



From Passive Observer to Active Participant

Years ago, I went to see an exhibition of photographs that had won the Pulitzer Prize for best news reporting. I was struck by how, one after another, the photos were all suffused with the same themes: visceral loss and suffering.

A particular photo caught my eye. It was of a Cambodian refugee, a woman, clutching a child, forging her way through a rushing river. She was surrounded by a torrent of water that was nearly neck high. With what seemed like every ounce of strength, she struggled, with one arm, to keep her daughter's head above the murderous waves. Her arm was wrapped around her child, and the limb of a tree, hanging over the river from the embankment. With the other arm, she reached out, desperately, in the direction of the camera.

I stood there in the museum, and here was this woman, gazing at me – through the lens of this camera, across the stretch of time. When you looked at the photo, it almost felt as if you could reach out with your own hand and grab her arm, and pull her and her child to safety. As I stood there, looking at the desperate mother and child – a sudden sense of shock and outrage shook me out of my reverie. It suddenly occurred to me: what was this photographer doing taking this picture? Why didn't he throw his camera aside and instead reach out to pull this woman to shore?

Reporters are there as third-party narrators of the news. But they are also human beings. So the choice to be a third-party observer, is, on some level, an arbitrary one. When you are witnessing great suffering, history may laud you for reporting the suffering – but as a human being, what integrity do you really have left if you choose to stand apart from it? The third-person offers the benefit of dispassionate reporting but sometimes, you can't afford to be the 'third person.' Sometimes, you are part of the story, whether you like it or not.



The first two chapters of Eicha lament the destruction of Yerushalayim, but more or less from the outside. Yirmiyahu speaks as an onlooker, describing tragedy as it befalls someone else. The city of Yerushalayim is anthropomorphized as a young maiden, making the tragedy of the city's downfall more poignant than the mere destruction of bricks and stone – but it is still a tragedy happening to someone over there.

In Chapter Three, all that changes. The perspective shifts to first-person. Yirmiyahu begins to describe his own experience. The shift is brought home, jarringly, with the chapter's very first words, "*I am the man who has seen affliction, with the rod of His wrath.*" All of a sudden, it's personal. Yirmiyahu speaks, for the first time, from his own perspective. This is no longer a lament for someone else's pain, however empathetically felt; this is the raw voice of someone living the suffering of which he tells. The voice we hear is short and breathless, like someone panting. Gone is the pretense of elegantly crafted lament, or even basic dignity. All that remains is the disjointed, stumbling, first-person account of anguish and horror.

Drawn into Yerushalayim's suffering, Yirmiyahu finds that he can't just be a reporter. And so he leaves the relative comfort of the reporter's microphone. He stands, vulnerable and alone, at one with his devastated city and its exiled inhabitants.

How different would our own experience of Tisha B'Av be if we too shift our perspective from a third-person onlooker to an individual living through the tragedy? What would it be like to experience the devastation first-hand and not from a safe distance? If we, like Yirmiyahu, take a step toward the suffering of our people and face the anguish and horror directly rather than remain at a safe distance? What would our Tisha B'Av look like then?

■ Adapted by Rachel Aviner from a longer article at www.alephbeta.org/tisha-bav.

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