

Parashat Devarim, 5770, 2010:

Rabbi David Etengoff

The Problem of Tisha b'Av: Its Hard for Us to Connect

Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

Parashat Devarim is always read immediately prior to Tisha b'Av, the saddest day on the Jewish calendar. *Mishnat Taanit* 4:6 teaches us the five ancient events that took place on this saddest of all days:

- 1) The Generation of the Desert (*Dor Hamidbar*) was prohibited from entering the Land of Israel as a result of their untoward reaction to the report of the Spies (*Sefer Bamidbar* 13:26-14:23).
- 2 & 3) The two *Batei Mikdash* (Holy Temples) were destroyed in 586 BCE by the Babylonians, and in 70 CE by Rome's legions.
- 4) Betar, the grand second century metropolis filled with countless numbers of Jews, was violently and mercilessly destroyed by the Romans in 135 CE.
- 5) Jerusalem was plowed under until it became like a barren field. This fulfilled Yermiahu's frightening prophecy (26:18): "So said the L-rd of Hosts: Zion shall be plowed for a field, and Jerusalem shall be heaps, and the Temple Mount as the high places of a forest." (This and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

In addition to this list of sorrows, the following disasters took place closer to our own historical moment:

1. The Spanish Inquisition reached its nadir with the expulsion of Jews from Spain on Tisha B'Av in 1492.
2. World War One broke out on the eve of Tisha B'Av in 1914 when Germany declared war on Russia. In addition to being a horrible war in its own right,

wherein thousands of Jews were murdered and entire Jewish towns and villages were destroyed, it set the stage for World War II and the Holocaust.

3. The mass deportation of Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto began on the eve of Tisha b'Av, 1942. Most of them died in the Treblinka death-camp.

Beyond a doubt, each of these tragedies has the potential to bring us to tears and evoke the saddest of all feelings within the depths of our beings. In practice, however, most of us do not react in this manner – neither in regard to the ancient tragedies, nor to the more recent ones. Far too many of us have become inured to the past as we desperately try to live meaningful lives in the present. Our day-to-day economic struggles and personal challenges often leave us little time or energy to focus upon the poignant moments of Jewish history – no matter how distressing and heartrending they may be. Unfortunately, this is the case for most of us – even, and perhaps most clearly, on Tisha b'Av.

We are left, therefore, with a great challenge: How can we relate to Tisha b'Av so that it is not merely a pro forma exercise of fasting, and endow it with depth-level meaning and significance? This is of the utmost importance, since I believe that if we can achieve this goal, we will at one and the same time transform the way we relate to Tisha b'Av – and transform ourselves. Our life experiences have taught us that each of us reacts to very different kinds of approaches. For some, the intellectual gesture achieves the most powerful impact and provides the greatest possibility for change. In contrast, many people are more readily reached through emotional and motivational writings and speakers. Sometimes, however, there is a story or vignette that is so powerful and evocative that it has the ability to reach everyone, and to help us all change. As such, please allow me to share the following incredible, and true story with you.

Our story takes place in 1993 shortly after Operation Solomon was concluded. As a result of this historic airlift, approximately 14,500 of our Jewish brothers and sisters were rescued from the primitive conditions, persecutions, and grinding poverty that represented Jewish life in Ethiopia. For the first time, Ethiopian Jews had the honor and pleasure of living in freedom in our beloved country, Israel. To place this narrative in its proper context, we must remember that the Ethiopian Jewish community had been completely cut off from the rest of our people for thousands of years. As a result, these probable descendants of the lost tribe of Dan were never exposed to Rabbinic Judaism (i.e. Mishnah and Talmud) and to the events that happened to the rest of the Jewish people subsequent their ancient exile. It should be noted that this story is unusually powerful since it is a first person account by its author, Keren Gottlieb:

As part of my army service in the Israeli army I was placed, to my delight, in a teachers' unit. I served at the Bat Hatzor caravan site located near Gedera. The site held 700 caravans, which housed thousands of new Ethiopian immigrants. In the mornings I taught immigrants at the Yad Shabtai School in Ashdod. In the afternoon and evening hours I served as a counselor on the site.

This was shortly after Operation Solomon in 1993, during which roughly 14,500 Jews from Ethiopia were airlifted to Israel. It was a special and moving operation, and the entire Israeli population was surprised to see that suddenly there were Jews walking around here who had, in fact, been severed from our nation many generations ago.

They observed Shabbat, were familiar with most of the holidays and kept Jewish tradition in a devout and traditional manner. But it was clear that they didn't know everything; the separation they had undergone throughout all those years had influenced their system of traditions.

They had never heard of Independence Day or Yom Yerushalayim, or even about Purim or Chanukah - none of the latter historical events that took place subsequent to their break-off from the Jewish nation. I realized that unless I concentrated on filling these gaps of knowledge, their adjustment in Israel would never be complete. I decided to allot a considerable amount of time each day to teach them about Judaism.

Passover and Ascending to the Temple

The month of Nissan had arrived and I started teaching about the holiday of Passover. My class consisted of 20 students, 3rd - 6th grade. (They were placed according to their reading level rather than chronological age). These children had come to Israel only a few months beforehand and more than anything else, they loved to hear stories, mainly because they didn't have to read or write in Hebrew which was still quite a difficult task for some of them. My plan was to first connect Passover to the other holidays by very briefly reviewing the three major festivals during the year when the Jewish nation would ascend to Jerusalem.

“Today is the first day of Nissan and Passover is celebrated in this month,” I began. “Passover is one of the three festivals when the entire Jewish people used to go to Jerusalem to the Temple.” At this point, a student jumped up, cutting me off in mid-sentence. “Teacher, have you ever been to the Temple?” I smiled at him, realizing that he was somewhat confused. “No, of course not. That was a very long time ago!” My student was insistent, and a few more pairs of eyes joined him. “Fine, it was a long time ago. But were you there? Were you at the Temple a long time ago?” I smiled again, this time slightly confused myself. *“Doesn't he understand? Perhaps my Hebrew is too difficult for him,”* I thought. “No, of course not. That was a *very* long time ago!” Now the rest of the students joined him in an uproar. “You've never been there?” “Teacher, what's it like being in the Temple?” “What does the Temple look like?”

“Quiet!” I tried calming everyone down. “Listen everyone -- there is no Temple! There used to be a Temple many years ago but today we don't have a Temple. It was destroyed, burned down. I have never been to it, my father's never been to it, and my grandfather has never been to it! We haven't had a Temple for 2000 years!” I said these words over and over, having a very hard time believing that this was so strange for them to hear. What's the big deal? This is the reality with which we've all grown up. Why are they so bothered

by it? The tumult in the class was steadily increasing. They began talking amongst themselves in Amharic, arguing, translating, explaining, shouting, as I lost total control over the class. When the bell rang, they collected their things and ran home. I left the school exhausted and utterly confused.

Next Day's Surprise

The next morning I was hardly bothered by the previous day's events. In fact, I had nearly forgotten all about the incident. That day I had planned to just teach math, geometry and other secular subjects. I got off the bus and leisurely made my way toward the school. As I neared the gate the guard approached me, seeming a bit alarmed. "Tell me," he said, "do you have any idea what's going on here today?" I tried recalling a special activity that was supposed to be going on, or some ceremony that I had forgotten about, but nothing exceptional came to mind. "Why do you ask?" I asked him. "What happened?" He didn't answer. He only pointed towards the entrance to the school. I raised my head and saw a sizeable gathering of Ethiopian adult immigrants -- apparently, my students' parents. *What are they doing here? And what are they yelling about?* I went over to them, attempting to understand what was the matter from the little Amharic that I knew.

As I came closer, everyone quieted down. One of the adults whose Hebrew was on a higher level, asked me, "Are you our children's teacher?" "Yes," I answered. "What is the matter, sir?" "Our children came home yesterday and told us that their teacher taught them that the Temple in Jerusalem no longer exists. Who would tell them such a thing?" He looked at me in anger. "I told them that. We were discussing the Temple and I felt that they were a bit confused. So I explained to them that the Temple had been burned down thousands of years ago and that today, we no longer have a Temple. That's all. What's all the fuss about?"

He was incredulous. "What? What are you talking about?" I was more confused than ever. "I don't understand. What are you all so angry about? I simply reminded them of the fact that the Temple was destroyed and that it no longer exists today." Another uproar -- this one even louder than before. The representative quieted the others down, and again turned to me. "Are you sure?" "Am I sure that the Temple was destroyed? Of course I'm sure!" I couldn't hide my smile. What a strange scene. The man turned to his friends and

in a dramatic tone translated what I had told him. At this point, things seemed to be finally sinking in.

Now, however, a different scene commenced: one woman fell to the ground, a second broke down in tears. A man standing by them just stared at me in disbelief. A group of men began quietly talking amongst themselves, very fast, in confusion and disbelief. The children stood on the side, looking on in great puzzlement. Another woman suddenly broke into a heart-rending cry. Her husband came over to her to hug her. I stood there in utter shock. I felt as if I had just brought them the worst news possible. It was as if I had just told them about the death of a loved one. I stood there across from a group of Jews who were genuinely mourning the destruction of the Temple. (<http://www.aish.com/h/9av/aas/48961761.html>)

We live at a time when Keren Gottlieb's words are the order of the day:

"Listen everyone - there is no Temple! There used to be a Temple many years ago but today we don't have a Temple. It was destroyed, burned down. I have never been to it, my father's never been to it, and my grandfather has never been to it! We haven't had a Temple for 2000 years!" ... What's the big deal? This is the reality with which we've all grown up."

For most of us, when we are truly honest with ourselves, Keren's words: "What's the big deal? This is the reality with which we've all grown up," ring all too true. Yet, the end of the story teaches us how we should encounter Tisha b'Av so that we can truly appreciate the loss of our *Batei Mikdash*:

A man standing by them just stared at me in disbelief. A group of men began quietly talking amongst themselves, very fast, in confusion and disbelief. The children stood on the side, looking on in great puzzlement. Another woman suddenly broke into a heart-rending cry. Her husband came over to her to hug her. I stood there in utter shock. I felt as if I had just brought them the worst news possible. It was as if I had just told them about the death of a loved one. I stood there across from a group of Jews who were genuinely mourning the destruction of the Temple.

Approximately 2700 years ago, the great 8th-century BCE Judean prophet, Yeshiyahu (Isaiah), declared: "Rejoice with Jerusalem and exult in her all those who love her:

rejoice with her a rejoicing, all who mourn over her.” (66:10) Basing themselves upon this verse, *Chazal* (our Sages of Blessed Memory) stated: “All those who mourn over the loss of Jerusalem will merit to see her in her [completely reconstructed] joy...” (*Talmud Bavli, Taanit 30b*, translation my own). Now, after Keren Gottlieb’s story, we finally know what it means to genuinely mourn for Jerusalem, and thereby authentically connect to Tisha b’Av. May Hashem give us the strength, wisdom, understanding, and heart to do so. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

Past drashot may be found at my website:

http://home.mindspring.com/~rdbe/parashat_hashavuah/index.html.

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The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added please do not hesitate to contact me via email: rdbe718@gmail.com.