

Tisha b'Av: The Communal And Personal Experience Of Loss And The Journey Towards Tshuva

By Rabbi Stephanie Dickstein

When we look at our reflection in the surface of a lake, we see something which is both identical and yet not quite the same. The directions are reversed and the edges are not clear, but the image is recognizable. We can make use of this image to consider the relationship between the Jewish communal grieving of Tisha b'Av and the experience of a grieving individual over time.

In some ways, the weeks prior to and following Tisha B'Av are the inverse of the prescribed mourning period after the death of a loved one. Even if we anticipate an impending death, and have strong emotions, there are no ritual actions. Immediately following a death, a series of restrictions and obligations take effect, which will change over time. A first response concerns how we nourish ourselves. Prior to the funeral, while we should eat, we refrain from wine and meat- the foods that represent joy in Judaism. The funeral is a time of intense action that forces the first confrontation with the absolute nature of the loss. After the funeral, during shiva, life slows to the essence of grief: crying, silence and telling stories. While physical nourishment is resumed, symbolized by the meal of comfort offered by the community, the body of the mourner is treated at its most elemental- clothing is ripped and not freshly laundered, and personal washing is kept to a minimum. Slowly the mourner emerges from the cocoon of shiva to face the world without the loved one. Life goes back to its normal routines, yet it is not normal. The mourner bathes, puts on fresh clothing and eats regular meals. Daily Kaddish, refraining from attending parties and other events for at least 30 days and up to a year offer the reminder that grieving takes effort, time and space. Slowly, a new normal takes form; new routines are shaped and old pleasures are reencountered. And, then, without warning, the loved one comes to mind, and is mourned, as if it were the first day- even if only for a few moments. In this way, the lives of the ones who still live go on.

Tisha B'av seems to work the opposite way. We begin our grieving and mourning rituals in anticipation of our loss, but the second day after Tisha B'av, things seem to have returned to normal. Three weeks before Tisha B'Av we begin to restrict our social joy and our physical pleasure. We begin to retell the story of our loss, in the form of the three haftorot of warning. As we come to the Nine Days, we no longer eat meat. On Shabbat we hear the mournful sounds of lamentations, in the melodies we use for Lecha Dodi and the Haftorah. We enter into the day of mourning by eating the foods that are traditionally served on returning from the cemetery- hard-boiled eggs and lentils. On the day its self, unless we can actually visit the Kotel, we use words and stories to force ourselves to confront the reality of our loss of the Temples. We carry our grief in and on our bodies, refraining from eating at all, not washing, or engaging in physical intimacy, not wearing leather or new clothing. However, by late afternoon, we already begin to look forward. At Mincha, we put on t'fillin and sing the service. My favorite custom is that we sweep our floors, in anticipation of the coming of the Messiah. Some mourning practices, such as not eating meat, continue into the next day. Then our personal experience of mourning and loss is over. We are only reminded of our loss when we realize that for seven weeks the

Haftorot continue to offer us beautiful words and images intended to comfort us, and to offer us hope for the future.

As much as it reflects the experience of grief immediately following death, Tisha B'Av is also a reflection of the experience of Yahrzeit, the anniversary of a death. For the remainder of our lives, we anticipate the anniversary of the day we lost our loved one. Consciously or unconsciously, we find that we remember the events leading up to the death, and moment of loss. We might get a reminder from the funeral home, or from a synagogue. Start the countdown. Connect with your community. Buy the Yahrzeit candle to remind you of the light your loved one brought into your world. The flame also recalls the flickering and ultimately mortal nature of each of us. Somehow that day is different, marked by fasting, learning, giving tzeddakah and saying Kaddish. Caring friends and family call each other, telling stories and recalling not just the loss, but also the love.

So, too, is the period of Tisha b'Av a Yahrzeit marked by the Jewish People as a family. The destruction of our Temples and the subsequent exile was a loss that left a deep mark on our communal history, and on each individual Jew. As the summer heat becomes oppressive, we check the calendar and see that our discomfort is not just physical, but that our souls are recalling our communal pain. Then on the Yahrzeit we come together and retell the terrible story of our loss. In feeling the pain of loss, we are reminded also of the beautiful city in which we celebrated our relationship with God. Strengthened by our memories we go back to our normal lives, and even to rejoicing at the flurry of weddings that follow the weeks of preparation and warning.

We are not unchanged by the communal encounter with loss, grief and memory. Those seven weeks following Tisha B'Av are also the seven weeks that precede the Yamim Noraim, the Days of Awe. It is a time devoted to teshuva. While the word is often translated as repentance, its core meaning is returning. It is a time when we examine ourselves and where we are along our journey. We ask ourselves what are the turns that we need to make in order to go in the best way for the coming year. It is significant that our tradition connects the seemingly unrelated holidays of Tisha B'Av and the Yamim Noraim. Mourning and loss strip us to the most essential parts of our being. Grieving forces us to confront our own mortality and the meaning of the people and things that we value most. It allows us to put our priorities in order, thereby giving us the impetus to make necessary changes, even when they are difficult. Grief and loss open the door to change, but change is not possible without hope.

Hope is the gift of the seven Haftorot of Comfort. In ecstatic and unmatched language, these haftorot comfort us with the promise of a renewed relationship with God. Many of the images used of hope and love are metaphors of the human family. God tells the abandoned city to take off her garments of widowhood for her bridegroom/ husband is returning to make her a bride again. The barren mother will indeed have her children with her, because even if one could imagine a mother forgetting her child, God the parent could never forget or totally abandon the Children of Israel. These metaphors might actually be painful to the individual who has suffered the loss of a loved one, because that loved one will not ever come back in this life. Even so, these haftorot do work to comfort the bereaved individual as well. First, the pain and loss are not ignored. The prophet retells the story of suffering, because comfort comes from acknowledging

the reality of loss. Comfort also comes from God's eternal presence. God was here in the moment of wrath, of loss, even when it seemed that God has turned away, and God is here now with compassion and everlasting loving kindness. God calls to us to arise, and let our light shine forth. If we need it, God will carry us as a shepherd carries the weakest little lamb, or a parent carries a tired toddler. Over all of this, Isaiah reminds us that God is the Creator of all. Comfort and hope come from knowing that we are part of a greater plan, looking forward to a time when the sun will not go down and the moon will not withdraw itself.

These same images that offer us comfort at a time of loss, also offer us hope as we turn our attention to the labor of tshuva. The suffering we experience as a consequence of our own wrongdoing is real, but it is not forever. God is present, not just calling us to return, but also straightening out the road in front of us. In the haftorot, redemption and comfort come from God's hesed and from the fulfillment of the punishment for communal sin. If the People did Tshuva, in the form of introspection and action, it is not so obvious. The thematic reason for the seven-week connection between Tisha B'Av and Rosh Hashanna is not a clear one of the surface of the texts. However, a more mature understanding of our relationship with God, suggests that Tisha B'Av and the Yamim Noraim are connected by the experience of loss. Surviving loss and learning that we can survive even unwelcome change enables us to take the risk of tshuva. We can do tshuva not just out of fear of punishment but because we have seen that change is inevitable and we have hope that it is potentially good.

We end our reading of Eicha- Lamentations, with the words "Take us back, O Lord, to Yourself, and let us come back. Renew our days as of old!" We seek to go back into a relationship with God, but it is not the same one as before. We cannot possibly be unchanged by our experiences of individual and communal grieving. Instead, we combine the wish for good days as we had in the past with the request of "hadesh", make it new. In returning to God, and in being accepted, we have new potential as we did in the idealized days of childhood, when we were new.

"Nachamu, Nachamu", May all of the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem find comfort.