

17TH OF TAMMUZ

Another Fast, Seriously?

7.1.15

AFTER THE UNSPEAKABLE joy and poignancy of Ben's high school graduation in June—where I couldn't quite believe that my first child was striding down the aisle in cap and gown—it's difficult to be mournful, on cue, the following month. Summer sadness seems oxymoronic. But it's required for the next holiday—the 17th of Tammuz (*Shivah Asar b'Tammuz*), which marks the breach of the walls of Jerusalem, before the Temple's final destruction three weeks later.

The summer has offered plenty of grief already. On June 17, 2015, nine black worshippers were killed in a Charleston church, where they had gathered for Bible study. Concurrent terrorist attacks in France, Tunisia, and Kuwait included families slaughtered on the beach and a decapitated head on a gatepost. Cancer returned to my close friend Julie, who has two children under six and now has a year at most to live.

And so, despite my general resistance to not eating (you must be weary of my fast-kvetching), it actually feels important to fulfill the demands of 17 Tammuz and take a day of self-denial this summer—July 5, immediately following America's Independence Day. (In a particularly bizarre coincidence of the calendar this year, two Jewish

fast-days fall on two American holidays—10 Tevet on New Year’s Day and 17 Tammuz on the day after July 4th—amplifying the contrast between my activities and what most people are doing.)

“The purpose of a fast is both to pray for salvation, but also to get rid of distraction and privilege and think about what we can do better in the world,” says Dr. Elana Stein Hain, the director of Leadership Education at the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America, based in New York. Again, that double obligation: with every challenging fast comes the charge to make others’ lives easier.

Stein Hain is right that fasts rid us of distraction; nothing focuses the mind like hunger. That temporary discomfort makes me keenly conscious of the deprivation regularly experienced around the world, the scourge of poverty and famine.

Stein Hain calls “magnificent” the suggestion she read a few years ago in an article by the Hebrew Bible professor David Lambert: that fasting in the Bible is like a hunger strike. “It’s a way of a human being saying to God, ‘Please change this, or I refuse to eat,’ ” she says. “It’s a way of getting at injustice in the world.”

What an idea: fasting as petition instead of penitence. Fasting to seek repair, not atonement.

The other four fasts this year—Tzom Gedaliah, Yom Kippur, the Tenth of Tevet, and the Fast of Esther—also made me think about suffering. But it’s one thing to feel empathy. It’s another to treat your fast as a plaintive appeal to God to pay attention.

I could make this fast a cry to stop all the Charlestons and Sandy Hooks. Or to beseech God to keep Julie alive for her small children. Her four-year-old has never known her healthy. But 17 Tammuz also teaches that you can’t always fix it; the test is how you bear it.

In the Roman siege of Jerusalem, which this fast remembers, the Jews were barricaded in the city, cut off from food and water, dying slowly, inescapably, in full view of their captors. “They’re in the moment where they’ve lost—because they know the walls have been breached,” says Stein Hain. “But they can’t mourn yet, because it’s not over. Some people today know exactly what that feels like—to know how it’s going to end and have no choice but to wait it out. That’s what

I think 17 Tammuz is. It's the Jewish people nearing the end in Jerusalem. We were nearing the end and we had to wait it out."

When you know you can't possibly survive, each day is a victory. I will try to hold on to that perspective. Every additional day Julie gets will create memories for her children. She is in Stein Hain's liminal space, between the life you still have and the moment you'll lose it.

I'm carrying these disparate images in my head—an ancient people being starved to death and a close friend whom modern medicine can't save. They'll lead me to the same place on Sunday: a brief encounter with having less, to honor the people losing more.

Despite this bleak message, Stein Hain rejects the idea that Jews wallow in woe, insisting that ours is a hopeful, celebratory religion. "There is an ongoing debate about whether Jewish history is a sad tale with some intermittent joy, or a joyful tale with some intermittent sadness," she tells me. "Salo Baron, an American historian of Jewish ancestry, wrote that we've been working with the 'lachrymose' interpretation of Jewish history; that we're just downtrodden. But he rejected that conception."

I reject it, too: the sum of all these holidays has been buoyant. Despite the sobriety of atonement (Yom Kippur), warfare (Hanukkah, Yom HaZikaron), slavery (Passover), near-massacre (Purim), and annihilation (Yom HaShoah and the upcoming Tisha B'Av), the takeaway is joy.

"Most days, Jews are just living to the fullest, and on occasion we take note of the hard times," Stein Hain says. "That is such a testament to our tradition, that we want Jewish life to be normal and happy, but we have to be respectful of the many moments we experience that are *not* like that. So a few times a year we say, 'Let's pause.'"

We pause for the Temple's siege, breach, and destruction. For expiation. For appreciation. Every fast is a decelerator and a referendum on a glass half full.

"The goal of Jewish life is celebrating and emphasizing *life*," says Rabbi Steven Exler, who will soon succeed Avi Weiss as the rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale in the Bronx. "But mourning and death are part of it, too, and three weeks out of the year—between

this fast of Tammuz and the next fast, Tisha B'av—are geared toward experiencing collective national loss and entering that emotional religious space.”

I’m finding it hard to enter three weeks of requiem in seventy-five-degree sunshine. I feel like the kid who’s been kept indoors on the nicest day of the year. The Temple feels awfully remote on this holiday. Exler tries to help: “Even if it doesn’t rattle or shake you to realize that there were centuries upon centuries of Jewish communities for whom this one place represented the presence of God in their lives—remember this was a place where mourners came, where bridegrooms came, it was the central hub of communal Jewish life,” he says. “And the sense of that locus becoming vulnerable is an awareness that even the things we hold most sacred can be violated in this world. Even the most sacred things sometimes can be ruptured—their physical presence gone. So how do I go on?”

So many people do. They survive the end. Yom Kippur taught me that no life is guaranteed, Sukkot that no house is solid. Tammuz marks not just the shock of an ending but of its inevitability. Some people cannot be saved.

In that space—between certain loss and the unpredictable road that leads to it—there is struggle and suffering, but also strength and endurance. So we fast a fifth time, not only to honor the breach and the purgatory, but the people who, as Exler puts it, “go on.”