While Tisha B’Av is a day of mourning for the destruction of both Batei Mikdash, it is referred to in our holy writings as a moed, a holiday. How could a day of such sadness and tears, when G-d’s Presence left its earthly abode and became distant from us, be designated a holiday?

The Siftei Chaim teaches us that once G-d removed His Presence from the Beit HaMikdash and the enemy burned it down, His Presence was no longer openly manifest in the world. The Beit HaMikdash devoid of G-d’s Presence remained an edifice of mere stone and mortar. As such, our awareness of His Presence in our lives became dimmed. It’s as if the clouds descended to obscure the sunlight. The sunlight of G-d’s Providence was still here, but we could not recognize it. All of Creation felt the distancing of G-d’s Presence. While Bnei Yisrael cried by the waters of Babylon, G-d Himself also cried.

The Siftei Chaim continues. An archangel then approached G-d and suggested that he cry and not G-d, for he is the angel responsible for the manifestation of G-d’s Presence in the world as a result of Bnei Yisrael’s good deeds. Bnei Yisrael were at fault for no longer being the recipient of G-d’s beneficence, not G-d. But G-d responds that He too needs to cry, for there is a vacuum and desecration in G-d’s Presence on Earth. He cannot rain down blessings of goodness because Bnei Yisrael has destroyed the tools that bring the closeness of HaKadosh Baruch Hu to Creation, and He is bereft of giving. I will go, says G-d, to the innermost chambers to cry, where even you, the archangel, are forbidden to enter. I will go into the hearts of every one of My people. Perhaps they will again recognize My Presence within the sanctuary of their hearts and return to Me with love as I stay with them.

This is HaKadosh Baruch Hu’s cry, echoed in the first word of Megillat Eicha. Jeremiah cried, “איך – how is it possible...” and G-d cries out, as He did to Adam, “איך – Where are you.” Where are you? Where is your heart? Are you searching for the connection to your Maker? Are you a conduit for G-d’s blessings to flow down to Earth? When we hear Eicha on Tisha B’Av, we should be asking ourselves why we have left Torah, and how we can facilitate kiruv, and approach a closeness to G-d again. We should recognize the intrinsic loss, and not just the trials and travails that Galut has brought upon us.

The Netivot Shalom uses this idea to understand why the Megillah says this day will be called a holiday. He explains that besides closeness and distance, there is another kind of relationship: the worst level is when you think you’re close and don’t even recognize that the relationship has deteriorated or non-existent. When you rationalize your evil, sinful or abusive actions into the belief they are in fact righteous and beneficial.

The Siftei Chaim cites the prophet Jeremiah in showing that this mindset had corrupted Bnei Yisrael. “How can you say I have not become impure, I have not followed Ba’al,” admonishes the prophet, when the evidence is right there. It is for this abnegation of responsibility, of “I have not sinned” that G-d is punishing Bnei Yisrael and Jerusalem. With the destruction of the Beit HaMikdash, the eyes of Bnei Yisrael opened up and they realized the extent of their sins. They had not yet re-established the closeness with HaKadosh Baruch Hu, but at least they could now acknowledge their responsibility in creating the distance from Him and yearn for the repair of the relationship. This awakening alone merited celebration as a holiday.

Our problem today is we don’t realize what we are missing. Even the mitzvot we do, we do more through habit than as a means of facilitating G-d’s renewed open Presence on earth. Our perspective in our daily life should be greater than performing the letter of the law. We should be focused on making G-d’s Presence manifest in the world again, as it was in the time of the Temple, by using our words and actions to this end rather than for rote observance. Even seemingly mundane tasks, like earning a living, caring for our children, can be viewed as doing G-d’s work on Earth and bringing His Presence closer. Our fast on Tisha B’Av should arouse this yearning within us.

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