2\)) and memories of bitterness! And so, on Tisha B’Av, like on Pesach, we hear echoes of Eliyahu by our doors as he is associated with the coming of the Final Redemption.\(^3\)

In fact, in many accounts we find Eliyahu by our thresholds – suspended in time and space between worlds – this one, and the World to Come; between inside and out, between parents and children. Eliyahu is confronted by G-d at the door of a cave in Chorev, appears to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai after 12 years at the door of his cave and to Rabbi Yehoshua HaGarsi (Rabbi Akiva’s devoted attendant) at the door of his home. Similarly, he confronts Rabbi Yose at the door of a \(churva\) – a ruin of Jerusalem – and teaches him, and us, numerous messages in the wake of destruction.\(^4\)

Rabbi Yose is searching for a means to connect with G-d post-\(churban\) and enters a destroyed building to pray, indicative of his psychological and emotional state. He can only relate to G-d through the ruins of the past! Eliyahu teaches him at the door that time does not stand still and that Rabbi Yose should not live his life focused on destruction and what was lost. Rather, he should “pray on the road” – learning how to move on and relate to G-d through \(tefila\) as part of a rebuilding process. Even if passers-by may interrupt – even if the road is beset with numerous distractions and setbacks – it is still preferable to pray and progress along a road than staying inside a ruin.

Eliyahu is at the door to encourage and instruct us to move forward and not be stunted by destruction. Our \(tefillot\) should not be focused on the past – but as we say three times a day – \(וְלִירָעָשְׁלָיִם עִירְךָ בְּרַחֲמִים\) – they express a trajectory for the future.

After teaching Rabbi Yose to beseech G-d \(baderach\) (on the road), and not in a \(churva\), Eliyahu continues to offer an alternative, preferable suggestion – enter as a community into the Beit Knesset and Beit Midrash! When we are in a state of \(galut\), our synagogues and houses of study are the greatest alternatives to the Beit HaMikdash. They demand a greater effort on our part, because immediate communication and revelation are not manifest as in the Mikdash, but echoes of G-d responding to our blessings may still be heard. The reality and challenge of \(galut\) is to recognize what we have lost and what we are lacking while simultaneously working on our current relationship with G-d with what we have in the present.

Every Tisha B’Av we re-enter the \(churva\) as we remember the glory of our past and cry with Rabbi Yose in a state of destitution and despair. But Eliyahu HaNavi waits for us by the threshold like on Pesach, teaching us how to progress from a state of destruction to a state of redemption. He doesn’t interrupt Rabbi Yose in the \(churva\) but waits at the door until he finishes his prayer. He allows us to mourn but reminds us that there is a road ahead that leads to rebuilding. And in the interim, we have a means of maintaining a relationship with G-d through prayers and Torah learning as a community.

Eliyahu assures Rabbi Yose: “Whenever the Jews go into the synagogues and schoolhouses and respond: ‘May His great name be blessed!’ the Holy One, blessed be He, shakes His head and says: Happy is the king who is thus praised in this house! Woe to the father who had to banish his children, and woe to the children who had to be banished from the table of their father!”

And we are confident in the knowledge that by the door awaits the prophet who will restore the Father to the children and the children to the Father!

\(^1\) Orach Chaim 428.3.
\(^2\) Jerusalem Talmud, Berachot 2:4.
\(^3\) See Malachi 3:23.
\(^4\) Based on Berachot 3b.

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Keriya Over YERUSHALAYIM

Following the destruction of the Temple, the Tanna'im instituted three laws of keriya (tearing ones’ garments). One who sees the Beit HaMikdash in a state of churban, one who sees Yerushalayim (the Old City), and one who sees cities of Yehuda in such a state are all obligated to do keriya (Mo’ed Katan 26a). Regarding the state of churban of the cities of Yehuda, the Magen Avraham (Orach Chaim 561:1) rules that one does keriya even if the city is inhabited by Jews, as long as it is ruled by non-Jews. The definition of churban in relation to cities of Yehuda is that these cities are no longer under Jewish control.

Therefore, after the Six-Day War, we no longer do keriya over the cities of Yehuda.

In contrast, it seems obvious that in regard to the din of bechurbana in relation to the Beit HaMikdash, the determining factor is not whether the Temple Mount is under Jewish control, but whether the Beit HaMikdash itself is in a state of destruction. Thus, we do keriya nowadays upon seeing the makom haMikdash (location of the Temple).

However, with regard to Yerushalayim bechurbana, it is unclear whether the takanah (enactment) to do keriya depends on the political situation, under whose jurisdiction the city is, or on the state of the Beit HaMikdash. These possibilities correspond to the two unique aspects that characterize Yerushalayim – its status as the political capital of the Jewish government in Eretz Yisrael and its being endowed with partial kedushat haMikdash (sanctity of the Temple).

Rav Soloveitchik was convinced that keriya over Yerushalayim bechurbana is a demonstration of mourning over the destruction of the Beit HaMikdash. The uniqueness of Yerushalayim is that it was sanctified with a partial kedushat haMikdash. The sanctified areas in Yerushalayim correspond to the Israelite desert encampment. The azara (outer court of the Temple) was sanctified with a kedusha corresponding to machane Shechina (the Divine Camp that contained the Mishkan), Har HaBayit with kedushat machane Leviya (the encampment of the Levites), and Yerushalayim with kedushat machane Yisrael (an area beyond machane Leviya where the rest of the Jews encamped). Kedushat machane Yisrael stems from kedushat machane Shechina, and that is why Yerushalayim contains a lower level of kedushat haMikdash.

Therefore, when the Beit HaMikdash is in a state of destruction, even if the Old City is under Jewish sovereignty and Jewish presence in the city continues to increase, Yerushalayim is still halachically considered to be in a state of churban. Thus, the enactment of keriya over Yerushalayim bechurbana still applies.

Likewise, the Rav did not see fit to celebrate Yom Yerushalayim with the recitation of Hallel, because he felt that the city remains in a state of destruction if the Beit HaMikdash is in such a state. In terms of Halacha, nothing of significance occurred on the day of the city’s inclusion under Jewish sovereignty.

The Rav’s view is considered to be the minority opinion. The prevalent practice is that we do not do keriya over Yerushalayim at this time, now that Yerushalayim is under Jewish sovereignty. We assume that when the Sages instituted the din of keriya over the destruction of Yerushalayim, it was to mourn the fact that it could no longer function as the capital of the Jewish government. We do consider it halachically significant that, since 1967, Yerushalayim can once again serve as the capital city in a political sense. The Jewish control of Yerushalayim is a considerable cause for celebration.

Since there is a debate regarding whether keriya should be performed, we do not tear our clothes. First, there is a general rule that in a case of machloket in hilchot aveilut (laws of mourning), the halacha is in accordance with the lenient opinion. Keriya over Yerushalayim bechurbana would presumably be governed by this principle since this keriya is an expression of aveilut. Second, whenever the mitzvah of keriya does not apply, the act of keriya would be included in the prohibition of bal tashchit (destroying usable items) (Pischei Teshuva, Yoreh De’ah 340:1). Therefore, keriya should only be performed when there is a definite obligation to do so.

This essay is taken from “Rav Schachter on the Moadim”.

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Seudah HaMafseket on Shabbat

The beraita in Ta'anit (29b) says that when the Ninth of Av occurs on Shabbat, or when the eve of the Ninth of Av occurs on Shabbat, one need not reduce the amount of food one eats; rather, one may eat and drink as much as one requires and put a meal on one’s table even like that of King Solomon in his time.

The Rishonim disagree whether the beraita is implying that it is permitted to eat a meal similar to that of Solomon (but perhaps it is better to be stringent), or whether one is required to eat a large and beautiful meal in honor of Shabbat, as usual.

According to the Ra’avya, it is permissible to eat meat and drink wine, but there are those who do not as there is no such obligation. Similarly, Shibolei HaLeket states that on this Shabbat, starting at midday, there are those who do not eat meat or drink wine.

However, the Shibolei HaLeket himself writes in the name of Rabbi Avigdor Cohen Tzedek, that one should not refrain from eating meat and wine even at the Seudah HaMafseket on Shabbat, so as not to mourn on Shabbat. Maimonides (Ta’anit 5: 8-9) also rules that one should eat Seudah Shlishit as a meal of Solomon, including meat and wine (even if Tisha B’Av itself falls on Shabbat).

What is the basis of the dispute?

When the eve of Tisha B’Av (or Tisha B’Av itself) falls on Shabbat, is the Seudah HaMafseket eaten without mourning (to honor Shabbat) or is there no Seudah HaMafseket at all? According to the opinions that advocate eating less meat and wine, there is a Seudah HaMafseket, whose rules are more lenient because of Shabbat. However, Rashi (Ta’anit 29b) writes that on the eve of Tisha B’Av which falls on Shabbat, one does not stop his meal, nor does he eat less, but rather eats all he needs and sets his table just like the meal of Solomon.

Rashi suggests that there is no Seudah HaMafseket on Shabbat.

This question connects to a broader discussion: do we observe the private mourning of Tisha B’Av on Shabbat, but not public mourning? (Or Zarua, HaMaharil and the Rama rule this way). Or are the laws of mourning not observed at all on Shabbat, not even in private (Ramban, Rashba and the Rosh, as well as the Shulchan Aruch and the Vilna Gaon rule this way).

Another explanation of the disagreement pertains to the nature of the Seudah HaMafseket. The Seudah HaMafseket is a meal of mourning (and therefore should not be eaten on Shabbat). However, Rav Soloveitchik explains that the Seudah HaMafseket is not related to mourning, but a law connected to fasting; an indication of the start of the fast (and therefore there is a Seudah HaMafseket even on the eve of Yom Kippur, even though there is no mourning there). It is possible that this is the basis for the opinion that on principle we should eat a Seudah HaMafseket on Shabbat as well.

In mind that Tisha B’Av needs preparation, if there is no Seudah HaMafseket on Shabbat, a meal worthy of King Solomon must also be a fitting preparation for us to enter the fast, in holiness and with the appropriate solemnity.

IN PRACTICE

The Mishna Berura states that it is customary to eat Seudah Shlishit as usual, and it is forbidden to refrain from eating meat and drinking wine because that indicates mourning on Shabbat. The Mishna Berura debates whether it is proper to sit at this meal in sorrow, without friends, like a regular Seudah HaMafseket (Magen Avraham), or is that considered mourning in public (Bechor Shor)?

It would seem that the Mishna Berura is lenient, and a family meal is permitted, even with a zimun.

According to the Igrot Moshe, not only is someone who is accustomed to eat meat for Seudah Shlishit permitted to do so on this Shabbat, but also one who is not accustomed to and specifically wants to on this Shabbat. It is also permitted to sing zemirot at this meal even if one does not regularly sing at Seudah Shlishit.

It seems that one can eat as usual, and even add food to be stronger for the fast (although he should not say that he is adding for the fast), and even eat meat and wine. However, one should not be excessively joyful and above the happiness of a regular Shabbat.

With G-d’s help, through the sanctity of Shabbat, may we merit to see the consolation of Zion, speedily in our days!

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ASK THE RABBI

Rabbi Yosef Zvi Rimon
The destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem was obviously a major crisis in the history of the Jewish people. How could we continue to exist after such a catastrophe? How can the Jewish nation continue to believe in a close connection with G-d? How will we live in exile?

The Midrash describes the concept that the Shechina went into exile with Israel, and will be with them there until their return to the Land of Israel.

This is not a simple idea. The destruction could have brought the people to the conclusion that G-d had abandoned them, and they were no longer the Chosen People. Ezekiel describes the people’s thoughts: “When you say, ‘We will be like the nations, like the families of the lands, worshiping wood and stone.’” (Ezekiel 20:32).

Even after the destruction, Jeremiah and Ezekiel invest great efforts to ensure that the people will remain with G-d. The Divine Presence did leave the Temple (as Ezekiel describes the chariot of the Shechina leaving the Temple in stages), but not the people of Israel. As we have said, the Divine Presence accompanied them throughout the years of exile.

The Tanach makes sure to leave the Jewish people with hope for redemption. How does it build that hope?

The Tanach is full of great prophecies of salvation, which promise the ingathering of the exiles and the renewed prosperity of the Jewish people in their Land. In addition to these prophecies of redemption, the Tanach describes the destruction in a way that leaves possibility for hope. For example, both Kings and Jeremiah conclude with the improvement of the status of King Yehoyachin in Babylon (Kings 2 25; 27-28 and Jeremiah 52: 31-32): “In the thirty-seventh year of the exile of King Yehoyachin of Judah, King Evil-Merodach of Babylon, in the year he became king, took note of King Yehoyachin of Judah and released him from prison. He spoke kindly to him.”

Improving the status of Yehoyachin gives hope to the exiles in Babylon that their situation will improve, and that there will be a continuation of the House of David.

Chronicles ends with an even greater hope (Chronicles 2 36: 22-23): “And in the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, when the word of the L-rd spoken by Jeremiah was fulfilled, the L-rd roused the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia to issue a proclamation throughout his realm by word of mouth and in writing, as follows: ‘Thus said King Cyrus of Persia: The L-rd G-d of Heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and has charged me with building Him a House in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Any one of you of all His people, the L-rd his G-d be with him and let him go up.’”

The Tanach concludes not with the destruction but with the great hope for redemption – the declaration of Cyrus, which will be followed by the return of Zion and the construction of the Second Temple.

Even Eicha, which laments the destruction, ends with a tone of hope (Lamentations 5: 19-22):

“But You, O L-rd, are enthroned forever, Your throne endures through the ages. Why have You forgotten us utterly, Forsaken us for all time? Take us back, O L-rd, to Yourself, And let us come back; Renew our days as of old! For truly, You have rejected us, Bitterly raged against us. Take us back, O L-rd, to Yourself, And let us come back; Renew our days as of old!”

Thanks to the hope that the prophets imparted to the people of Israel during times of great tragedy, Israel continues to hold faith in G-d and retain the connection with the Land of Israel. Am Yisrael has survived thousands of years of exile, preserving its identity and, in recent generations, has been privileged to experience the beginning of the Final Redemption.

Hope for a better future is not just a comfort. It represents a deep understanding of the nature of the relationship between G-d and His nation, the assembly of Israel. G-d wants what is best for us. Am Yisrael have a great role in the world, and even if we undergo periods of darkness, we will ultimately carry out our special mission.

Through reading the consolation that follows the destruction, we are strengthened by the understanding that G-d loves us and has appointed us to be His messengers to the world.

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In a recent behavioral study, a group of students watched a documentary about a serious disease called “TAA Deficiency,” which unbeknownst to them, was fake.

Afterwards, they were given the option of providing a cheek swab to assess their risk of developing the disease. Half were told that if they ever developed TAA Deficiency, the treatment would involve a two-week course of pills. Of this group, 52% agreed to provide the swab. The other half were told the treatment would require taking the pills for the rest of their lives. Just 21% of this group agreed to the swab.

The implication of the study is clear – people are resistant to feedback that may oblige them to do something difficult or unwelcome. Criticism and words of rebuke are particularly difficult to accept. Nobody likes to be told they’re doing the wrong thing. If there’s something wrong with us – something that if we were aware of could push us to improve ourselves or address the problem directly – we’d rather not know about it.

In Devarim, Moshe delivers his final address to the nation. He begins not with words of encouragement or affirmation, but, surprisingly, with words of reproof. We also read Chapter 1 of Isaiah in which Isaiah, who lived during the time of the First Temple, delivers a stinging critique of the people, calling upon them to repent and return to G-d.

These passages remind us that the period before Tisha B’Av is not just one of mourning, but of national rebuke – we have strayed as a nation and need to be shaken from our complacency. In particular, we reflect on and try to correct the sin which caused the destruction of the Second Temple and the ensuing exile – baseless hatred.

Accepting criticism is crucial for repentance. When we lower ourselves through poor decisions and negative behavioral patterns, rebuke and criticism can help get our lives back on track. An important task of Moshe’s and of any spiritual leader to this day is to be the voice of conscience, guiding us back to the good.

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz explains that rebuke – and teshuva in general – can reconnect us with reality. Sometimes one mistake leads to another, and we start to lose our grip on what’s real and true. If we aren’t careful, our misdeeds come to permeate and corrupt our entire life. Strong criticism – when coming from the right place – can help us snap back to reality.

Rav Shmuelevitz brings a fascinating Midrash demonstrating this idea: when Joseph revealed himself to his brothers, he rebuked them for their treatment of him all those years before. The brothers were in turmoil and unable to respond. However, nowhere in the text did Joseph directly rebuke his brothers for what they did to him. He merely said, “I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?”

The rebuke, Rav Shmuelevitz explains, is contained in the simple words, “I am Joseph.” He was showing them that their lives had been based on a terrible mistake. When Joseph had related his dreams of them bowing before him, the brothers had felt threatened.

According to Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, they feared that Joseph would oppress them, which they perceived as a threat to the family. To protect the family, they sold him into slavery. When Joseph says, “I am Joseph,” he demonstrates that their fears were unfounded. He has power over them, yet rather than using it in a destructive fashion, he uses it to rescue them from famine and save the family. The rebuke is delivered quietly and subtly but not any less powerfully.

Sin and wrongdoing happen when we are detached from the truth. Joseph’s subtle rebuke redirected the brothers back to a path of truth, showing them that their deeds had been based on a fundamental mistake. Rav Shmuelevitz explains that this is the core of real deep rebuke: to redirect a person back to the truth.

The Three Weeks and Tisha B’Av are a time to quietly and humbly reflect on our mistakes and to use that as a springboard for turning things around.

This is when we draw on the energy of being part of the Jewish people, and of our shared national destiny. A time to reflect on where we have come as a nation and what we can do to move forward together. Absorbing criticism is never easy for anyone. But when we read Moshe’s and Isaiah’s strong words this Shabbat, let us remember the power of rebuke to kick-start that journey.

How Do We React To Criticism?
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There are few more blazing passages in the whole of religious literature than the first chapter of the book of Isaiah, the great “vision,” chazon, that gives its name to the Shabbat before Tisha B’Av, the saddest day of the Jewish year. It is more than great literature. It expresses one of the great prophetic truths, that a society cannot flourish without honesty and justice. It could not be more relevant to our time.

The Talmud (Shabbat 31a) states that when we leave this life and arrive in the World to Come, the first question we will be asked will not be a conventionally religious one (Did you set aside times for learning Torah?) but rather, Did you act honestly in business? I used to wonder how the rabbis felt certain about this. Death is, after all, “the undiscovered country, from whose bourn no traveler returns.”

The answer, it seems to me, is this passage from Isaiah:

See how the faithful city has become a harlot! She once was full of justice; righteousness used to dwell in her—but now murderers! Your silver has become dross, your choice wine is diluted with water. Your rulers are rebels, companions of thieves; they all love bribes and chase after gifts.

They do not defend the cause of the fatherless; the widow’s case does not come before them. (Isaiah 1: 21-23)

Jerusalem’s fate was sealed not by conventional religious failure but by the failure of people to act honestly. They engaged in sharp business practices that were highly profitable but hard to detect – mixing silver with baser metals, diluting wine. People were concerned with maximizing profits, indifferent to the fact that others would suffer. The political system too had become corrupt. Politicians were using their office and influence to personal advantage. People were concerned with maximizing profits, indifferent to the fact that others would suffer. The political system too had become corrupt. Politicians were using their office and influence to personal advantage.

This, says Isaiah, is the real danger: that widespread dishonesty and corruption saps the morale of a society, makes people cynical, opens up divisions between the rich and powerful and the poor and powerless, erodes the fabric of society and makes people wonder why they should make sacrifices for the common good if everyone else seems to be bent on personal advantage. A nation in this condition is sick and in a state of incipient decline. What Isaiah saw and said with primal force and devastating clarity is that sometimes (organized) religion is not the solution but itself part of the problem. It has always been tempting, even for a nation of monotheists, to slip into magical thinking: that we can atone for our sins or those of society by frequent attendances at the Temple, the offering of sacrifices, and conspicuous shows of piety. Few things, implies Isaiah, make G-d angrier than this:

“The multitude of your sacrifices – what are they to Me?” says the L-rd... “When you come to appear before Me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of My courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to Me... I cannot bear your evil assemblies. Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts My soul hates. They have become a burden to Me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen.”

The corrupt not only believe they can fool their fellow humans;
they believe they can fool G-d as well. When moral standards begin to break down in business, finance, trade and politics, a kind of collective madness takes hold of people – the sages said adam bahul al mamono, meaning, roughly, “money makes us do wild things” – and people come to believe that they are leading a charmed life, that luck is with them, that they will neither fail nor be found out. They even believe they can bribe G-d to look the other way. In the end, it all comes crashing down and those who suffer most tend to be those who deserve it least.

Isaiah is making a prophetic point but one that has implications for economics and politics today and can be stated even in secular terms. The market economy is and must be a moral enterprise. Absent that, and eventually, it will fail.

There used to be a belief among superficial readers of Adam Smith, prophet of free trade, that the market economy did not depend on morality at all: “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest.” It was the brilliance of the system that it turned self-interest into the common good by what Smith called, almost mystically, an “invisible hand.” Morality was not part of the system. It was unnecessary.

This was a misreading of Smith, who took morality very seriously indeed and wrote a book called The Theory of Moral Sentiments. But it was also a misreading of economics. This was made clear, two centuries later, by a paradox in Games Theory known as The Prisoner’s Dilemma. Without going into details, this imagined two people faced with a choice (to stay silent, confess, or accuse the other). The outcome of their decision would depend on what the other person did, and this could not be known in advance. It can be shown that if both people act rationally in their own interest, they will produce an outcome that is bad for both of them. This seems to refute the basic premise of market economics, that the pursuit of self-interest serves the common good.

The negative outcome of the Prisoner’s Dilemma can only be avoided if the two people repeatedly find themselves in the same situation. Eventually, they realize they are harming one another and themselves. They learn to cooperate, which they can only do if they trust one another, and they will only do this if the other has earned that trust by acting honestly and with integrity.

In other words, the market economy depends on moral virtues that are not themselves produced by the market and may be undermined by the market itself. For if the market is about the pursuit of profit, and if we can gain at other people’s expense, then the pursuit of profit will lead, first to shady practices (“your silver has become dross, your choice wine is diluted with water”), then to the breakdown of trust, and then to the collapse of the market itself.

A classic instance of this happened after the financial crash in 2008. For a decade, banks had engaged in doubtful practices, notably subprime mortgages and the securitization of risk through financial instruments so complex that even bankers themselves later admitted they did not fully understand them. They continued to authorize them despite Warren Buffet’s warning in 2002 that subprime mortgages were “instruments of mass financial destruction.” The result was the crash. But that was not the source of the depression/recession that followed. That happened because the banks no longer trusted one another. Credit was no longer freely available and in one country after another the economy stalled.

The key word, used by both Isaiah and the Sages, is emunah, meaning faithfulness and trust. Isaiah in our haftarah twice uses the phrase kirya ne’emana, “faithful city.” The Sages say that in heaven we will be asked, Did you conduct your business be’emunah? – meaning, in such a way as to inspire trust. The market economy depends on trust. Absent that, and depend instead on contracts, lawyers, regulations and supervisory authorities, and there will be yet more scandals, collapses and crashes, since the ingenuity of those who seek to sidestep the rules always exceeds those whose job it is to apply them. The only safe regulatory authority is conscience, the voice of G-d within the human heart forbidding us to do what we know is wrong but think we can get away with.

Isaiah’s warning is as timely now as it was 27 centuries ago. When morality is missing and economics and politics are driven by self-interest alone, trust fails and the social fabric unravels. That is how all great superpowers began their decline, and there is no exception.

In the long term, the evidence shows that it is sounder to follow prophets than profits.

1 Hamlet, Act 3 Scene 1.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks is Emeritus Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth @RabbiSacks · www.RabbiSacks.org
In another forward-looking Mizrachi initiative, Israel’s “power communications couple,” Yedidya Meir and Sivan Rahav-Meir, will embark on an exciting journey as the World Mizrachi Shlichim to North America, where they will deepen relationships between American Jews and their Israeli peers. On the eve of their departure, HaMizrachi chats with them and Rabbi Doron Perez, Chief Executive of World Mizrachi, about the upcoming adventure.

Rav Doron, what was the vision? After all, one doesn’t usually hear of high-profile Israelis going on Shlichut?

RAV DORON: Over the last few years, World Mizrachi has gradually been raising Israel’s profile across the globe and in the US in partnership with our US branch, Religious Zionists of America – Mizrachi. Whether it’s been hosting mega missions to Israel, sending top speakers to hundreds of communities overseas (70 for 70, Israel 360), or even the launch of this publication and the Tzurba M’Rabanan learning program, to mention but a few. The goal is engagement, fostering a healthy relationship between Diaspora Jewry and Israeli Jews, and spreading the message of a vibrant, living Torat Eretz Yisrael relevant to living as a Jew in the 21st century.

Approaching Sivan and Yedidya, who have been at the forefront of the Israeli media for many years – and who personify the young, relevant and meaningful Torah inextricably linked with Israel that speaks to young and old alike – was a natural continuation of our mission.

Sivan, what sparked the excitement on your part? After all, both of you have flourishing careers here, you’re well known, with regular shiurim, newspaper columns, and invitations to present all sorts of events. Why leave all that for the States?

SIVAN: Well, we’re not going to have to give all that up! But the truth is, when you’ve been working as a journalist in the Israeli media for years, you cover topics that seem important, the day’s headlines, but for a while now we’ve been sensing that the real headline is the gradual evaporation of Diaspora Jewry.

With all due respect to the two Israeli elections this year and our internal Israeli debates, how can we just carry on discussing left and right here in Israel when the majority of Jews across the globe are assimilating or disappearing?

And although I believe that Yedidya and I have a lot to give, I know we can learn a lot from the Americans too. It’s certainly not all one-way and it’s not just “come on Aliyah and all your problems will be solved.” American Jewry has built up a fine reputation over the years with an education system second to none. And of course unstinting support for Israel. But the issue is not the strong communities over there. It’s the young people and the outlying communities without the broader Jewish infrastructure and a strong sense of Jewish identity.

YEDIDYA: From our previous trips overseas, we’ve seen just how critical the relationship is between Jews in the Diaspora and Jews in Israel. For both sides. But to take it from knowledge to action, you need other ‘crazy’ people to make such a dream come true. Rabbi Perez and Rabbi Reuven Taragin, Mizrachi’s Educational Director, were the movers and shakers behind this idea. They have a wonderful vision for Mizrachi and they’re working tirelessly to make a lasting difference to the Jewish people. We definitely bought into their vision and believe that strengthening Jewish identity over there and educating young (and old) Jews about Israel are the most pressing issues today.

What are your plans for the coming year? What do you hope to achieve?

SIVAN: Well, we don’t expect to change the world overnight. After we settle down and get the children sorted out, I’m really looking forward to meeting people, and learning about them and their communities. And hearing lots of stories, because our stories are what connect us to each other.

YEDIDYA: Thanks to World Mizrachi, we already have many invitations from different communities, schools, and organizations.

The plan is to foster healthy relationships, strengthen Jewish identity among the young people, and educate people about Israel on a more intimate, personal level than they hear and see in the media.

Yes, Mizrachi is not going to let us relax over there! We’re keen to spread
America, Here We Come!
It was actually quite overwhelming! We didn’t expect it to cause so much attention, but it is evident the right move at the right time. We’re always looking to do more, to definitely the right move at the right time. And through that we hope to generate a more productive relationship between American Jews and their Israeli counterparts. The Mizrachi message, Torat Eretz Yisrael, to as many communities as possible – because it’s how we live our lives too. It carries so much richness, relevance and wisdom for all. And through that we hope to generate a positive, productive relationship between American Jews and their Israeli counterparts.

SIVAN: On a personal level, I’m going to be keeping up my weekly Parashat HaShavua shiur, which thank G-d has become very popular all over the world, and I’m really excited to teach at Yeshiva University. Stephanie Strauss, CEO of YU in Israel, has become a friend and a partner in recent months. She initiated the transfer of my weekly shiur to Stern College in Manhattan. So it’ll now be accessible to an English-speaking audience as well. That’s just part of the partnership with YU. There’s more in the pipeline!

But the aim is not just to fill our diaries to the brim! We want to really get to know American Jews and write about them for the Israeli public. Present a rounded, in-depth picture of our brothers and sisters in America. Both of us are journalists, and we’ll carry on with that over there.

We’re not just coming to teach but to learn as well. I think we (and Israelis in general) have a tremendous amount to learn from American communities – education, chessed, the approach to Jewish life. Here in Israel it’s just natural to be Jewish. In the rest of the world you have to put in the effort and pay the price to live Jewishly. That’s inspiring and worthy of appreciation and publicity in Israel.

Were you surprised by the reactions to the announcement?

RAV DORON: It was actually quite overwhelming! We didn’t expect it to cause so much attention, but it is evidently the right move at the right time. We’re always looking to do more, to have greater impact, to bring Israel to the forefront, and having Sivan and Yedidya as part of this greatly furthers our goals.

YEDIDYA: Wow! We’re still replying to all the messages. This is actually an opportunity to apologize to all those we’ve not replied to yet! We received thousands of messages and it was all over social media. We were quite taken aback but now people are talking to me about it everywhere I go. And it’s not just the religious or charedi crowd either. There’s widespread interest and encouragement for what we’re doing. People intuitively understand how important the US-Israel relationship is, on a person-to-person level as well.

SIVAN: And it’s Israel, so everyone has something to say! The support and advice are very helpful – about packing, preparing the children for their educational frameworks, moving apartments. We feel as though so many people are accompanying us on our journey.

But apart from the practical tools and tips, it’s also very moving to hear what people are feeling. Take these special requests for example – “I have family in Boston who left Israel 20 years ago. Please tell them to come back!” Or “My cousin is assimilating in Los Angeles. Maybe you can go talk to him?” We’re obviously not going around the States knocking on every Jewish door, but these requests do reveal a deep connection and at the same time a deep crisis… a desire to reinforce the connections between “us and them.”

One of our goals of course is to remove the “them” from the equation as far as possible. Am Yisrael are one united entity, whether they’re in New York, London, Melbourne or Jerusalem.

RAV DORON: Definitely. That was one of our drives in this project. We also wanted to shake up the whole concept of Shlichut. Let’s be more creative. There’s already been one article reacting to Sivan and Yedidya’s Shlichut saying that Israel should be sending other well-known Israelis to America. I hope other organizations follow our lead. It’s definitely an idea worth looking into.

SIVAN, what’s going to be the central message of your Shlichut?

SIVAN: Well, apart from the unity of Am Yisrael, the Torah is our mutual treasure. It’s our pulse and the pillar that lies at the foundation of Jewish life all over the world. Here in Israel, after years of being involved in the media, I began to talk openly about the weekly Torah portion. And I was astonished to see just how important it is to millions of Israelis. We want to expand this circle. We can argue about politics, Bibi, Trump – all that’s legitimate and sometimes necessary, of course – but the Torah, and particularly the Torah of Eretz Yisrael, that comes from Jerusalem and shines its light upon the world – is our common culture. It’s irrelevant what party you vote for. We can all connect to identity and heritage; to the basic common values we sometimes forget about under the weight of our often-petty debates.

YEDIDYA: I totally agree! I think our message is that Judaism has a lot to give to the world. I sometimes feel that in Israel we put so much energy into headlines about non-Orthodox movements, anti-Semitism, terrorists, etc. but we sidestep the heart, the essence of our existence. Shabbat for example. That’s the most basic Jewish credo. Or working on our character traits, Lashon Hara, Daf Yomi… I think we can talk about all of that unapologetically and make it relevant, vibrant and alive for today’s young people.

SIVAN: But the message is for Israelis too. The time is ripe. Or maybe the time is running out… after we made our Shlichut public, people have told me that they too have begun thinking seriously about it. Shlichut is not just for young, newly-married couples to go have some fun and work for a year. That’s important too but we’re losing huge chunks of the Jewish people…

YEDIDYA: Yes. Don’t say, “Who am I? I’m only one person. What can I do?” We can all do something. As the Lubavitcher Rebbe said: “Every Jew is a Shaliach.” We can all do our bit, wherever we are.
The traveler’s sobbing was so intense that it awoke Berel the innkeeper. His wife was very nervous. “Why is our guest crying so bitterly in the middle of the night?” she asked. “Something must have happened!”

Berel entered the guestroom to find a simple Jew, dressed like a peasant, shoeless, sitting on the floor, crying bitter tears over the Jewish exile from Israel. [This man was really a pious chassidic master, traveling “incognito” to learn of the situation of the world. Every midnight (besides Shabbat and festivals) he would arise to bemoan the destruction of our Holy Temples.]

“Why are you crying?” asked Berel. “What disaster has befallen you?”

The rabbi replied simply, “I cry over our Temple’s destruction, and I beseech the Almighty to bring the Messiah who will return us to the Holy Land.”

Berel was relieved, “Is that it?! Then please keep your wailing down so that you don’t disturb the other guests!” With that Berel returned to his bedroom and informed his wife of the cause of the disturbance.

Five minutes later there was a knock on the rabbi’s door. It was Berel again. “My wife would like to know if the Messiah comes and brings us back to the Land of Israel, will we be allowed to take our chickens with us?”

The rabbi was taken aback by the question. “Chickens? As far as I am aware, it doesn’t say anything about chickens. You might have to leave your chickens here when the Messiah comes.”

Berel duly informed his wife.

Five minutes later, another knock. Berel: “My wife asks you to please not pray anymore for the Messiah to come. We are doing fine here and would prefer to stay with our chickens.”

At that the rabbi became agitated, “What do you mean ‘fine’? Don’t you know how
precious our exile is? At any moment the Cossacks could arrive and take your chickens, your wife, all your money and even your life! Aren’t we better off in our Promised Land?"

The rabbi’s words made sense to Berel. But he still had to inform his wife.

Five minutes later, another knock. “My wife requests that you pray for the Messiah to come and take the Cossacks to the Land of Israel... so we can stay here with our chickens!”

This story reflects the attitude many Jews have concerning exile and redemption. It also explains in part why mourning on Tisha B’Av and reciting Eicha is so difficult for us to relate to. We hope that this Eicha Companion, together with this entire issue of HaMizrachi, will make these concepts more relevant to our generation.

The Right Questions
Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

If only we asked the right questions.

Over this coming weekend there is one question that we are going to be hearing time and time again. It is “Eicha?” meaning “How?”

In Parashat Devarim we will be reading how Moshe asked that question. In our Haftarah this Shabbat, we will read how the prophet Isaiah asked this question. And of course, the Book of Eicha takes its name from the opening word, “Eicha?” because that is the question the prophet Jeremiah asked as well.

King Solomon asked the question too – in fact there are 18 occasions in Tanach on which the question “Eicha?” is posed. It’s all about sorrow. We are asking, how could this have happened? How could it be that we are facing such challenges that we are enduring such sorrow? Why is this happening to us?

Fascinatingly there is a 19th occasion in Tanach in which the same word appears. However, it is pronounced differently. It is also spelt אֶיֶכָּה but this time it is vowelled differently – אַיֶּכָּה, ayeka.

It features in Parashat Bereishit, right at the beginning of the Torah. After the original sin, when G-d saw that Adam had fled, we read “The L-rd, G-d, called out to man and He said to him: אֲיֹ֣ו֖אָֽקַא: Where are you?”

G-d was saying to Adam that this is not a time to hide away. It is also not a time to shy away from your responsibilities. The Hebrew word for responsibility is תְוִידָא. It comes from the root תוי meaning “after,” indicating that our response to anything must be with a sense of responsibility.

In the aftermath of something that has happened to us, instead of caving in to the pressure and asking “eicha?” – how or why? we need to ask ourselves “ayeka?” Where are we at? What are we going to do about this situation? How will we respond proactively and constructively?

Interestingly, תְוִידָא also comes from the root תוי meaning “another” or “someone else.” This indicates that the responsible way for me to react in situations of crisis and challenge is not to just consider my own plight but also to consider the welfare, wellbeing and interests of everyone around me.

Our Prophets teach that Tisha B’Av is a יאֲוָל, a festival. This indicates that in the course of the time, the saddest of all our days in the calendar will become the happiest of days. We can contribute towards this if we transform “eicha?” into “ayeka?”

In times of difficulty, of crisis, tragedy and of challenge, instead of asking “how/why is this happening?” let us ask, “What can I do about it?” “Where am I in this situation?” and “How can I contribute towards making this a better world for us all?”

Why We Are So Lonely
Rabbi Reuven Taragin

The phrase נַעֲדֵה אִ֖ישׁ – she has no comforter, is a motif throughout the first chapter (2, 9, 17, 21) and emphasizes that the nations of the world not only hold back assistance and betray commitments made to us (2), they also show us no sympathy.

Why does no-one offer consolation? Why are the Jewish people the only ones unable to evoke sympathy? Eicha answers this in verse 5. The loneliness is part of G-d’s punishment. It is He who has hardened the hearts of the surrounding nations; He who has ensured that we be shown no sympathy (17). The suffering aims to bring us to reflect upon our sins and the implications of our having distanced ourselves from G-d. Had we been consoled and welcomed by the other nations, if our life lived far from G-d was functional and normal, we might have missed the point. If the nations welcomed us in, we might not feel the need to correct our mistakes and repair our relationship with Him.

It is our sins that make us pariahs (8) and therefore it is G-d, not the surrounding nations, who we need to beseech in order to solve our problem (9-11, 20-22). We focus on the righteousness of His decrees, not the whims of other nations (18-19). In fact, when we do speak to the nations, it is not to beg for their sympathy but rather to help them understand the heavenly origins of our lonely fate (12-15).

The first chapter of Eicha reads like a contemporary report on anti-Semitism and anti-Israel bias. But the lessons are exactly the same. We too need to realize that the true source of this hatred and bias actually emanates from G-d’s decree. The solution is not easy but it is simple. We solve the problem by fixing our relationship with Him.

May we succeed in doing this sooner rather than later.

Eicha Rabbah: The Gift of Torah
Dr. Yael Ziegler

The biblical book of Eicha dwells on the past and present of the הַעֲשָׂרָה, offering only brief glimpses into a possible future. Practically, this means that Eicha offers no real advice for surviving the grim state of destruction and exile. Eicha Rabbah rushes to fill this void, offering guidance for Israel in its difficult times. The wise and compassionate messages found in this rabbinic compendium continue to be pertinent and to bolster Israel throughout
the long and difficult years of exile. Chazal’s ability to intuit Israel’s present and future needs contributes greatly to Israel’s perseverance and ability not simply to survive, but also to flourish in exile.

To this end, Eicha Rabbah focuses a great deal of attention on the importance of Torah study, which constitutes a portable means for maintaining spiritual identity. Lacking a homeland and a sacred center for worship, Israel can draw spiritual purpose and strength from its unwavering devotion to Torah. The importance of Torah study for maintaining faith in its original relationship with G-d finds unique expression in a poignant midrash (Eicha Rabbah 3:7).

Exile is fraught with G-d’s distance and inaccessibility, leaving Israel uncertain as to the state of its relationship with Him. The hostile surrounding nations intensify Israel’s insecurity, and their jeers echo in the backdrop of Israel’s exilic misery. The exile at times seems intolerable, and it is possible that Israel’s only recourse is to hope in a distant future.

Nevertheless, the midrash does not resort to excessive attention upon eschatology. Instead, this midrash supports a lifestyle that concentrates on routine, daily life. Synagogues and study halls emerge as prominent institutions, amidst a clear-eyed recognition that Torah study will be the secret of Israel’s survival during the period of G-d’s withdrawal.

Chazal’s perspicacity is nothing short of astonishing. Indeed, Israel’s devotion to both prayer and (perhaps especially) Torah study unites the exilic community and provides Israel with nobility, purpose, dignity, and grace throughout its turbulent history.

Adapted from Dr. Yael Ziegler’s upcoming book, Eicha: Faith in a Turbulent World (Maggid, 2020)

Where Are You?
Rabbi Zev Leff

The Midrash (Yalkut Shimoni 801) relates that Moshe saw the Jewish people in their glory and said Eicha. Isaiah saw them in their wantonness and also said Eicha, and Jeremiah saw them in their degradation and likewise said Eicha.

Eicha connotes a desire to understand the conscience of the Jew, echoing G-d’s call to Adam HaRishon after his sin: הָיבָּהוּ אֶת הָאָדָם — where are you? Where were you? Where could you have been and where are you now?

Just as experiencing a taste of greatness can motivate us to appreciate our true essence and evoke an רְסָעָה, so too recognizing the degradation of our wantonness can evoke the same רְסָעָה and help us put back on the path to reclaim our rightful status.

Making it Real
Eve Harow

Many years ago, I was among a group of people who ascended Herodian on Erev Tisha B’Av to say Eicha in what has now become an annual tradition attracting hundreds. Herodian, at the western edge of the Judean Desert, the eastern end of today’s Gush Etzion, was one of the fortresses that the Judeans barricaded and from where they waged the rebellion against the Romans known as the Great Revolt of 66-73 CE.

After the destruction of Jerusalem and the Second Temple in 70 CE, Herodian became the main stronghold until it too was overrun. The survivors fled deep into the desert, to Masada, where their last stand is well documented.

Sitting on the dirt floor of the ancient Beit Knesset at Herodian, reading Eicha, is an incredibly moving experience. There is often a mist over Jerusalem, easily visible from the mountain rim just a few kilometers away, and one can imagine the smoke of the burning city, the attendant screams of fear and grief, the poignancy of the moment. The meaning of the raw text becomes palpable.

Our forefathers were here. The horrific scenes we read were actually happening. We can’t change the past, and we must continue to honor our ancestors and commemorate our losses on this tragic date in our Hebrew calendar.

But we’re back in Judea again. We fast as a free nation whose collective faith in G-d and our mission didn’t waver and so He brought us home. Eicha is a warning that we would do well to heed, of what happens when we betray G-d. And each other. In that sense, it’s just as timely as ever.

Galut as a Mighty Blow to Torah
Rabbi Ari Shvat

On the verse in Eicha (2, 9), “... her king and princes are [exiled] among the gentiles, [and] there is no more Torah,” our Rabbis teach: “From here we learn that the Torah is in Eretz Yisrael” (Sifre Devarim, 37).

There are several ways of understanding the problem of the Torah’s status in chutz laAretz, even today when Jews generally aren’t persecuted. In short:

1. When one lives among gentiles, the Torah is not found in the public domain, but rather just in a relatively minor, not so formidable, format. “From the day the Beit HaMikdash was destroyed, (it is as if) G-d has no place in His world but in the four cubits [symbolizing the private domain] of Halacha” (Brachot 8a). Judaism is meant to be our life, not just as individuals, but also outside, in our national holidays, government, army, economy, radio, newspapers, etc., even serving as a “light to all other nations” (Rav Kook, Orot HaTorah 33).

2. In Israel, even when one is involved with apparently secular issues, it’s not considered Bitul Torah for even the physical is holy (Rambam, Melachim 5, 10, Chatam Sofer, Sukkah 35). “When Israel was exiled from their place, there is no greater ‘wasting’ of the Torah than this” (Chagiga 5a).

4. Rav Ovadia Yosef: “Building Torah institutions outside of Israel, is like building a palace on ice,” it’s temporary (ToShBa”a 11, p. 42).

5. All mitzvot are meant to be observed in Israel (Sifre on Devarim 11:18).

6. Rav Kook adds that Torat Eretz Yisrael includes not only the study of Gemara, but also returning to learn Tanach, Jewish thought, Mussar, Chassidut, Hebrew, Israeli geography, military, agricultural and national mitzvot, and analyzing redemption.

Accepting Others
Rabbi Dr. Kenneth Brander

The Netziv, Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, explains in his introduction to Bereishit that the difficult atmosphere which prevailed at the time of the Second Temple’s destruction was due to the lack of tolerance and piety amongst religious leaders and those engaged in Torah study:

We may explain that during the Second Temple, there were tzaddikim and chasidim, as well as those who toiled in the words of Torah; however, they were not yesharim [literally: straight] in their dealings with others.

Due to the baseless hatred in their hearts towards each other, they suspected that those who disagreed with them on religious matters were Sadducees or heretics. This brought them to bloodshed under false pretenses and many other evils until the Temple was destroyed. This is the justification for the destruction: for G-d is yashar and G-d could not tolerate tsaddikim like these... Rather, [G-d prefers] people who act in a way that is yashar even in worldly matters, not those who act crookedly even for the sake of Heaven; this causes the destruction of creation and the annihilation of the world’s population.

When we are unable to disagree agreeably; when we are unable to engage with others whose customs differ from ours, think differently or desire different outcomes in life, we add to the destruction.

I served as community rabbi of Boca Raton, Florida, which in 14 years grew from 60 to 600 families. I saw with my own eyes how Jews who were distanced came closer to Judaism precisely because we did not disparage them and were not condescending toward the streams of Judaism with which they had been affiliated. Derogatory discourse distances people, even if the depths of their hearts are thirsty for a spiritual encounter with G-d.

It is not a coincidence that the trop, the cantillations, of the Book of Lamentations and the Book of Esther are remarkably similar. What separates these two scrolls are not the Masoretic musical notes, but rather the tone in which they are voiced. This is a keen reminder that the Mashiach’s birthday is Tisha B’Av – and that his ability to appear depends on each and every one of us.

Eicha Today: Heightening Grief and Initiating Hope
Sarah Medved and Esty Rollhaus

While Megillat Eicha may have served as a powerful cathartic avenue for Yirmiyahu and his contemporaries, does this cathartic experience still resonate with us today? How ought we to relate to this text, as Jews generations removed from the overwhelming emotional experiences of firsthand observers? The mere fact that we still read Eicha, that we recall and mourn a destruction that occurred so long ago, indicates an aspect of our unique national character. In “Out of The Whirlwind,” Rav Soloveitchik describes the distinction between aveilut chadashah, mourning for a recent, personal loss, and aveilut yeshanah, national mourning “due to a historic disaster that took place 1,900 years ago. This category is the handiwork of man...The aveilut is a result of recollection of events. Judaism here introduced a strange kind of memory, a very unique and singular memory.”
This type of memory, he argues, is based on Judaism’s belief in a unitive time consciousness. We do not acknowledge the gap that seemingly exists between ourselves and the events of our history, but rather view our past as a current, living reality.

The Rav notes a further difference between aveilut chadashah (which he equates with aveilut deyachid, individual mourning) and aveilut yeshanah (which he also terms aveilut derabim, communal mourning). While the individual, in the wake of personal loss, becomes completely subsumed by his grief, the community never reaches the same state of total despair. As the Rav eloquently explains, “the covenantal community... must never lose hope or faith. No matter how difficult times are, no matter how great the loss is, however dreary and bleak the present seems, the future shines with a brilliant glow full of promise. The messianic hope has never vanished; the people have never been enveloped by the dark night of despair.”

Accordingly, as modern readers of Eicha, we catch the droplets of hope that glisten softly alongside Yirmiyahu’s tears. Over the course of the sefer, Yirmiyahu’s emotions move from unbridled sorrow and anger and toward acceptance and catharsis. For him, the shift had to come with time and expression, but we are given the text in its entirety, a whole that encompasses both aspects at once. Therefore, as observers of aveilut derabim, when we read the text we are never swallowed by the all-consuming grief that Yirmiyahu first experienced. We are given, within the text, the catharsis that he ultimately discovers, the spark of hope for us as a nation.

The Message of the Fifth Chapter
Rabbanit Shani Taragin

The fifth and final chapter of Eicha does not follow the acrostic form of the previous kinnot yet still maintains a composition of 22 verses as found in the alphabetic sequence of chapters 1, 2, and 4. The narrator, albeit continuing his lament, is changing his audience. Until now, he has been addressing the nation of Yisrael post-churban. He has tried through kina meter and various poetic devices, to elicit a response from the people – to turn to G-d in prayer, whether through tears, anger or through focusing on the narrator – ani haGever as a microcosm for their collective experiences. To no avail. He thereby also omits his cry of Eicha in his final lament and instead of turning to the people in exasperation and plea, turns directly to G-d: “Remember, G-d, what has befallen us, look and see our disgrace... Why do You ignore us eternally, forsake us for so long?”

The narrator recognizes the depression and passivity of the nation and resigns himself to the status quo of despair. If there will be any change, it must come from G-d as the nation is overwhelmed! He, therefore, turns directly to G-d and with a final plea – “Bring us back to You, G-d, and we shall return, renew our days as of old.” (5:21).

The Targum understands this pasuk as a plea to G-d to help us repent, a reversal of the dictated process of repentance. In Sefer Devarim (30:1-10), we are taught that repentance must be initiated by the nation, a pattern reiterated by various prophets (e.g. Malachi 3:7 – “Return to me and [then] I will return to you”). Our narrator, and eye-witness to the churban, knows that his generation will not initiate. He despairingly beseeches G-d to reverse the rules and initiate the process so that we may respond and rebuild our relationship in turn.

Though at times we sing this pasuk to upbeat melodies, it is, in fact, a despairing last attempt of teshuva. We wish to have the cognizance and resolve to initiate the restoration of a relationship with G-d. If we do not merit, then by default we hope to at least respond to G-d’s initiative of returning us to Him. May we internalize the messages of the kinot of Eicha and turn to G-d before the final lament!
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Three Dates, 
Three Relationship Lessons

There are three significant dates on the calendar in the coming weeks from which we can glean important themes to guide our interpersonal relationships: Tisha B’Av, Tu B’Av and Rosh Chodesh Elul.

**TISHA B’AV**

There is a striking statement of Chazal concerning one of the causes of the churban (destruction): the destruction of the Beit HaMikdash is partly attributed to the insistence of the Jewish people on adhering to the intricacies of monetary laws with one another. This seems puzzling, as presumably as Torah Jews, we are commanded to be scrupulous in our observance of monetary laws. Yet within the same rubric of Halacha, there is a concept known as lifnim mishurat haDin – acting above the letter of the law. We are advised, in many instances, not to be too demanding or exact with every penny or item owed to us, but rather to be more forgiving and less stringent when possible. Likewise, we are encouraged to apply the same concept to our interpersonal relationships.

**TU B’AV**

There are many historical events connected to this joyous day, including its proximity to Tisha B’Av. Soon after the grave tragedy associated with Tisha B’Av, we were given heavenly messages that our destiny would improve. Chazal instituted Tu B’Av as a day of celebration and as a reminder to look toward the future with an emphasis on redemption. Rabbi Akiva personified this mindset when he saw a fox running out of the Holy of Holies. As tragic as the churban was, Rabbi Akiva perceived the fox’s exit as a sign of life and hope, understanding that just as the prophecies of destruction have been fulfilled, the promises of redemption will follow. Using this mindset to reflect upon the churban teaches us to be optimistic and focused on the rays of geula (redemption). So too, emphasizing the positives and highlights of others are essential to developing and maintaining meaningful interpersonal relationships.

**ROSH CHODESH ELUL**

We learn two lessons from the month of Elul. First, we all have the ability to do teshuva (repentance) and change our ways. Even if we displayed certain attitudes and behaviors in the past, we have the opportunity to recalibrate, improve, and start afresh. Second, in the prayers throughout the month of Elul, we beseech G-d to have erech apayim – to be patient with us. We beg Him not to use a precise measuring tool when evaluating our year, but to be kind and judge us favorably. The pathway to merit His patience and compassion is for us human beings to demonstrate the same middot (virtues) toward others and to emulate His ways.

These lessons very briefly touched upon above are pivotal components toward fostering healthy and long-lasting relationships. While dating, (and similarly throughout marriage, parenting, and beyond), we sometimes find ourselves quick to judge others and critically evaluating those around us, just as during the days before the churban. By removing “measuring sticks” and “magnifying glasses” when interacting with others, especially when dealing with our nearest and dearest, we may be granted the blessing of having G-d and others view us with a gentle eye.

Giving others the benefit of the doubt whenever possible invites closeness into our everyday relationships. To quote a piece of advice given by a busy matchmaker to those she is working with: “he or she isn’t a mind reader, the other person may not know that you prefer this or that, etc.” Fill in the blanks as you wish. “Share your preferences, likes and dislikes with her or him and see how the person reacts before prematurely misjudging or ending a relationship.” This is not, G-d forbid, to indicate that we should irresponsibly overlook worrisome issues or character traits. Of course, we should consider them with great seriousness and caution. Yet, sometimes we raise alarms over less significant things, tainting the potential for meaningful relationships to flourish.

Maintaining a positive outlook, an eyin tovah, being optimistic whenever possible and “letting go” advances opportunities and endears relationships. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, as we learn from Chodesh Elul, we can all benefit from pausing, taking some time to self-reflect and making a din veCheshbon (judgment and accounting) of our own ways, and changing them for the better. Ultimately, we can only control ourselves and our own thoughts and actions. By improving our ways and mindsets, we will, G-d willing, merit to bring the geula closer.

Efrat Sobolofsky LMSW, PhD, is Director of YUConnects
Shortly after a scandal erupted in public, I was invited to speak in separate meetings with the parents, teachers, and children attending one of the local community yeshivot. I began the meeting with the students by asking “What guidance have you received from your teachers or parents about whatever questions and concerns you had regarding what occurred?”

To my dismay, with very little exception, the children were left to cope with the situation on their own. The parents assumed that the school would take care of educating the children about the moral and educational lessons that should inform their approach in responding to the scandal; the educators believed that this was something best dealt with at home. The children were left in a moral vacuum. A teachable moment – that presented priceless opportunities for clarifying Jewish values and how to respond to situations where leadership fails – was squandered.

The reality is that our children are being raised in an atmosphere marked by adults who are absolutely certain of their view. Respectful dialogue and healthy perspective-taking have given way to disrespect, stridency, and failure to foster an ability to see the world through the eyes of the other.

Dr. Gene Beresin, a child psychiatrist at Massachusetts General Hospital’s Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds, makes a number of important points about how to address concerns raised by troubling behavior on the part of leaders. The guiding principle, Dr. Beresin recommends, is to stay away from discussion about politics and policy and to focus on how the behaviors our children have been exposed to may raise questions in their mind. Examples of troubling behavior exhibited by various leaders include lying, mocking others, making fun of those who aren’t viewed as attractive, externalizing blame, and seeking revenge for perceived slights.

Conversations with children on this range of behaviors from supposed role models must begin with understanding how the child or student is processing the information they may see online, in the papers, or in discussions around the dinner table. Among the initial questions that Dr. Beresin recommends parents or educators use to trigger a productive discussion are these:

- What have you seen?
- What have you heard?
- What do you think about this behavior?
- How does it make you feel?

The discussion can then lead to exploring what similar behaviors they might have seen in friends, family, or acquaintances at home or in school. Parents can engage their children in a discussion of how, through dealing with similar challenges in their own lives, they can find more effective alternatives in trying to achieve their goals. Parents should keep in mind that such conversations are not a one-shot event, but a process that can ideally become an important tool in shaping our children’s moral development.

I play a game with my grandchildren called “moral dilemma.” While it might sound like one of the many annoyances that go along with having a grandfather who is a psychologist, my grandchildren love the game and actively push me to play it whenever we spend Shabbat together. The game consists of presenting a real-life ethical dilemma that I might have faced during the week, followed by a discussion of how they would respond. This approach to clarifying moral values is described by Dr. Mary Gentile, a senior research scholar at the Yale School of Management. Dr. Gentile and her colleagues assume that most people know the right thing to do in a particular morally challenging situation. The challenge is how to translate this knowledge into action. She uses discussions of moral dilemmas as a bridge from knowledge into action by giving people the opportunity to practice and pre-script responses to situations that call for an ethical response.

The challenge of how to respond to our children’s exposure to morally questionable behavior on the part of some religious and political leaders presents us with an opportunity. It’s a chance to clarify our thinking about our responsibility to foster our children’s moral education through direct discussion as well as awareness of some of the more subtle ways that children internalize our values. Awareness of some of the “silent” modes by which children learn moral lessons include prioritizing spending quality time with them in spite of our hectic schedules, helping them see their mistakes as opportunities for growth, and modeling respect and curiosity regarding the perspectives of those we disagree with.
**FROM OY TO JOY: A call for positivity in Jewish engagement**

Tisha B'Av is the saddest day in our collective history – it was on this day that the slanderous report from the spies was received and the nation of Israel was forbidden to enter the Land of Israel in 1312 BCE; our Temples were destroyed in 586 BCE and 70 CE; the Bar Kochba revolt was crushed in 135 CE; Spanish Jewry was expelled in 1492; World War I broke out in 1914; the mass deportation began from Warsaw to Treblinka in 1942 and the list goes on. While causing us deep sadness, these events often led to unity.

Threats to one’s Jewish identity often provoke an instinctive reaction of protectiveness, but this approach is becoming less effective as the distance from these events widens and time marches on.

The establishment of the State of Israel has been coupled with significant general improvements for global Jewry, and many Jews have not been directly exposed to old forms of anti-Semitism and the powerfully emotional tribalism it can induce. Instead, as Jewish millennials are welcomed with open arms into western societies, they have become increasingly disengaged from days like Tisha B'Av that memorialize a heritage with which they struggle to relate.

Desperately attempting to re-establish these stirrings of Jewish pride, many Jewish educators double down on Jewish victimhood, limiting their educational impact by focusing on instilling a responsibility to lead Jewish lives purely because the victims of prior generations could not.

While this narrative continues to inspire a sense of Jewishness, it has generally not been strong enough to translate emotion into action in a consistent way. Tisha B'Av is still of enormous importance and remembering our traumatic past must have its place in the Jewish calendar. But there is a reason it is counterbalanced with so many reasons for celebration. Our ongoing story has its sad parts, but we are edging closer to the happy ending and the positives can dominate the story that’s worth telling. We must stand tall and say that we are proud to be Jews, not because of terrorism in places like Pittsburgh or Poway, or Israel’s enemies, but in spite of them.

In the late 1960s, Stanford psychology professor Walter Mischel conducted a series of experiments on delayed gratification known as The Marshmallow Test. Particularly fascinating for psychologists today are the follow-up studies, decades later, which found that childhood ability to delay gratification correlated with higher SAT scores, professional success and better physical health.

What is clear is that as Millennials grow up, they are witnessing the collapse of the long-term security once offered by traditional institutions, older generations losing their entire accumulated wealth, debts rising and job prospects and job security declining. As a result, they assign greater social value to experiences – memories guaranteed to last.

Judaism, when lived fully, includes enriching, positive substance that can make a far more enduring impact on the individual than the declining sense of obligation to marry Jewish and the uninspired schlep to a synagogue on the High Holidays. On the other hand, exposure to the Shabbat experience, for example, can lead to an appreciation that supposedly disruptive restrictions can grant the freedom to value the truly important things in life.

Jewish teachings about charity and hospitality allow one to appreciate how an ancient moral compass can enhance the quality of life for the most vulnerable members of modern society. And a deeper understanding of the vibrant, nuanced, multi-faceted reality of Israel can allow one to acknowledge its issues while seeing past its falsified reputation and appreciate the truth of its inclusivity and flourishing democracy.

Days like Tisha B'Av are still of vital importance but a healthy Jewish communal body cannot thrive on a diet of tragedy alone. It cannot devolve into a skeleton devoid of bone marrow based on external threats. It must celebrate the inner beauty of Jewish life. To move from oy to joy, we need a paradigm shift in our pedagogy. The impetus for Jewish living must come from inside the Jewish world, being proactive rather than reactive.

We must begin by truly believing that the Jewish story is worth telling and then reconsider how we tell that story. Perhaps this is the reason that tradition teaches us that the Messiah will be born on Tisha B’Av and ultimately herald the era of the building of the Third Temple which will never be destroyed.

After all, our children no longer want to hear how not to leave. They need to experience why they must stay.

Rabbi Benji Levy is CEO of Mosaic United
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One of the most important, complex and difficult challenges faced by Diaspora Jewry is the fight against assimilation, which is affecting Jews everywhere.

The expression “refused to be comforted” appears twice in the Tanach. The first time is in the story of Yosef and his brothers. The brothers return home and tell their father Ya’akov that “a wild beast has devoured” Yosef and that Yosef is dead, placing his clothes before Ya’akov. The Torah tells us: “and Ya’akov mourned for his son many days and all his sons and all his daughters arose to console him. “ But Ya’akov “refused to be comforted.” This begs the question – why did Ya’akov refuse to be comforted? Did he not know that mourning has a limit? There is a time to cry and a time to be silent. Why did Ya’akov refuse to accept the consolation? What we have here is a foundation of the Jewish faith.

At first glance, faith is found in the ability to be consoled. Tragedy strikes, there is suffering and destruction, and a Jew accepts the judgment and says: “the Rock; His work is perfect.” He resigns himself to the facts and views them as the will of the Creator. Ostensibly, this is the apex of faith. However, there is a faith higher than that: the refusal to be comforted. We agree to be comforted when we believe that hope is lost. Deep in his heart, Ya’akov knew that Yosef was still alive. The refusal to be comforted is a victory of hope over desperation. Throughout the generations, it also characterized the belief our forefathers had in the building of Jerusalem.

When the city was destroyed and the Temple was burned down, the Jewish people refused to be consoled. We remember Jerusalem and mention it at every opportunity – in prayers and when saying Grace after Meals. At joyous occasions, we break a glass to remember Jerusalem. If a Jew whitewashes his home, he leaves an empty corner in memory of the city. The verse “if I forget thee Jerusalem, may my right hand wither” has accompanied the Jewish people since Biblical times.

The second case in which consolation was refused occurred when Jeremiah reflected on the loss of 10 of the 12 tribes: “A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children and refuses to be comforted because they are no more.”

Today we see Jews distancing themselves from Torah and detaching themselves from Jewish tradition. There are two possible responses to this situation:

There are those who will be consoled and say this is the way of the world and the will of the Creator. Jewish continuity, both physical and spiritual, will be sustained by the people loyal to Zion, to Jerusalem and to Jewish tradition. That is how it was in the past, that is how it is in the present, and that is how it will be in the future. We must accept this. The situation cannot be changed.

There is, however, another response: “Rachel is weeping for her children and refuses to be comforted because they are no more.” There is no consolation, we must continue our struggle and have hope. Change is definitely possible. We cannot be comforted and we must have faith. Assimilation can and must be countered using all the tools available. We have to bring people closer to their faith and to Jewish tradition so they will remain part of the Jewish people.

The war against assimilation is the most important battle being waged by the Jewish people today. The most effective way to win it is through education, which offers the sole guarantee for overcoming this painful phenomenon. We must enlist all our strengths and brainpower. Those on the front line, in each and every place, must put their fingers in the huge dike to hold back the gushing water jeopardizing the resilience of the Jewish people and their spiritual continuity.

The shlichim (emissaries) of Religious Zionism are hard at work in hundreds of Jewish communities across the globe. Their goal is to cultivate the connection with Jewish heritage and strengthen the bond with the Jewish people and the State of Israel.

We all share the hope that the vision of the prophet Jeremiah – “there is hope for your future, declares the L-rd, and the children shall return to their own Land” – will speedily be fulfilled in our lifetime.

Rabbi Yechiel Wasserman is Head of the Center for Religious Affairs in the Diaspora in the World Zionist Organization and one of World Mizrachi’s representatives in the National Institutions.
On Tisha B’Av we recite Kinot, mournful poems that intensify the sad ambience of the day. Which themes would you say are central to Kinot?

I’m convinced that throughout the generations, the writers of kinot wrote them to express their grief, as a personal and national catharsis. That is ideally the feeling that we should have when we read them. Obviously, we don’t have the same feelings that panged the original authors, but that’s the task of the teachers today: to convey to the reader the expression of pain, which can be therapeutic.

One theme that is strikingly absent from the kinot is the quest for revenge, for nekama. While we do find this in Tanakh, it doesn’t appear in the kinot. Instead, they express the powerlessness of the Jews in Galut. When you’re really powerless, you don’t have room for revenge.

The name Elazar HaKalir is seen time after time as the author of the kinot. How were his poems selected as the “authoritative” kinot? Do we have any historical information about who he was, and why he penned such dirges?

Most of the Ashkenazi kinot are written by Elazar HaKalir. We explain in The Mesorat HaRav Kinot that no one is really sure about who he was. According to the Ba’alei Tosafot (Tractate Hagiga 13a), HaKalir was the Tanna (Mishnaic scholar) Rabbi Elazar the Great, who lived in the 2nd Century C.E. It seems clear from an analysis of his poems that he lived in Israel and followed Minhag Eretz Yisrael.

We know that he was prolific. He was an expert in Tanakh, Hazal and Midrashim, and alludes to the whole spectrum of sources in his piyutim. He also wrote many of the piyutim that we see in the mahzorim for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. He plays a lot with the Hebrew alphabet, as seen in the first four chapters of Eikha. He incorporates the Aleph-Bet in different permutations; sometimes the pattern is obvious, but often it’s not. Because HaKalir wrote many piyutim, they were gradually incorporated as the kinot were being assembled, but there are other authors identified.

Should we continue to write our own kinot in modern times?

Rav Soloveitchik was against writing new kinot. He opposed new innovations to tefila, but some people disagree with this approach to kinot.

When we produced The Koren Mesorat HaRav Kinot, we felt that we needed to include the kinot for the Holocaust since so many congregations do say them.

Since I’ve been leading the Tisha B’Av webcast for the OU, many people have contacted me with examples of kinot they’ve discovered or written, particularly for fallen Israeli soldiers and for the Disengagement from Gush Katif.

I feel that we should be writing prayers – especially in the 21st century. It was done throughout the ages; personal expression of prayer is something we don’t do enough of.

The last phrase we read in Megillat Eikha is Hadesh Yameinu K’Kedem (renew our days as of old). What does that mean to you?

Even though we have a traumatic history as a people, we did have a feeling of closeness to G-d in “Yemei Kedem” that seems absent nowadays. The key word in that last phrase of Eikha is “Eilekha” (to You); we’re asking for that experience of closeness to G-d. It’s important to realize that religious observance doesn’t necessarily correlate with an experience with G-d. David HaMelekh had a traumatized, difficult life, but he was close to G-d. That’s what Tehillim is all about! He was close to G-d even when he sinned.

Eikha ends with “renew our days as of old.” That phrase captures something so strong.

Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb is the Editor-in-Chief of The Noé Edition Koren Talmud Bavli and the author of The Person in the Parasha: Discovering the Human Element in the Weekly Torah Portion (Maggid Books/OU Press)

Yehudit Jessica Singer is Marketing Manager at Koren Publishers
What is the origin of the word kinito, קיניתו – laments, dirges, which we read on Tisha B’Av?

Ernest Klein states that the root of kina is קינא, and writes as follows:

to fit together, fabricate [Whence Arab. qana ( = he fabricated, forged), qayn (= craftsman, a worker in steel or another metalsmith), Aramaic qinay, Syr. קינא, Akkadian qinayi ( = metal worker), Hebrew קין (kayin) (= spear), קינא (= elegy, dirge), Syr. קין (kine) (of same meaning), קינה (kine) (slave girl who is a singer), Ethiopian qene (= song), Syr. קינאה (kine) (= musical instrument). For sense development cp. Greek poietes (=poet; lit. ‘a maker’) from poiein (= to make, produce).]

Cassuto explains that the name Kayin (Bereishit 4:1) also derives from the sense of קינא as “to make, to form, to give shape,” and so his name meant “creation.”

Kaddari points out that while in Hebrew kina has a sense of mourning, in most Semitic languages it refers to singing in general.

Eicha contains two related words, which are unique in the Tanach: קינא, pronounced “kina,” is the root of kinot, קינות – laments, dirges, which we read on Tisha B’Av; and the word kina is קינא, pronounced “kina,” which Klein states is קינא, קין, קינא, קינא. Today קינא is a word for an infant.

Both words derive from the root פּוֹג, פּוֹגָה, and there is much debate as to its meaning. Much of the discussion surrounds the description of Ya’akov’s reaction to being told that Yosef was still alive – פּוֹג לָךְ יַעֲבֹד (Bereishit 45:26). What exactly happened to Ya’akov’s heart?

Rashi writes: His heart was changed so that he could not believe. That is to say that his heart could not take notice of the things (that Yosef’s brothers had spoken). The usage is similar to that which is stated in the Talmud (Beitza 14a) that spices lose their flavor (“mefigin talaman”) if ground ahead of time. It is also similar to the verse in Eicha 3:49 that “my eye(s) shall flow (tears) and not cease, without respite (“hafugot”). Also, note the Aramaic translation of the verse in Yirmiyahu 48:11: “Moav is complacent from its youth and settled upon its lees; it has not been poured from one vessel to another nor gone into exile. Therefore, its fine flavor abides and its bouquet has not dissipated.” Concerning this undissipated bouquet, the Aramaic translation renders “lo fug.”

However, Ramban disagrees: ... Rashi’s derivation is incorrect, for the matter of “fuga” is cessation and cancellation... Here too, the expression means that his heart stopped beating and his breathing ceased. The action of his heart stopped and it was as if he was dead. This phenomenon is well documented in situations where sudden and unexpected joy occurs. The medical literature relates that the old and the weak cannot bear unexpected joyous news, for many of them faint away under such circumstances. Their hearts are suddenly expanded and opened and the body’s natural heat is transferred to the extremities, leaving the heart with insufficient warmth. The old man (Ya’akov) fell down as if dead.

Although Ramban does not mention it directly, his mention that the heart is left without sufficient warmth connects with the Arabic meaning of the root, as quoted by Klein:

Aram. פֶּסֶק (=to cease, be helpless), Syr. פָּג (= was cold), Arab. פּוּג (= grew cool.)

Shadal rejects the definition of “cold.” Would Ya’akov remain “cold” to the news about Yosef? He claims it means “to become weak.” He connects the root פּוֹג to the root פָּסֶק, also meaning “weak” (Yirmiyahu 10:4, Yishayahu 28:7). Shadal derives the words safek פָּסֶק – doubt, and pikpuk פּוּג – doubt, from the same root.

Kaddari writes that פּוֹג means “to become numb, without feeling.” This connects well with the meaning of “become cold” (Ramban), as well as “become weak” (Shadal, Radak), or “to cease” (Rashi, Ibn Ezra). In fact, all three explanations are brought by Amos Chacham in the Da’at Mikra to Tehillim 38:9.

The sense of weak, ceased, is likely the origin of the word pag פּוֹג, meaning “unripe fig.” Klein claims that the Latin words for fig – ficus, fica (and from them the English word “fig”) – derive from pag. Today the word פּוֹג refers to a premature infant.

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A Toast TO TISHA B’AV

All of the Jewish holidays have a ‘mirror image.’ The most commonly cited example is Purim and Yom Kippur, as the name Yom HaKippurim can be read as, “a day like Purim,” a day when the masks come off and our true selves are openly displayed before G-d.

What holiday matches up with Tisha B’Av?

The well-known ש-תאש code connects the first letter of the Alef-Bet with the last, the second with the next to last, and so on. This code can be applied to the holidays of the Jewish year, which correspond to the 7 (Biblical) days of Pesach. The first day – א peça – connects to ה, which stands for Tisha B’Av, thus Tisha B’Av will always come out on the same day of the week as the first day of Pesach. Indeed, some commentaries suggest that one of the reasons we traditionally wear a kittel and eat an egg on Pesach – both symbols of mourning – is precisely because of Pesach’s link to Tisha B’Av.

What else do these two days have in common?

Rav Yochanan Zweig of Miami’s Talmudic Academy suggests that the devastation unleashed against the Egyptians, characterized by the 10 Plagues, was a by-product of the intensity of the relationship between Bnei Yisrael and G-d. Any nation which attempts to inhibit that relationship will be subject to severe Divine retribution, as the Egyptians learned all too well. However, when Bnei Yisrael adversely affects its own relationship with G-d, then those very energies which were unleashed against our enemies are now unleashed against us. This is manifested by the terrible calamities of Tisha B’Av when both the First and Second Temples were destroyed in horrendous fashion. Thus Tisha B’Av and Pesach both exemplify the same extreme passion that G-d has for His people.

This can also explain why we, in this generation, have been privileged to experience amazing miracles surrounding the rebirth of Israel. Our determination to return to our homeland, and our dedication to defending the Land at all costs, indicates our heroic commitment to G-d and His commandment of Yishuv HaAretz (settling the Land). This devotion on our part has resulted in G-d enabling our stunning successes on the battlefield and our stupendous growth into one of the world’s premier nations.

The Zionist-led reversal of the ‘original sin’ of Tisha B’Av – when the Meraglim (spies) rejected the Divine call to inherit Israel – only promises more signs and wonders as we propel the modern State to even higher glory. And so someday, hopefully soon, the Fast of Tisha B’Av will become a day when, like on Pesach, we will lift our wine glasses to offer toast after toast to our Redemption.

One fascinating footnote: As we said, each day of Pesach – as represented by its numerical letter – corresponds to a Jewish holiday. The first day – 1 or ק – corresponds to פ, or Tisha B’Av. Day 2/2 connects to ר-רואש, the one which precedes Pesach.

But the 7th and final day of Pesach – 8, which connects in the Alef-Bet to י – confounded the Sages. Try as they might, they could not identify a Jewish holiday that began with an י, and so they questioned whether the יא code was truly effective. And then a very wise and faithful person suggested that while it is true that there is no Chag today that begins with an י, perhaps G-d will provide the Jewish people with one in the future.

And so it came to be. In 1948, Israel won its independence (יהבש, or Torah reading, the most famous of which is Simchat Torah). Day 5/5 connects to י or fast day, the most important of which is Yom Kippur. Day 6/6 corresponds to פ-רואש (the one which precedes Pesach).

In 1949, Israel’s independence was officially recognized by the UN. And so a new holiday was proclaimed, Yom HaAtzmaut, which always falls out (officially) on the same day of the week as the seventh day of Pesach (though it is often moved in order to protect the sanctity of Shabbat). The יא code was finally complete.

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A PARADIGM OF UNITY

In the midst of the 2014 Gaza war, there was a special funeral. As expected, it was sad, an honor to a life cut short and a measure of comfort to the mourners. Unexpectedly, it was a perceivable demonstration of extreme unity.

My wife and I joined an estimated 30,000 others on Mt. Herzl to pay final respects to Max Steinberg, a young man from California, who two years earlier had participated in Taglit-Birthright. It opened his Jewish eyes, convincing him that Israel was his true home and inspiring him to join the IDF.

Max was laid to rest on that hot Wednesday morning.

The light rail to the military cemetery on Mt. Herzl was an experience; huge crowds in confined spaces. At every station hundreds watched overstuffed train cars pass them by. The throng swarmed over every walkway and climbed onto rocks and retaining walls. The mountain top seemed incongruously alive.

Suddenly, I was struck by the moment. All that had happened in the previous weeks: kidnappings, murders, rockets, ground action, terror tunnels, sacrifices our brave soldiers had made, all came together. The quiet in the air was broken by an announcement – what to do if the air raid siren went off during the funeral. As if the multitude could somehow find shelter. It reminded me of the “duck and cover” drills during the Cold War. Duck, cover and pray, was the message. Thank G-d we heard no sirens that morning.

Max was a chayal boded – a lone soldier. He had no blood relatives in Israel, but “family” transcends biology. Max personified love and chesed with his helpful disposition. And he was resolute. With his poor Hebrew language background, he was not accepted into the Golani Brigade at first. Instead of settling for a different assignment, he went back to the US, improved his Hebrew skills and reapplied. His grit and determination paid off, and moreover, eventually earned him the highest marks in his training and the utmost respect of his comrades and officers.

He was killed in action in Gaza.

Max’s parents, whose very first visit to Israel was to bury their son, said they had no regrets. Max’s entire life had been a blessing. They found solace and comfort in his heroism and dedication to his new connection to his roots and his people. As Max’s father and brother said Kadish, the “Amen Y’hei Shmei Raba...” of thousands of co-mourners filled the mountaintop in a tangible manifestation of achdut (unity). Dati-leumi, charedi, chiloni, native and tourist, soldier and office worker, student, professional, babe-in-arms, elder with cane and everyone in between – all backgrounds, all uniforms, all flavors of Jews came together for 90 minutes to share the grief. As the chazzan’s booming voice recited the tefillot, it was chilling in its purity and its timeless connection to Yahadut, a unifying encounter that bound all of us together on that mountain.

In these days around Tisha B’Av, when we mourn the churban, shedding tears for the past, and expressing prayers for the future – for the rebuilding of the Beit HaMikdash – we need to pray better, learn more, and increase our mitzvah observance and good deeds. But we also need something else: to express hakarat hatov (gratitude) for the soldiers who demonstrate the highest form of gemilut chasadim (benevolence) every day. Putting their lives on the line to protect someone else’s life.

Precisely what Max Steinberg did.

His family, friends and officers all spoke of his smile and modesty. His joy of life and his strength of character. But mostly they told of his commitment to Israel. A dedication born of his conviction that for a Jew, Israel was home, and for him, protecting that home was life’s highest purpose.

Throughout the funeral, red alert alarms on smartphones were indicating Gazan rockets targeting the south. This underscored the significance of what Max had died trying to accomplish. The unfinished mission, the objective still to be attained.

Not in his death, but in his life, Max Steinberg taught us about the oneness of Klal Yisrael. A young man, neither dati nor chiloni. Just a young Jewish man. He felt the connection to Israel, to his roots, to his people; to their rich history and their magnificent destiny, and he answered their call for help. Max reached across the ocean and tied his California family together with his newfound family in Israel. We all need to emulate that achdut.

1 As explained by Rav Aharon Lichtenstein.

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According to the Mishnah (Taanit 4:6), five specific events occurred on the 9th of Av that warrant fasting.

- **2448**: The spies returned with a bad report
- **3340**: First Beit Hamikdash was destroyed
- **3892**: Bar Kochba massacre
- **3893**: Romans plowed the Beit Hamikdash

Gradually, Tisha B’Av has become a Jewish day of mourning, not only for these events but also for later tragedies which occurred around the 9th of Av.

**Family Discussion:**

What can we do to bring a little more Ahavat Chinam (unconditional love) to the world?

**On Tisha B’Av, we don’t:**

- Eat and drink
- Bath or wash
- Anoint (using oil or perfume)
- Wear leather shoes
- Learn Torah
- Greet someone
- Conduct business
- Sit on chairs (before noon)

**Dates:**

- **5050**: Jews were expelled from England
- **5252**: Jews were banished from Spain
- **5674**: Both World Wars began
- **5702**: Deportation of Jews from Warsaw ghetto began
- **5765**: Israeli disengagement from Gaza began
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