



# Tisha B'Av in an Age of Open Antisemitism

## Tisha B'Av Loneliness

**T**isha B'Av is about loneliness. Megilat Eicha begins by reflecting on the reality of Jewish loneliness. We accentuate this emotion on Tisha B'Av by refraining from greeting each other and even on Erev Tisha B'Av, by eating separately.<sup>1</sup>

Last year's Tisha B'Av was an especially lonely one. Covid reality and restrictions reinforced our feeling of loneliness. It was not only the laws of Tisha B'Av that kept us from greeting and embracing each other, but also concern for our health and welfare.

Tisha B'Av this year should have a different feeling. Our communities are emerging from Covid. We are once again able to gather and connect with each other. That said, we are still feeling lonely this year, for a different reason.

only in Muslim countries and across the European continent, but also in the US, Canada and around the world.

Our peace overtures and territorial withdrawals have failed to earn us the world's sympathy and understanding. Antisemitism has once again proved its amazing resilience and has morphed into a virulent strain of anti-Zionism that does not allow true reality to keep it from demonizing Israel and the Jewish people.

## Megillat Eicha on Antisemitism

Of course, after suffering from antisemitism in so many forms over so many centuries, we should no longer be surprised. In fact, the Torah<sup>2</sup> teaches us to expect antisemitism. Megillat Eicha laments its existence and teaches us what to learn from it.

After opening by bemoaning how others abandoned us, the first *perek* of Megillat Eicha ends with our call to Hashem: "I called for my lovers but they deceived me... See, Hashem for I am in distress... There is none to comfort me."

*Perek Bet* emphasizes that Hashem is the one who has brought the suffering. It is His way of calling us to turn to him. "Hashem has done that which He devised. He has fulfilled His word that He commanded in days of old... Arise, cry out in the night, in the beginning of the watches pour out your heart like water opposite Hashem's face..."

The pivotal, personal *Perek Gimmel* recognizes it is Hashem who has isolated us from the rest of the world with the intention that we focus on our relationship with Him. Isolation helps us appreciate neglected and abused relationships.

This reflection leads to a return to Hashem later in the *perek*: "Let us search and try our ways and turn back to Hashem. Let us lift up our heart with our hands to G-d in the heavens. We have transgressed and have rebelled..." *Am Yisrael* has gotten the message. Hashem orchestrated the mass

betrayal and isolation so we would appreciate the need to turn and return to Him.

## Realizing Our Destiny

The Jewish people are meant to impact and lead others. Unfortunately, sometimes our relationships with others cause us to lose our appreciation of our unique Jewish identity and relationship with Hashem. The hatred of others who distance themselves from us should remind us of our unique identity and mission and inspire us to return to Hashem with renewed commitment and connection. When we do so, we can rightfully recite Eicha's concluding *pasuk*: הַשְׁיִבְנוּ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְנִשְׁבְּרָה. May our doing so merit our experiencing the conclusion of that *pasuk*: חֲדָשׁ יִמְיָנוּ כְּקֶדֶם.

<sup>1</sup> See more on this topic in my piece in last year's Tisha B'Av HaMizrachi: [mizrachi.org/hamizrachi/archive](http://mizrachi.org/hamizrachi/archive).

<sup>2</sup> Devarim 28:68, Tehillim and Midrash Tehillim 25:19. See also Maharal's Gevruot Hashem 54 and the Introduction to the Siddur of Rav Yaakov Emden.

## Reminder of Antisemitism

The recent Israel-Arab conflict reminded us of our people's existential loneliness. This is not the first time Israel has been attacked by its Arab neighbors. It is also not the first time popular world opinion has been marshalled against us.

It is, however, the first time these external attacks were accompanied by the internal attacks of Arab citizens of the State of Israel. It is also the first time Jews around the world were targeted with open hostility and violence. This was the case not



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 Rabbanit Shani Taragin

## Cries, Crisis and Conflict: Rabbinic Responses to Churban

**V**oices of conflicting political leadership resound throughout the *aggadot* of the second *Churban*. In contrast, the Sages of the time, dependent upon their patrons for survival, were relatively silent. Three voices of religious leadership, however, address the impending destruction of the second *Beit HaMikdash*, each with a different perspective and response to times of crisis.

The first is the passive tone of Rabbi Zecharia Ben Avkolus (Gittin 55b-56a). Rabbi Yochanan, living over a century after the destruction, initially “blames” Kamtza and Bar Kamtza for the destruction of Yerushalayim, yet concludes: “The humility of Rabbi Zecharia ben Avkolus destroyed our Temple, burned our Sanctuary and exiled us from our Land.”

The Rabbis had wanted to either offer a blemished animal brought by Bar Kamtza to preserve good relations with the authorities, or to kill the informer.

Rabbi Zecharia ben Avkolus said to them: “People will then think that blemished animals may be offered upon the altar... People will say that anyone who places a blemish on a sacrifice should be killed.” So the animal was not sacrificed and the informer was not killed. In retrospect, Rabbi Yochanan realized how drastic times require drastic messages from religious leaders and not a response of humility.

The second voice is that of Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen who, witnessing the murder of a *kohen* during *Mikdash* worship, stood on the stairs of the *Beit HaMikdash* and cried that all the people and the *kohanim* were culpable (Tosefta Yoma 1). He deplored Miriam, the daughter of wealthy Nakdimon, who demanded a ridiculously high dowry, and later witnessed her during the siege of Yerushalayim eating fodder from the hooves of horses (Pesikta Rabbati 21). He bemoaned the fate of Marta, the daughter of Baythus, who insisted that her servants roll out carpets for her on Yom Kippur so that her feet would not be soiled, only to eventually be dragged through the streets,

tied to the tails of horses (Eicha Rabbah 1:47).

Rabbi Tzadok did not respond with silence or passivity; he remained with the people in Yerushalayim and witnessed their moral and physical decay. He admonished the people and priests and observed fasts for 40 years to prevent the *Beit HaMikdash* from being destroyed. He remained hopeful of repentance without ignoring the apparent atrocities.



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The most lasting and resounding voice of religious leadership is that of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai. Rabbi Yochanan harshly rebuked Sadducee distortion of *halacha* and the brutal methods of burning storehouses by the Biryoni sect. Unlike Rabbi Tzadok, who still hoped for the nation’s repentance and restored peace, Rabbi Yochanan found the anger of the besieged populace to be intolerable and began planning for the possibility of destruction.

After surreptitiously escaping the Roman siege and greeting Vespasian as “king,” the new emperor granted Rabbi Yochanan his requests: “Give me Yavneh and its wise men, and the family chain of Rabban Gamaliel and physicians to heal R. Tzadok” (Gittin 56a-b).

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai mourned upon hearing of the *Churban*, but simultaneously anticipated and prepared for a new way of life that would transcend the absence of the *Mikdash* – “We have a form of atonement just like it [the *Mikdash*]. And what is it? Acts of kindness” (Avot DeRabbi Natan 4:5).

He re-established the Sanhedrin in Yavneh and enacted laws to replace animal sacrifice with prayer. He instituted that certain practices of the *Beit HaMikdash* continue, to remember it as it once stood, while also establishing means to recall its destruction.

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai’s legacy of leadership was perpetuated by his students, who adopted his outlook of preparing for the future in times of distress. For example, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya dealt with ascetics who refused to eat meat and drink wine after the destruction by reminding them that we must not overly mourn. Inspired by his mentor, he recommended that we engage in practices of mourning only when we are most prone to forgetting Yerushalayim, i.e. at joyous occasions (Bava Batra 60b).

The subsequent generation in Yavneh, led by Rabbi Akiva, began the next stage of preparation – anticipating the eventual return to and rebuilding of Yerushalayim (Makkot 24b).

Polarization and conflict may depress and blur our understanding of the present, yet do not absolve us from taking responsibility and providing a trajectory of religious-national survival for the future. May religious leadership’s voices of introspection together with hope for *Mikdash* restoration resound and awaken us to react, repent and properly plan for the rebuilding of a “just and righteous” society in Tzion.

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