

Tisha beAv - “Since the day the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed”

Tisha b’Av (the 9th day of the month of Av) represented to our people, about 2000 years ago, what we today call Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day); A day of profound agony, collective grief and individual introspection. A day where we remember the “greatest catastrophe” that anyone could have imagined. Years after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the main event remembered on this day (Mishnah, Taanit 4:6), our sages realized that the world, particularly the Jewish people, changed forever. The rabbis of that time therefore coined the following expression: “Since the day the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed...” (“M’yom Shecharab Beit Hamikdash...”), and each concluded the sentence with another radical change that happened after the catastrophe.

This sentence is quoted in the Mishnah (3rd century CE) in nine instances, but only in reference to changes in the law. Some rabbis have claimed that since that fateful day, several laws of the Jewish religious life have changed forever (see for example: Moed Katan 3:6, Menachot 10:5, Maaser Sheni 5:2, Sotah 9:12, Sukkah 3:12, TB Beitza 5a and the well-known decrees of Rabbi Yochanan in Rosh Hashanah 4:1-4). Some of these changes were attempts to replace the religious practice in the Temple, others were the result of the practical impossibilities of continuing certain rituals, and others were made in order to keep the memory of the Temple alive in synagogue life (Zecher LeMikdash).

Later generations of sages, who came after that fateful day in Av, began to take this expression “since the day the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed...” not only to remember ritual changes, but to remember much deeper theological, philosophical, and cultural transformations. Here are some examples:

Since the day that the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, “the very essence of God changed. God ceased to laugh” (Avodah Zarah 3b), “God had no more pleasures” (Eicha Zutah, ed. Buber. 1:7), and “God’s presence in this world was sadly reduced to the four elbows of Halacha” (Brachot 8a). Since that day, “the relationship between God and the Jewish people changed forever. The iron wall that connected them was broken down” (Brachot 32b), “prayer gates were closed” (ad. loc.), prophecy passed into the hands of the fools and children” (Baba Batra 12b), “the divine Council was removed from our sages” (Megillah 12b); and “the priests stopped blessing the people with the ineffable name of God” (Rashi to Eruvin 18b). Even nature changed forever: “since the day that the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, the skies are no longer pure” (Berachot 59a), “no showers of blessings fall from the sky” (Baba Bathra 25b), and “the taste of the fruits was taken away” (Mishnah, Sotah 9:12). The society also changed: “the flavor of permitted relationships was removed and was transferred to the forbidden relationships” (Sanhedrin 75b). Apparently, the law and justice lost their value.

Since the day the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, that 9th of Av in the year 70 CE, the world changed forever. So much so that our teachers still express themselves using phrases that are almost 2000 year old, but yet are still touching and meaningful. The tragedy on Tisha b'Av was so terrible that some of our teachers even insisted that "the right thing would be to not eat meat or drink wine" (Tosefta, Sotah 15:10), meaning, the right thing would be to live in eternal grief. They even felt they did not have the strength to move on, because since that day "...the earth made miserable all its inhabitants, leaving them as a sick man who has no power" (Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer, Ed. Higger, chap. 32).

Nonetheless, almost 2000 years later, here we are. We continue to pray, continue to study, and continue to recite the priestly blessing. We are still amazed by the blue sky; we are still enjoying the rain, the dew and the flavor of the fruits. We are still observing the laws and demanding justice. We continue our lives, celebrating with meat and wine each Shabbat, each Chag and every Simcha (joy). We are still strong - and the creation of the State of Israel has given us even more strength.

The destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem changed the way we see the world of our ancestors forever. It has changed the way we connect with God, look at nature, and contemplate society and human beings. However, life continued; the Jewish people adapted and redefined themselves without the Temple or a homeland. Each tragedy redefines our lives, but life continues. Judaism is a song to life. We are a culture of resilience. Although it is true that since "that day all seems more ugly", in the words of the singer Ismael Serrano, each evening of Tisha b'Av, we eagerly look forward to the arrival of the Messiah, who will change the world forever.

The day will come when we will stop grieving by saying "since the day the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed", and we will start smiling by saying: "since the day the Messiah arrived..."

Nechama,

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