

Tisha b'Av: An Historical Approach

Introduction

The 9th of Av is observed by Jews as a date of national calamity and mourning. Instituted initially to lament the destruction of the first and second Temples, by the Babylonians and then by the Romans, many other historical traumas – whether they in fact occurred on the 9th of Av or are only attributed to that date – have been integrated into our observance.

Most of the Tisha b'Av liturgy is focused on the destruction of the Temples in Jerusalem. But present day observance also includes mourning for the other Jewish catastrophes on or near that date later in history, including the expulsions of the Jewish communities of England (1290) and Spain (1492). Later still, specific massacres during the Crusades, the Chmielniecki pogroms in 1648 in Poland, the outbreak of World War I, and the Holocaust are also memorialized on the 9th of Av – although, admittedly, the dating is often contrived. Nevertheless, the symbolism of the 9th of Av as one of recurring trauma is etched in our religious consciousness.

Instructions to the leader:

This study guide contains a number of historical texts that can be read in conjunction with *Eikhab* on Tisha b'Av. Because of time constraints you will have to decide which texts to read, and how much discussion you will have with your participants.

As you read the texts, ask the following questions:

1. What makes this text appropriate for Tisha b'Av?
2. What specific language and imagery does each text employ?
3. Does the text contain a theological message?

I. The Bible's Historical Account

Leader: *The earliest account of the destruction of the first Temple is contained in the biblical book of II Kings, from which we derive the specific date.*

II Kings 25: 1-11

In the ninth year of his [King Zedekiah] reign of, on the tenth day of the tenth month [asarah beTevet], Nebuchadnezzar moved against Jerusalem with his whole army. He besieged it; and they built towers against it all around. The city continued in a state of siege until the eleventh year of King Zedekiah. By the ninth [of the fourth month] the famine had become acute in the city; there was no food left for the common people.

Then [the wall of] the city was breached. All the soldiers [left the city] by night through the gate between the double walls... They captured the king and brought him before the king of Babylon at Riblah... On the seventh day of the fifth month – that was the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon—Nebuzaradan, the chief of the guards, an officer of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. He burned the House of the LORD, the king's palace, and all the houses of Jerusalem; he burned down the house of

every notable person. The entire Chaldean force that was with the chief of the guard tore down the walls of Jerusalem on every side. The remnant of the people that was left in the city...and the remnant of the population ...were taken into exile by Nebuzardan.

Leader: *What specific actions are described in this account?*

What is the tenor of this account?

Who is responsible for the destruction of Jerusalem?

- Nebuchadnezzar and the army; God is not mentioned.

How does this account differ from that in Eikvah?

II. Josephus Flavius: *Jewish Antiquities*

Background: Josephus was born into a priestly family in Jerusalem at the beginning the common era. During the revolt against Rome from 66-73 CE, Josephus served as a general of the Jewish rebel troops in the Galilee. When the Roman army overcame his forces, Josephus surrendered and eventually became part of the emperor Vespasian's court in Rome where he wrote a history of the revolt, *The Jewish War*. It was later incorporated into his more extensive history of the Jews, *Jewish Antiquities*. While his writings are an invaluable tool for historians of antiquity, their reliability is colored by his dependence on hearsay and legend, and (in the former work) his clearly Roman bias.

Josephus: *The Jewish War*

Book 6: Chapter 4

⁽²²⁰⁾ And now two of the legions had completed their banks on the eighth day of the month of Lous [Av]. Whereupon Titus gave orders that the battering-rams should be brought and set over against the western edifice of the inner temple...⁽²³²⁾ and now the soldiers had already put fire to the gates, and the silver that was over them quickly carried the flames to the wood that was within it, whence it spread itself all on the sudden, and caught hold of the cloisters...⁽²³⁵⁾ the fires prevailed during that day and the next also, for the soldiers were not able to burn all the cloisters that were round about together at one time...

⁽²⁴⁹⁾ So Titus retired into the tower of Antonia and resolved to storm the temple the next day, early in the morning, with his whole army...⁽²⁵⁰⁾ but, as for that house, God had for certain long ago doomed it to the fire; and now that fatal day was come, according to the revolution of ages; it was the tenth day of the month Lous [Av] upon which it was formerly burnt by the king of Babylon...

⁽²⁶⁷⁾ Now although anyone would justly lament the destruction of such a work as this was, since it was the most admirable of all the works that we have seen or heard of, both for its curious structure and its magnitude, and also for the vast wealth bestowed upon it, as well as for the glorious reputation it had for its holiness... ⁽²⁶⁸⁻²⁷⁰⁾ However, one cannot but wonder at the accuracy of this period thereto relating; for the same month and day were now observed, as I said before, wherein the holy house was burnt

formerly by the Babylonians. Now the number of years that passed from its first foundation, which was laid by king Solomon, till this its destruction, which happened in the second year of the reign of Vespasian, are collected to be one thousand one hundred and thirty, besides seven months and fifteen days; and from the second building of it, which was done by Haggai, in the second year of Cyrus the king, till its destruction under Vespasian, there were six hundred and thirty-nine years and forty-five days.

Leader: *What does Josephus write in this narrative about the destruction of the Temple?*

- It is destroyed by an all-consuming fire
- Its destruction was ordained by God (for Israel's sins)
- It occurred, providentially, on the same date as the destruction of the previous Temple by the Babylonians [Josephus' chronology is faulty; he places the reign of Solomon in the period of the judges.]
- Titus is God's instrument, but God doomed the temple to destruction

Leader: *In this account, who is ultimately responsible for the destruction of the Temple? Why does Josephus, a historian, introject theology into his narrative?*

III. Rabbinic Literature

Background: The rabbis view the destruction of the two Temples in theological terms as a punishment for Israel's sins. While many rabbinic texts name specific violations of the covenant – violating Shabbat, not observing kashrut, internal Jewish conflict – the Mishnah maintains that the date of calamity was established in the desert, long before the first Temple was built.

Mishnah Ta'anit 4:6

Five things befell our fathers on the 17th of Tammuz and five on the 9th of Av. On the 17th of Tammuz the tables [of the ten commandments] were broken, and the daily Whole-offering ceased, and the city [Jerusalem] was breached, and Apostomus [unknown Syrian general] burned the [scrolls of the] law, and an idol was set up in the sanctuary. On the 9th of Av it was decreed against our fathers that they should not enter into the land [of Israel], and the Temple was destroyed the first and the second time, and Beth-Tor* was captured and the city was ploughed up. When Av comes in, gladness must be diminished.

Leader: *According to the Mishnah (codified around 200 CE), a number of misfortunes befell the Jews on the 9th of Av? What were they?*

- Decree to ancestors in Numbers 14: 29 that they would not enter the land: *“In this very wilderness shall your carcasses drop. Of all of you who were recorded in your various lists from the age of twenty years up, you who have muttered against Me, not one shall enter the land in which I swore to settle you—save Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun.”*
- First Temple destroyed

- Second Temple destroyed
- Beth-tor (Bethar) was the scene of Bar Kochba's final battle against the Romans
- Jerusalem was razed to the ground by the Romans after the Bar Kochba revolt [renamed Aelia Capitolina]

Leader: *This day of calamity is developed further in the Talmud.*

B. Ta'anit 29a-b

And it is further written, *And all the congregation lifted up their voices, and cried; and the people wept that night.* [referring to Numbers 14:1 when the camp began to wail upon hearing the report from the spies]. **Rabbah said in the name of R. Johanan: That night was the ninth of Av.** The Holy One, blessed by He, said to them, 'You wept without cause; I will therefore make this an eternal day of mourning for you.' It was then decreed that on the ninth of Av the Temple would be destroyed and the children of Israel would go into exile.

Leader: *How do the Rabbis connect Tisha b'Av with the story of the spies?*

The rabbis were seeking to justify *Tisha b'Av* as a divinely decreed day of calamity. They projected the date back into the story of the spies – punishing Israel for not trusting in God who said '*You wept without cause therefore I will not allow you to enter the land of Israel and I will make this a day of mourning for you*' and pronounced that the Temple would be destroyed **also** on that day. Punishment was meted out because of Israel's lack of faith.

Leader: *How do these other statements, also from the same passage of the Talmud, further confirm this?*

B. Ta'anit 29a-b

And the Temple was destroyed the second time. Whence do we know this? For it has been taught: Good things come to pass on an auspicious day, and bad things on an unlucky day. It is reported that the day on which the first temple was destroyed was the eve of the ninth of Av, a Sunday...

Our rabbis have taught: When the first Temple was about to be destroyed bands upon bands of young priests with the key of the temple in their hands assembled and mounted the roof of the temple and exclaimed, 'Master of the Universe, as we did not have the merit to be faithful treasurer these keys are handed back into thy keeping'. They then threw the keys up towards heaven. And there emerged the figure of a hand and received the keys from them.

Answers might include:

- The destruction is because of Israel's sins – even the priests have sinned
- The date is pre-ordained: the 9th of Av is an inauspicious day, one meant for calamity

- To maintain this theological certainty, other occurrences will be attributed to this date: Bethar was captured. This is a tradition. [Here the rabbis are telling us that they have no textual proof for the 9th of Av date, so they are conjuring this date.]

IV. The Middle Ages/Expulsions

The need to maintain Tisha b'Av as a day of recurring calamity continues well beyond the time of the destruction of the two Temples. It is associated with the Crusades (especially the summer of 1096 when the first crusaders reached the Rhineland and later Jerusalem); kinot associated with Tisha b'Av were recited during these and other times of disaster.

In the 17th century, Shabbatai Tsvi, the false messiah, proclaimed that he was born on the 9th of Av, the date which some rabbinic texts maintain will be the birth date of the messiah. This date was most certainly appropriated by Shabbatai or his followers to bolster his messianic pretensions.

Leader: *History maintains that the two expulsions of Jewish communities, from England in 1290 and from Spain in 1492, took place on the 9th of Av. The 9th of Av attribution of the English expulsion is probably another example of an artificial connection between the event and the date, but the edict of expulsion from Spain does, in fact, contain the date, July 30, 1492 which was the 8th of Av that year.*

The expulsions – particularly traumatic for the very large and culturally vibrant Jewish population in Spain – had deep and long-lasting effects for those Jews who left the Iberian peninsula never to return. Menasseh ben Israel, the head of the Jewish community in Amsterdam, petitioned Oliver Cromwell in 1655 to allow Jews to return to England, arguing forcibly for their economic benefit to society.

Expulsion Decree for the Jews of England, 1290 CE

To the same end [in reference to a tax levy in the previous sentence which is not included here] in the year, all Jews, with their goods, children and wives, around the holiday of All Saints [All Saints' Day is November 1], are banished from the land of England and of Aquitania [the southwest part of what is now France between the Loire River and Pyrenees Mountains], King Edward having conceded.

Leader: *The expulsion decree suggests a date of November 1 (All Saints Day). What might have been the reason for this date? Although the 9th of Av is not mentioned, why do Jews maintain that it was this date?*

Leader: *The expulsion decree from Spain establishes the date as 3 months to the day following the order of expulsion, from March 31, 1492, to the end of July of that year.*

Expulsion Decree from Spain, 1492 (abridged)

King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, by the grace of God...with the counsel and advice of prelates, great noblemen of our kingdoms, and other persons of learning and wisdom of our Council, having taken deliberation about this matter, resolve to order the said Jews and Jewesses of our kingdoms to depart and never to return or come back to them or to any of them. And concerning this we command this our charter to be given, by which we order all Jews and Jewesses of whatever age they may be, who live, reside, and exist

in our said kingdoms and lordships, as much those who are natives as those who are not, who by whatever manner or whatever cause have come to live and reside therein, that by the end of the month of July next of the present year, they depart from all of these our said realms and lordships, along with their sons and daughters, menservants and maidservants, Jewish familiars, those who are great as well as the lesser folk, of whatever age they may be, and they shall not dare to return to those places, nor to reside in them, nor to live in any part of them, neither temporarily on the way to somewhere else nor in any other manner, under pain that if they do not perform and comply with this command and should be found in our said kingdom and lordships and should in any manner live in them, they incur the penalty of death and the confiscation of all their possessions by our Chamber of Finance, incurring these penalties by the act itself, without further trial, sentence, or declaration

Given in our city of Granada, the XXXI day of the month of March, the year of the birth of our lord Jesus Christ one thousand four hundred and ninety-two years. I, the King, I the Queen, I, Juan de Coloma, secretary of the king and queen our lords, have caused this to be written at their command.

Leader: *The following account gives an accurate picture of the expulsion and its immediate consequences for Spanish Jewry. It was written in Hebrew by an Italian Jew in April or May, 1495.*

A Jewish Account of the Expulsion from Spain (abridged)

And in the year 5252 [1492], in the days of King Ferdinand, the Lord visited the remnant of his people a second time [the first was in 1391], and exiled them. After the King had captured the city of Granada from the Moors... he ordered the expulsion of all the Jews from his kingdom...

...The King gave them three months' time in which to leave. It was announced in public in every city on the first of May, which happened to be the 19th day of the Omer, and the term ended on the day before the 9th of Ab. ...The Jews were to leave during in May, June, and July and be out of the country by August 1, the 8th of Ab.]

[Estimates of number of Jews expelled ...] They had houses, fields, vineyards, and cattle, and most of them were artisans. At that time there existed many [Talmudic] academies in Spain... and a great expert in mathematics, ... Abraham Zacuto. [famous astronomer]... [They attempted to negotiate terms by which they could remain which was preempted by the queen]. ... Then the Queen gave an answer to the representatives of the Jews, similar to the saying of King Solomon [Proverbs 2 1: 1]: "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water. God turneth it whithersoever He will." She said furthermore: "Do you believe that this comes upon you from us? The Lord hath put this thing into the heart of the king."

...But the time had become short, and they had to hasten their exodus from Spain. They sold their houses, their landed estates, and their cattle for very small prices, to save themselves. The King did not allow them to carry silver and gold out of his country, so that they were compelled to exchange their silver and gold for merchandise of cloths and skins and other things... [Many Spanish Jews went to Portugal, paying per capita settlement fees, only to be expelled after six months.] Many of the exiled Spaniards went to Mohammedan countries... A part of those who went to Northern Africa, as

they found no rest and no place that would receive them, returned to Spain, and became converts... [Recounting of the countries that received them.]

He who said unto His world, Enough, may He also say Enough unto our sufferings, and may He look down upon our impotence. May He turn again, and have compassion upon us, and hasten out salvation. Thus may it be Thy will!

Leader: *What does this text tell us about the Jewish community in Spain? What does the author imply with his “quotation” of Queen Isabella? What is the theological message of the final paragraph?*

Leader: *Many Jews believe that a commemoration of victims of the holocaust has added another – and perhaps more tangible – dimension to Tisha b’Av observance. In Israel, secular Jews visit Yad Vashem (even wearing sneakers) as a way of observing this day of mourning.*

Chaim Kaplan’s Scroll of Agony, November 18, 1941

Warsaw is depressed and wrapped in deep mourning. But it is no ceremonial mourning with only the outward trappings, lacking heartfelt grief. On the contrary, if we could, we would weep bitterly, and our cry would rise to the high heavens. Were it not for fear of the evil kingdom, our wailing would burst forth in the dark alleys, and we would cry and weep and wail dreadfully for our calamity, as vast as the sea. But because of the sword, drawn and waiting for our plaint to lop off our heads—our grief does not break out. Our hearts—are our graves.

Leader: *What words and images evoke Tisha b’Av?*

- depressed
- wrapped in deep mourning
- heartfelt grief
- weep bitterly
- cry...rise to the high heavens
- evil kingdom
- fear
- wailing
- dark alleys
- cry, weep and wail dreadfully
- calamity as vast as the sea
- sword drawn and waiting for our plaint to lop off our heads
- our grief does not break out
- our hearts are our graves

Leader: *How are these images interchangeable with other calamitous events?*

Final discussion question: *Is this comforting or troubling?*

