

RECOLLECTION OF A TISHA B'AV SHIUR
GIVEN BY THE RAV

It is an exceptional honor and pleasure for me to be associated with the publication of the *Kinot* commentaries of my revered *rebbe*, the Rav, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, of blessed memory. Reading through them brought back memories of when my wife, Audrey, and I traveled to Israel in August of 1967 in order to see for ourselves the incredible results of the Six Day War, to feel the miraculous salvation of the people and State of Israel, and to see the devastation of the Arab armies which attacked Israel from all sides in June of 1967 and threatened the extinction of the State and its citizens.

We arrived in Tel Aviv on Erev Tisha B'Av, August 14, 1967, just in time to eat a meal before the fast and go to Rabbi Shlomo Goren's synagogue for the Tisha B'Av night service. The mood in Israel was anything but Tisha B'Av-like. There was simply no feeling of mourning or sadness. On the contrary, there was a feeling of exhilaration, confidence, excitement and redemption. It was clear that Israelis were in no mood to observe or even to feel the sadness and mourning of Tisha B'Av.

The service proceeded rather routinely, Rabbi Goren read *Eikha* and then the congregation began the first of the Lamentations. They got through about half of the stanzas and then they stopped, and everyone proceeded to leave *shul*. The mood of the country was one of liberation and redemption with people feeling that they had been saved from, God forbid, a second Holocaust and with the sensation that not only were we saved, but that the State of Israel had expanded its territory perhaps threefold and its holiest sites were back in our hands; all of this because of the hatred and mistakes of intractable foes. How could one feel depressed and mournful on that Tisha B'Av?

And yet, Audrey and I were very disturbed. It was, after all, Tisha B'Av, the saddest day of the year. Something inside of me said that this reaction, although understandable, was not appropriate. Ten months later, June 26, 1968, the Rav gave expression to our feelings in one of the most memorable *shiurim* I ever heard from him.

The Rav asked: How can one mourn for events that occurred 2,000 and 2,500 years ago? Tisha B'Av marks the destruction of the First and

Second Temples in Jerusalem in 586 BCE and 70 CE. They are historic events, long gone from memory. How are we able to sit *shiva* on Tisha B'Av, night and morning, for events that occurred twenty centuries ago? If a close relative of ours had died and we didn't learn about it until after thirty days, there would be no formal *shiva*. We would sit *shiva* symbolically for an hour and then get up and go about our business. How then, can we sit down on the ground for an event that happened two millennia ago?

The Rav gave three answers to that question, answers which were not only relevant to a halakhic analysis of our behavior on Tisha B'Av, but which also shed light on why our Israeli brethren, as well as we, should have been more conscious of the need for Tisha B'Av even in the aftermath of the dramatic victory of the Six Day War.

I

The first answer to the question of how we can observe the rules of *shiva* – sitting on the ground, not washing ourselves nor anointing our bodies – for an event that happened so long ago, is that in our Jewish consciousness the event did not happen in the past. It is not ancient history; it is a contemporary experience. This is the approach of the Jew to all of our history and its recollection in all of our festivals.

On the Seder night we proclaim: “*Bekhol dor*, in every generation, each person must feel as if he (himself) emerged (just now) from Egypt.” The parenthetical additions are from Maimonides’ quotation of the Mishna in his Code of Law. The exodus from Egypt is to be seen as a contemporary experience. On the Seder night, we feel that we have *just now* experienced slavery and liberation. That’s why we recline; drink four cups of wine; recite Hallel and celebrate as if it all just happened. This is fundamental to the whole experience of Pesah.

The same is true of Shavuot. We stand during the reading of the Ten Commandments in a synagogue that is decorated with greenery and flowers as if we were standing at Mount Sinai and receiving the Ten Commandments today, not 3,300 years ago. On Sukkot, we dwell in thatched roof booths as if we were experiencing the desert travels of our people *today*.

So it is with Tisha B'Av. We sit down on the ground as if the Temple was burning now and Jerusalem was lying in ruins now and Jews were

being slaughtered now. The Jerusalem Talmud records that the rabbis experienced Tisha B'Av night “בְּאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יָמְתוּ מוֹטֵל לְפָנָיו, Like someone whose relative's dead body lay before him.”

The Rav then concluded his first answer by reminding us that in the Jerusalem Talmud there is a parallel for Tisha B'Av in the “*bekhol dor*, in every generation...” of Pesah. “כָּל דּוֹר שֶׁלֹּא נִבְנְהָ בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ בְּיָמָיו, כְּאֵלֶּיךָ, נִחָרֵב בְּיָמָיו, Every generation in which the Temple has not been rebuilt is like the generation in which it was destroyed.” This is not mourning for something that happened millennia ago; it is mourning for what happened just now.”

II

The second answer to the question of why we observe Tisha B'Av in so dramatic a fashion when the event we remember occurred so long ago rests on another question. What did the Jewish people do during the period of the Second Temple, from the end of the sixth century BCE until 70 CE? Was Tisha B'Av observed or not? The Rav went into a long analysis of the Talmudic discussion of this question and Maimonides' conclusion in his Code of Law which, as understood by the Rav, indicated that Tisha B'Av was actually observed during the period of the Second Temple. The Rav then asked the obvious question: How could they mourn for the First Temple when the Second Temple stood in all its glory? How could the Kohanim bring the daily sacrifice and then sit down on the ground to recite *kinot*? Are not the two experiences mutually exclusive?

He then gave an unforgettable answer to his question. He said that, of course, the Kohanim and the Levi'im could not have celebrated all of the daily rituals in the Second Temple on Tisha B'Av and then mourned for the destruction of the First Temple. That would have been absurd. *If they observed Tisha B'Av during the days of the Second Temple it was observed not in mourning, but in prayer; that what happened once should not happen again.* During the weeks preceding Tisha B'Av, the Rav said (I believe I am quoting him verbatim), “The ghost of the *Hurban* stalked the land.” The people were terrified that history would repeat itself and that the destruction that came 600 years before would happen again. And, tragically, it did happen again. He didn't have to add the obvious: that Jews today, even after the Six Day War, need to observe Tisha B'Av not only

in mourning for what happened twice in our history but in prayer that, God forbid, it shouldn't happen a third time. During the intervening years since 1968 that feeling has haunted me, not just on Tisha B'Av. I imagine it has haunted others as well.

III

Finally, the Rav offered a third answer to why Tisha B'Av is mandatory and meaningful today. He pointed out that Tisha B'Av has been understood throughout our history as a day devoted not only to our mourning the destruction of two Temples, but also to our historic recollection of all the tragedies that have befallen our people over the centuries, from the destruction of the First and Second Temples, through Beitar, the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the expulsions of Jews from many lands, the pogroms of Eastern Europe and, finally, in the Holocaust. Our history has been one long experience of *Eikha*? How come? How could it be? Why is our people constantly persecuted? Why is our history punctuated by so many periods of despair and tragedy? The Rav said that *Eikha* is not the expression of Jeremiah alone, but of all of Jewish history as we ask the obvious question of God: Why us? Why have we suffered so? He said that, ultimately, when the Messiah comes, we will understand the entire course of Jewish history. At that point *Eikha* will have a period after it and not a question mark. As long as *Eikha* still has a question mark the Jewish people must observe Tisha B'Av.

IV

Why Tisha B'Av today? The Rav, responding to the euphoric questioning of the relevance of Tisha B'Av after the Six Day War, offered three compelling reasons. First, we mourn not for something that happened millennia ago, but for tragedies that, in our unique historical consciousness, we re-live today. Second, we observe Tisha B'Av not only in mourning, but also in prayer that what happened twice before should not, God forbid, happen again. And third, we observe this saddest day of the year because we cannot understand why our people continues to suffer so much tragedy. "*Eikha yasheva vadad?*" Why are Jerusalem and the Jewish people so alone? "*Ha'ir rabati am?*" A city and a people that was populous and prosperous? "*Hayeta ke'almana?*" Why is she – and why are we – bereft as a widow?

Until we can answer those questions, Tisha B'Av will be a day of mourning and *kinot* for us. And with this publication of the Rav's profound commentary, the *kinot* speak to us ever more clearly, directly, and powerfully.

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