

# TISHA B'AV

## Mourning History, Headlines, and Hatred

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**N**O DEODORANT IN July? That's asking a lot. But Tisha B'Av demands it.

The twenty-five-hour fast marks the destruction of Jerusalem's two Temples (the first in 586 B.C.E. by the Babylonians, the second in 70 C.E. by the Romans), and also marks almost every other catastrophe that's befallen the Jews, including the sin of the Golden Calf when we built a false idol, the First Crusade in August 1096 when ten thousand Jews were killed, the 1290 expulsion from England, the 1306 expulsion from France, the 1492 expulsion from Spain, the 1941 approval of "the Final Solution," the 1942 deportation of Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto to Treblinka, the Holocaust as a whole, the 1994 bombing of a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires, you get the idea. A lot of pain in one basket.

Other religions fast—Christians during Lent, Muslims during Ramadan, Hindus, Buddhists, Mormons, Eastern Orthodox. Reasons include asceticism, contemplation, penance, purification, resistance to gluttony, spiritual improvement, closeness to God. Jews add memory. We fast to remember. Tisha B'Av marks the mother lode of memorial, exceeding Yom HaShoah and Yom HaZikaron.

We're supposed to abstain from food and drink, sex, leather shoes, studying Torah, greeting people, idle chatter, leisure activities, or "anointing" ourselves (meaning no perfume, deodorant, or sunblock). All of which adds up to a challenge at the height of summer.

This year, Tisha B'Av (translation: the ninth of the Hebrew month Av) falls on a Sunday, and is the longest fast besides Yom Kippur. But despite the momentousness of this remembrance, the holiday remains obscure, certainly not in the Top Ten. "Tisha B'Av doesn't come close," says Rabbi Judith Hauptman, a plainspoken, widely admired professor of Talmud at the Jewish Theological Seminary. "If you look at the most-observed holidays on a bar graph, Tisha B'Av doesn't get a quarter inch."

Nevertheless, Hauptman loves the music that is played on the eve of the holiday, and the power of the traditional reading—the book of Lamentations, whose first word, "*Eichab*" ("How?"), captures our inability to understand why God destroyed the Temple and let us suffer. The *Eichab* recitation had an eerie power for Hauptman when she heard it as a youngster at Jewish summer camp in the Poconos. The counselors went out on a floating dock at night and ignited the Hebrew letters of *Eichab* so that campers gathered on a hilltop could watch the word burn. "It was the most dramatic, beautiful, inspirational thing ever," Hauptman says. "And then they would get on the P.A. system and read these chapters from the book of Jeremiah, which were all about predictions of the destruction and so on. . . . It was like the most riveting ghost story. They really brought Tisha B'Av home to us. Not in a purely intellectual way, but in this emotional way."

I have no emotional tie to this holiday. Maybe because my childhood lacked that dramatic lake tableau (at my summer camp, I learned to tie-dye and weave on a loom), it's hard for me to find any hook.

Or maybe my detachment is because Tisha B'Av remembers the destruction of two ancient temples, and the Judaism I know and care about isn't based on a building, especially one that relied upon blood-soaked animal sacrifices as an expression of faith.

Or maybe I simply don't relish a sixth fast.

But then one idea *does* tug at my heart: when Rabbi Hauptman describes Tisha B'Av as an opportunity to grieve together. “This holiday is kind of a collective shiva,” she says. “We’re mourning for the past, and the many tragedies of the Jewish people. For solidarity.”

A collective shiva. Judaism at its most unified. We cry on cue—it’s required of us. Our tradition insists not just that we look at *past* pain, but present-day, too.

I think about the Paris kosher market in January 2015, when four hostages were killed just because they were buying groceries.

The Copenhagen shooting in the Great Synagogue on February 14, when a Jewish security guard was killed during a bat mitzvah celebration.

The same month, posters reading “A good Jew is a dead Jew” were found in Buenos Aires, “Jews to the gas” was painted on a community center in Tuscany, cars were spray-painted with swastikas in Montreal, “F\*\*\* the Jews” was written on the gates of a Jewish school in London.

The list is too long for this space. I’m not paranoid these days, but I’m rattled. The ground has shifted. Anger is less veiled.

“This has been a very bad year for the Jewish people,” says Hauptman. “If there were to be any time when Tisha B’Av should strike home, it would be this year. We’ve had Jews killed just because they were Jews, swastikas painted, attacks of all sorts. So yes, the Jewish community has to come together as Jews. Just for solidarity.”

On this holiday, therefore, I plan to focus on the places where there has been persecution—a word that shouldn’t be used cavalierly, a word that has attached itself like a parasite to Jewish history. What I *won’t* be doing Sunday, however, is focusing on myself. Hauptman says the holiday is not for reflecting upon sad events in one’s own life. “When I hear a rabbi suggest that we all talk about our own personal tragedies on Tisha B’Av, it drives me berserk,” she says. “We’re pulling together as a Jewish community to mourn our common tragedies that befell us *as the Jewish people*. It’s not about my personal journey from sadness to happiness. That’s totally missing the point. We celebrate together and we mourn together. It’s a lot harder to mourn together. I don’t deny that.”

It's a lot harder to mourn together. I saw that on Yom HaShoah, when we were supposed to pause communally to honor the victims of the Holocaust, but so few Jews in New York did anything. Many didn't know the holiday was even happening. Several told me that choosing one day to speak of the unspeakable felt insufficient or trivializing. Others said they wouldn't know where to begin.

I saw the same discomfort on Yom HaZikaron, Israel's Memorial Day, which most American Jews also skip or never learned. Until this year, I never knew it or observed it myself. Maybe that's the work of Tisha B'Av: to put communal sorrow on the calendar. To tell us to stop, intentionally, in the brightest possible sunlight, to remember the dark. I'm not sure if it works to sob on schedule. But Judaism doesn't give you the choice. It *requires* memory.

So on Sunday, I'll swear off the sunblock and do my share of mourning. I'll be honoring not just suffering, but survival. Because we weathered the Temples' destruction, the crusades, the pogroms, the Holocaust, the intifada, the kosher market, and all the scrawled hatred on the cars, schools, and walls. We've been hit and hit and kept walking. That's Tisha B'Av, too.



On the day of the holiday itself, since I choose to be in our Connecticut house with my family rather than in a New York synagogue, I rely on the geographically closest rabbi to guide me through the holiday: Rabbi Burt Visotzky, Midrash expert, who happens to have a home near mine. Burt was the first rabbi I interviewed for this voyage, and it seems fitting that he be my last.

I am well into my fast-funk when we sit down with the Lamentations text on a sofa. The rain has stopped, but the sky remains stubbornly gray. I ask Burt to explain why, when the Romans brought down the Second Temple, does *Eichab* suggest the Jews bear significant responsibility. When we ask "How?"—*Eichab*—*How, God, could you let our Temple burn?*, the answer apparently involves our own sin. The Talmud says we ripped each other apart instead of our enemy.

When we should have united to beat back the Roman army, we instead argued among ourselves, even killed each other. *Sinat chinam*—translated as “baseless hate”—was our downfall.

“God commands us to love one another,” Burt explains. “So when we hate one another and then things fall apart, the rabbis say, ‘Well, this is the punishment that God predicted for us.’”

The Talmud says: *But why was the second Sanctuary destroyed. . . ? Because therein prevailed hatred without cause. That teaches you that groundless hatred is considered as of even gravity with the three sins of idolatry, immorality, and bloodshed together.*

I get it: God destroys us when we destroy each other. We will pay for Jew against Jew.

Samuel G. Freedman’s important book *Jew vs. Jew* (2000) exposed the modern, American iterations of “baseless hatred.” His prologue invoked that ancient sin, which led to our exile and slaughter: “The Second Temple, Jews came to believe, was lost less to the Romans than to their own *sinat chinam*—pure hatred, groundless hatred.”

Of course, *sinat chinam* meant something different in 70 c.e. than it does in 2015. But our current rabbis see the parallel and a warning: we are risking our proverbial edifices, our centers of Jewish life, when we go at each other.

Freedman reported contemporary civil wars through sharp stories: a zoning battle in a Cleveland suburb in response to an influx of Orthodox Jews; a dispute in Los Angeles over whether to introduce feminist language into the Amidah prayer—the core standing prayer; and a lawsuit against Yale brought by pious students who refused coed bathrooms. These are just a few of the flashpoints that can splinter a people.

I saw internecine strains come to a boil during the 2014 Gaza war. And during my entire Jewish year, as I’ve been attuned to the calendar, I’ve paid more attention to the roiled Jewish press, nasty Facebook posts, and Twitter feeds. *Sinat chinam* is alive and well.

“I’m afraid to look at my email in the morning,” confesses Rabbi Judith Hauptman. “It’s breaking my heart, what’s happening today. Back in Temple times, there were Jews fighting over all these political

factions. They were stabbing each other over political differences, possibly religious differences. And we're still fighting each other. Maybe not with swords."

Did God *instigate* the Romans' assault on the Second Temple, or simply do nothing to stop it? Burt answers the question with a question: "Is God's hand an active hand or a passive hand? That's not for me to decide."

The lesson that hatred corrodes is one that we evidently need to keep relearning. I try to believe in some halcyon view of Jewish unity—that we're one people and we have each other's backs; that we don't malign, fight, or undermine each other because we're too few (and battered) to risk more division. But then I see how much internal discord there has been throughout history—Jacob's theft of his twin's birthright; the nuances of Hanukkah, when observant Maccabees fought their Hellenized kin; I see how Orthodox Jews have chastised some Modern Orthodox for ordaining women, how angrily Jews have disagreed about Israel's settlements and its Arab citizens. Jews even disparage each other about who counts as a real Jew.

Earlier this summer, David Azoulay, Israel's religious-services minister, a member of the Knesset—Israel's governing congress—said he doesn't consider Reform Jews to be really Jewish. I took that personally. My Reform congregation—six thousand strong—is, in my estimation, wholly legitimate. Moreover, the Reform movement happens to be the largest denomination in America, so Azoulay's condemnation impugns a lot of us. One could shrug off his blanket indictment as extremist; but when he claims that non-Orthodox Jews are "people who try and falsify" the Jewish religion, it smacks of *sinat chinam*.

Burt's own exasperation with Israeli divisiveness comes through as we talk. "We're commanded to love one another," he repeats. "*Ve'ahavta Lerei'acha kamocho*. Love your neighbor as yourself. We're commanded to love God. So why are we teaching hate? Why have we raised a generation of Israeli kids who can set fire to a bilingual school that teaches Hebrew and Arabic, and then, when they're sentenced at trial, hear them say it was worth it? Why are we raising a generation

of kids in yeshivot [Jewish schools] who can throw bags of feces on people praying at the Wailing Wall because they're not Orthodox? I mean, how did this happen?

"And we're all equally guilty," he continues. "I've certainly been intemperate in my rage against politics that I don't care for, and I've probably said so too publicly. Instead of working to find ways to talk to one another, we find ways to shut one another out. That's really the tragedy of this holiday. If you want something to mourn for, that's it. We're reproducing what cost us the Second Temple. We're just wallowing in *sinat chinam*."

I know it sounds naïve, but I really can't fathom the acrimony; it feels fundamentally un-Jewish to me. And profoundly dispiriting. As I approach the end of a full Jewish year, I'm actually left with the opposite sensation: I have felt surprisingly supported, even by those rabbis who are miles away on the spectrum of observance. And I have drawn wisdom from countless different Jewish perspectives. As I reflect on what I'll remember most from my immersion, it is not *sinat chinam*—the rancor of my people. What will stick with me is the wide capacity to find meaning. Judaism perseveres because it still speaks to us, because it withstands our clashes and grows from them.

So, though I resist the Tisha B'Av message that God would punish our warfare—to the point of destroying the center of Jewish life—I see that this is perhaps just what God intended: the Temple needed to go in order for the tradition to spread beyond one location on the map. And indeed it has. Judaism is alive today despite our divisions and despite all the catastrophes subsumed in Tisha B'Av.

As I head into the next Jewish cycle—more privately this time around—I'm choosing to focus not on *sinat chinam* but on *klal yisrael*, the whole of Israel: a shared inheritance, and reverence for a calendar that has kept us intact.



## Rabbi Judith Hauptman

ON TISHA B'AV

I used to think mourning for the destruction of a building—because that is how Tisha B'Av is always presented—made little sense. I could easily see mourning Jews killed in pogroms, massacres, the Holocaust. But a building? Until 9/11; that brought Tisha B'Av home to me. You can mourn a building. It symbolized, as did the Temple in Jerusalem, the body politic. It had a grand name. It was lost. If we celebrate history that ended well for us, like Passover and Purim, we should also celebrate history that ended badly. If one thinks about Tisha B'Av, it forces introspection as a community, not as individuals—as on Yom Kippur. To be a Jew means to be part of the Jewish community. And that means to rejoice over successes and mourn failures. It means to think about where we go from here so that catastrophes don't befall us again. Celebrations are easy; for whatever reason, people love taking stock and repenting, asking for forgiveness. Tisha B'Av is a very hard sell.

## Rabbi Steven Exler

ON TISHA B'AV

Tisha B'Av is when the decree was set that there would be forty years of wandering in the wilderness and that the generation that came out of Egypt wouldn't go into the land. So thinking about it as a time of delayed redemption—that idea of delayed fulfillment of promises—is at the heart of the day. This becomes the time when we think about moments of brokenness. It's the moment of breaking the glass under the huppah, expanded out into a period of time. It's the sense that everything that we think protects us ultimately falls away.

