



Prisoners of Hope: Why We Mourn on Tisha B'Av

Ever hear that you shouldn't cry over spilt milk? Why do the Jews sit on the floor every year on Tisha B'Av, mourning the destruction that happened eons ago? And while, "they lived happily ever after" is a great ending for a children's story, we cynical adults smirk at the thought. We've been around long enough to know there are no happy endings. So what is this naïve hoping for *Mashiach*?

A Life of Longing

Getting beyond the cynicism to yearn for *Mashiach* means I understand that life is not an endless flipping of calendar pages. There will be a time when we reclaim the relationship of love that started with the Exodus. During the long middle of this story, we hold on for dear life to the vision we were shown at Sinai. We experienced that love once, and forever more we yearn for it.

We are told that after death, we will be asked, *Tzipita LiShua*? "Did you yearn for redemption?" G-d will say: I missed you so much. Did you miss Me? Did you wait every day for Me to return? Did you agonize over My absence? And it will be in direct proportion to our yearning that we experience the joy of re-connection. If we don't mind that You are there, and we are here, we betray the intimacy of our experience at Sinai.

Yes, we have lives to live, jobs to do – and of course, we live our lives joyfully. But through it all, the Jew never forgets there is something missing. Even at a wedding, moments before we break into song and dance, we shatter a glass to remind us that though this wedding is a joyous glimpse of the unity of the future – there will always be a corner in our heart that refuses to be reconciled with Your absence. A part of us will always ache for You.

Recognizing the Jail

Rabbeinu Yonah, in his *Shaarei Teshuva*, cites a Midrash:

The king sentenced some bandits to imprisonment. Once in prison, the prisoners managed to dig themselves a tunnel to freedom. Most of them took the opportunity to escape but one stayed behind. The jailer comes in and beats the remaining prisoner. "The way is open before you! Why have you not escaped?"

Imagine the prisoner protesting, "Wait a minute! Go find the escapees and beat them. What are you yelling at me for? I am the good one who stayed where you put me!"



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The jailer would respond, "No! It is you by staying here, who have betrayed freedom. You are the problem! The others realized they were in jail; they took the first opportunity to escape. You, by staying put, have declared you are comfortable with the way things are. You've negated the jail!"

We cheerfully sit around in exile and decorate the cell, pipe in some music – we're having a grand time.

"I will remove your heart of stone and replace it with a heart of flesh," Yechezkel says. But who needs a heart of flesh? A heart of stone is much more comfortable. Who wants to care so much? Who wants to mourn? Who wants to be so aware of what we are missing? Get with the program! Put that smile back on your face; get back on the dance floor! Yet, sometimes it is pain and mourning for what was that peels us off our infatuation with the superficial and forces us to dig deeper for the source of real joy.

So G-d makes exile a little less comfortable. We notice it's getting hotter and we run to adjust the air conditioning. We're okay. We've got it. Everything is under control.

G-d waits. He waits for us to notice we are in prison. He waits for us to let the pain catapult us into His arms.

The prophet Zecharia calls us *Asirei Tikva* – "prisoners of hope." Being in a constant state of hope and longing is a hard way to live. We never totally fit in, never completely feel at home. Everyone else is dancing to the music, doing just fine. Only we (even while dancing) have our eyes pinned to the door, bound by love, with ropes of hope to another world, another reality. Yet when that reality arrives, it is all those years of yearning – those years of mourning what was, and years of hope for the future – which will bind us to the Source of all Joy.

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