The Romans destroyed the Second Temple in Jerusalem 1,950 years ago. 1,950 years is a very long time, even in terms of the span of human history. Great empires have risen to dominate the world over this period but without exception, they have all crumbled and disappeared into the dustbin of history. Religions and beliefs arose and for a long time were popular and boasted millions of adherents. However, once again the bloom is off the rose for most of them.

We are living in a post-Christian era and vast areas of the world such as Europe, that formerly were the bastions of that faith, have now abandoned it in belief and practice. The god of secularism appeared to be dominant during the last century, spearheaded and abetted by the power of the atheistic and seemingly all-powerful Soviet Union. But that mighty colossus has also proven to be empty. Though there are those that still espouse the disproven theories of Marxism, real facts belie there is any truth or future in those theories and beliefs.

Nationalism as a goal and an ideal also seems to be on its way, as nations and peoples struggle to construct some sort of international order and economic interdependence. The world has changed greatly in terms of technology and social order over the past 1,950 years. But, in many respects, it has not changed at all.

The world hardly marks the disappearance and passing of previous governments and social orders. It does not celebrate days of defeat nor does it wish to remember the true and actual causes of those defeats. One of the most striking aspects of Jewish tradition is the fact that Judaism commemorates - with ritual, prayer and behavior - the most negative moments in Jewish history. It does so to remind us of the actuality of life and events. It does so to warn us of the consequences of evil and even erroneous behavior and policies. It does so that we shall not gloss over the parts of our story that are uncomfortable and even very negative.

If we are not aware of our defeats, there is no way we can ever plan to reach victory

For if we are not aware of our defeats, there is no way we can ever plan to reach victory and accomplishment. The prime example of this attitude of truthfulness, no matter how painful, is found in the words of the prophets of Israel who foresaw the destruction of the Temple but also saw the eventual restoration and rebuilding of the Jewish people and Jewish life in the land of Israel.

I think it is because of this truthfulness and honesty that the prayers and Biblical readings of Tisha B’Av still speak to us in such a meaningful and emotional fashion. Like everything else that is Jewish and Biblical, it is not just a record of what happened to us long ago but rather a comment on our times, our situation and our challenges.

Over the past few decades, discussions have arisen both within and outside the Jewish religious world as to the place this day of mourning should have in our lives. The miraculous rise and success of the State of Israel has presented the Jewish world with enormous opportunities, but with enormous spiritual and physical challenges as well. After 1,950 years of mourning on this date, it is hard to imagine any change, yet the prophets did tell us this day would become a day of joy and rejoicing and no longer one of mourning.

We are not yet so privileged to be able to change and reverse the content and mood of the day. Too much has occurred to us and at too great a price, in our struggle to remain a separate and holy people, for this day to be stripped of its sad content. The lessons of the day and of the words of the great prophets of Israel still need to be reinforced within us personally and within our society.

The day demands of us loyalty to the G-d of Israel and to the Torah and traditions that have maintained us over this long span of time. It evokes memory and demands attention to the problems and failings still present in our lives and society. But it also points to a hopeful future and to comfort, consolation and better times.

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