

***Tisha b'Av* Root Issue – JewishClarity.com**

Let's begin with what happened on *Tisha b'Av*. The Jewish People were about to enter into Israel from the Sinai desert when they asked to first send in spies to check out the Land. When 10 of the 12 spies brought back a negative report, the Jews cried about how bad the Land was. That night on which they cried in the desert was *Tisha b'Av* (the 9th of the month of Av). Over the centuries, many terrible tragedies have occurred specifically on *Tisha b'Av*, including the destruction of both Temples in Jerusalem (hundreds of years apart), the expulsion of the Jews from England (in 1290), and later from Spain (in 1492), as well as the beginning of the First World War. It is the day that the Jewish People use to mourn all of the difficulties that they have endured throughout their long history.

Understanding What It's All About

The key question with every Jewish holiday is: What is the particular opportunity with which this day presents us? This is more difficult to answer when it comes to understanding *Tisha b'Av* than with the other holidays. First of all, it is a Rabbinical holiday, and secondly, it is not a celebration at all, but rather a time of reflection and mourning.

As one of the holidays in the cycle of the Jewish year, however, it must contain some unique potential for us to grow. It is our responsibility to try to understand what that opportunity consists of.

The main reference in the Torah for this Rabbinical holiday of *Tisha b'Av* would seem to be *Parshat Shelach*. That is where we read about the story of the spies that were sent by the Jewish People to check out the land of Israel. After all, it was this tragic event that began the process of defining *Tisha b'Av* as an historical day of tragedy for the Jewish nation.

I would like to suggest, however, that *Parshat Devarim* is a better source for understanding *Tisha b'Av*, for four different reasons. First of all, it also discusses the spies that were sent into the land of Israel. It contains a brief recap of the story of the spies – as recounted by Moshe in the course of his rebuke to the Jewish People. Secondly, it is the *parsha* (weekly section) from the Torah which is read on Shabbat Chazon, which immediately precedes *Tisha b'Av* **every single** year. Third, is that *Parshat Devarim* contains the word “*Eichah*” (*Devarim* 1:12), which is the name of the scroll or book which is always read on *Tisha b'Av*. And finally, we actually read the entire verse containing the word “*Eichah*,” along with the following one (1:12 and 1:13), with the special tune that *Megillat Eichah* (the Scroll of *Eichah*) is always read with on *Tisha b'Av* itself.

As logical and persuasive as all of this may sound, however, there is still something which is quite puzzling. Moshe opens his speech to the Jewish people by beginning to recap the story of the spies — “See that I have placed the land [of Israel] before you; come and possess the land which G-d swore to your fathers, to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov, to give it to them, and to their descendents after them” (*Devarim* 1:8). He then, very abruptly, switches to speak about what seems to be a completely unrelated episode — the story in which Yitro encouraged Moshe, his son-in-law, to establish a system of judges to help him to guide the Jewish people. In fact, the very verse

containing the word “*Eichah*” (“*Eichah* — **how** can I carry your difficulties, burdens, and quarrels?”), which is read with the tune of the book of *Eichah*, also appears in this recap of Yitro's advice, not in the story of the spies. It is only after the Torah finishes discussing Yitro's advice (i.e., 1:12–1:18), that it returns to the story of the spies.

Since the word “*Eichah*” is found specifically in this recap of Yitro's advice, and Yitro's advice, which seems to be artificially jammed into the story of the spies, actually forms a bridge between the word “*Eichah*” and the continuation of the mistake of the spies, Yitro's advice must somehow be very related to both the story of the spies and to the holiday of *Tisha b'Av*. Before trying to explain this connection, however, there are a number of obvious questions which need to be understood in terms of the story of Yitro's advice itself.

What Happened with Yitro?

The Torah tells us that when Yitro first arrived, he saw the Jewish nation waiting for Moshe to judge their cases “from morning until evening” (*Shemot* 18:13). He, therefore, advised Moshe to delegate his authority by setting up a system of judges. Yitro's advice seems so intuitively obvious that it is difficult to understand why no one else had suggested it previously. Could anyone really imagine that Moshe would be able to adjudicate every single legal case for the entire nation of 2–3 million Jews? Furthermore, while *Parshat Yitro* contains no mention of anything wrong that the Jewish people did in terms of Yitro's advice, the verses in *Parshat Devarim* contain Moshe's rebuke to the Jews for wanting to follow this advice (*Devarim* 1:9,12). What exactly did they do wrong?

First of all, the notion that a system established and directed by G-d requires any modification or adjustment is ridiculous. If G-d could destroy the entire Egyptian empire, the greatest military power in the world at that time, rescue the Jews with ten open miracles, split the water for the Jews to cross through and then drown the Egyptian army in it, and feed 2–3 million Jews every day with food from the sky, it is absurd to suggest that he couldn't figure out how to implement the very system that He Himself created.

Leaving aside the issue of logistics, then, which could have been taken care of through either hidden or open miracles, let's think how Yitro's advice must have impacted the Jewish nation. While we can never really know what it was like in the desert before Yitro gave his advice, one thing is clear — if you had a question, dispute, or any type of an issue requiring guidance — you took it straight to Moshe. There may have been a long line in front of you, and it may, therefore, have taken a while for your turn, but in the end, you got to speak to the one human being that had achieved the closest relationship with G-d in the history of mankind.

Beyond clarifying whatever issue one was inquiring about, the experience itself of meeting Moshe would probably have been a life-altering one. Moshe himself expressed this other dimension when he explained to Yitro that “the people come to me to **seek G-d**” (*Shemot* 18:15). Only in the next verse (18:16) does he speak about his more formal judicial role — “When they have a matter, one comes to me, and I judge between a man and his fellow.”

What then should have been the reaction of the Jews to Yitro's suggestion to distance them from Moshe? A complete and absolute rejection! But even if they felt that the

difficulty for both Moshe as well as themselves in maintaining this exclusive relationship was too great, at the very least, their reaction should have been one of enormous sadness for what they were certain to lose. However, not only was their reaction to the possibility of losing this close relationship with G-d's greatest prophet not one of profound sadness; it seems that they actually welcomed this distancing of themselves from Moshe. As Moshe relates in the recap of the story in *Devarim* (1:14) — “You answered me and said, “The thing that you have proposed to do is **good**.” Independent of whether the Jewish People felt that some sort of a realignment in their relationship with Moshe was inevitable, they certainly shouldn't have felt good about it, and should not have openly embraced the idea.

It seems that this was their fundamental mistake — a desire to move away from Moshe, and by extension — from G-d. This issue is also expressed in a well known Medrash which criticizes the Jewish nation for being too excited when they left Mount Sinai. The Medrash compares them to kids racing to get out of school once the final bell rings. Mount Sinai was the place where they had transcended their physical limitations and made contact with the Infinite. The revelation was now finished, and they *did* need to leave. Their leaving, however, should have been reluctant and difficult, certainly not enthusiastic.

Love-Hate Relationship

This touches on what we could call the love-hate relationship which every human being has with G-d. On the one hand, we all want to live elevated and spiritual lives, close to G-d, filled with meaning and significance. At the same time, however, we also desire to distance ourselves from G-d, since this intensity of awareness and closeness to G-d can feel overwhelming.

This desire of the Jewish People in the story of Yitro to distance themselves from G-d helps us to make some sense out of the incident of the spies. At first glance, this story seems absolutely incomprehensible. G-d miraculously brought the Jewish people out of Egypt, and protected and fed them daily in the desert. He then brought them close to the land of Israel, which had been reserved for them from the beginning of creation. How is it possible to understand their desire to send spies to evaluate Israel before entering it?

As an analogy, think about someone returning home after having travelled abroad for many months. The front door opens and his parents are waiting there, full of excitement, next to a beautifully wrapped present. He looks at his parents, and the present, takes out a cell phone, and calls the police — “Please send a bomb squad here. There is a suspicious package that I would like to have checked out.” What type of a child would express such a deep distrust for his parents? That was effectively what the Jewish people did towards G-d when they sent spies into Israel.

This desire of the Jewish People to distance themselves from the intensity of closeness to Moshe and G-d, which expressed itself in their willingness to follow Yitro's advice, would certainly have undermined their trust in G-d. That could have led them to first feeling the need to send spies into Israel, and then crying when ten of them brought back a bad report.

Feeling, and possibly even desiring, a distance between oneself and G-d, is an issue that every one of us needs to grapple with on a regular basis. And that is the central focus of *Tisha b'Av*.

What Exactly Are We Mourning on *Tisha B'Av*?

One of the challenges to meaningfully connecting with *Tisha b'Av* is the confusion over what we are supposed to be mourning. The widespread assumption is that *Tisha b'Av* is all about a building — i.e., we are mourning the loss of the *Beit HaMikdash* (Temple in Jerusalem). And, of course, this is very difficult, because how can we feel the loss of something that we never experienced?

While the loss of the *Beit HaMikdash* is certainly significant, and very much related to *Tisha b'Av*, it is *not* the essential point of the day.

As another analogy, imagine a terrible argument between a husband and wife. He raises his voice and she raises her voice. He uses hurtful language and she uses hurtful language. She finally gets so angry that she actually pulls her wedding band off of her finger and throws it to the ground. As soon as she does that, the two of them become silent. They are both wondering what this means for their marriage. Suppose the husband would think to himself — “The problem here is that my wife's wedding band is lying on the floor. I have a simple way to solve this problem. I am stronger than her, so all I need to do is pick the ring up from the floor, grab her hand, and shove the ring back onto her finger!”

But, the real problem, of course, is not that the ring is on the floor. That is merely the expression of the problem. The real issue is that their relationship has been shattered. And if it will ever become possible for their relationship to be healed, then the wife will naturally pick up the wedding band herself and put it back onto her finger.

Similarly, our mourning for the *Churban* (destruction of the Temple) is not merely our desire to rebuild the building, but rather a desire to rectify our relationship with G-d. As terrible as the destruction of the *Beit HaMikdash* was, and continues to be, it is only the expression of the underlying problem. The central issue of *Tisha b'Av* is the fact that our relationship with G-d has been fundamentally broken — on the personal, and by extension, the national level. That is what we need to focus on and to address. Once that has been repaired, and only once that has been repaired, will G-d then allow the *Beit HaMikdash*, our “wedding band with G-d,” to be restored.

The Opportunity of *Tisha b'Av*

By recalling and focusing our attention every *Tisha b'Av* on the multitude of tragedies that have occurred all throughout Jewish history, we remind ourselves just how destructive this distance from G-d has really been. The rectification for all of this, and our primary task on *Tisha b'Av* is, therefore, to do the hard work of reestablishing and strengthening our relationship with G-d.

G-d should grant us all the *siyata d'Shimaya* (Heavenly assistance) this *Tisha b'Av* to feel the pain of our distance from G-d, and to thereby begin a process to actively work to improve our relationship with G-d. This will, G-d willing, ultimately culminate in the rebuilding of the *Beit HaMikdash* very soon.