

International
Rabbinic
Fellowship

TISHA B'AV 2014/5774



TISHA B'AV, THE HURBAN, AND THE LESSONS OF SODOM

RABBI JOSH YUTER

While there is no shortage of *Benei Yisrael* being rebuked in *Tanach* for their various transgressions, one such indictment which seems imprecise and perhaps overly harsh is the comparison with the people of Sodom and 'Amorah. As we know, the legacy of Sodom and 'Amorah is one of unmitigated evil and a benchmark for immorality which is used to this day. Their sins were so complete and evil, so absolute that *Hashem* does not simply cause the cities' destruction, but completely obliterates them with unparalleled divine wrath. And yet in *Eicha* we are told that "the sin of the daughter of my people is greater than that of Sodom" (*Eicha* 4:6), and in the *Haftara* of *Hazon* the *Navi* exclaims "Heed the word of *Hashem* you leaders of Sodom, listen to the words of our God's Torah you people of 'Amorah" (*Yeshayahu* 1:10). Were the sins of the Jews in fact as serious and complete to

warrant such comparisons with Sodom and 'Amorah?

To answer this question, we should examine the nature of the sins of Sodom and 'Amorah. Curiously, despite the apparent gravity of Sodom's sins, the Torah does not explicitly tell us what were Sodom's sins which made them worthy of such enduring infamy. For such details and interpretive direction, we will first turn to the *Midrashim*.

In commenting on the *Mishna* that the people of Sodom have no share in the world to come, (*M. Sanhedrin* 10:3), the *Gemara* gives some examples of Sodom's uniquely twisted wickedness (*M. Sanhedrin* 109a-b (English)). The *Midrashim* begin by saying that the people of Sodom viewed their wealth as from *Hashem*, but they interpreted that to mean that they should be stingy with their God-given wealth. *Rava* adds that when they found a wealthy individual they would give him

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a gift of spices. When the person would add this gift to his storeroom, the Sodomites would track the smell and then loot his treasury.

The *Gemara* continues that if someone laid out bricks or onions, people would steal one saying, "I've only taken one," implying that their offense was of no real consequence. If someone injured someone else's wife, their judges ruled that the offender's wife should be given to the other as restitution. One passerby refused to pay an unjust toll for crossing a river and was assaulted. When he came before the judges to protest, the judges not only charged him the river fee, but added that he should pay the toll keepers money for the therapeutic act of bleeding him.

There are other stories in the *Gemara*, but I would like to point out a recurring theme. The evils of Sodom were not simply that they were unethical, but they did so under the pretext of justice or righteousness. They did not simply rob people, but did so through the illusion of moral legitimacy; the corruption was an integral part of the legal system. The nature of Sodom's sin was that it was not simply wickedness, but evil disguised as morality - corruption with the pretense of justice.

We find this characteristic discussed elsewhere in Rabbinic literature. *M. Avot* 5:10 cites two opinions regarding the person who says "what is mine is mine, and what is yours is yours." One perspective is that this is the "middle" or "typical" person, but others say that this is the trait of Sodom. On the surface this statement seems equitable and fair, but there is latent cruelty in that it does not account for charity. "What is mine is mine" is an intellectually reasonable statement which can mask a miserly and selfish lifestyle. And it is precisely because of the natural inclination to view this statement as legitimate or normal which makes it "*middat S'dom*."

To some extent this theme is implicit in the Biblical verses as well. "The people of Sodom were wicked and sinful before God" (*Bereishit* 13:13), but according to the superficial perspective of an outsider, Sodom seemed "like the garden of God" (*Bereishit* 13:10). When the people of Sodom wanted to assault Lot's visiting angels, they said "bring them out and we will know them" (*Bereishit* 19:5). On a literal level this is a polite invitation, but in the biblical sense its connotation is far more sinister. Once again the good of the superficial hides and masks the obscured reality of evil.¹

Now let us reexamine *Yeshayahu's* rebuke in his *Hazon*. Obviously we would have expected *Benei Yisrael* to be sinning at some level, which in this case was widespread social corruption (1:22-23). But similar to the nature of Sodom's sins, the Jews portrayed themselves as observant and religious, in this case by keeping the public and observable rituals of bringing sacrifices and praying (1:11-15). The casual bystander would observe that the Jews were *frum* for all intents and purposes, but it was the *Navi* who saw the corruption behind the ritual observance.

In some ways this type of society is worse than one which is purely evil. If the good can successfully mask the evil, then there would be no reason to change, since people would only look at the positives of society. In fact, they might even be resistant to change since that would imply that their positive traits are somehow flawed or lacking. Such moral compromising is not only problematic for the wicked people themselves, but also for ordinarily good people who can be corrupted by it.

Sadly, as evidenced by the continuing *Galut* this is a lesson we have yet to learn. Even regarding the mourning of the *Hurban* we have missed the point. We accept upon ourselves customs of mourning for the three weeks and the nine days, but in the words of the *Navi* (1:12) "who

asked this of us?" It is apparent from this chapter that *Hashem* was not swayed by the external religious gestures, saying that they were not done for His sake but for the sake of the people's ego. Rather, what *Hashem* actually requested was that we should "learn to do good, seek out justice, support the oppressed, give justice to the orphan and defend the widow (1:17)."

The problem is that it is easier to grow a beard for display than it is to grow a spine to fight injustice and corruption. It is likewise easier to turn off the radio and stop listening to music than it is to open our ears and listen to people's suffering. We

can deprive ourselves of meat, but what of sustaining those who are in need?

This Tisha B'Av, I suggest we try the novel approach of actually following the words and ideas of the *Navi*. Yes, we should not abolish the customs of mourning, but they should in no way be seen as a substitute for the *Ikkar* of social improvement. If we follow the instructions, then perhaps we can avoid the fate of Sodom and 'Amorah, and maybe we can avoid another year of a Tisha B'Av.

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BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE HALACHOT OF TISHA B'AV

Prepared by Rabbi Elliot Kaplowitz for the Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus at Brandeis

Tisha B'Av is the most tragic day in the Jewish calendar. The *Mishna* in *Ta'anit* tells us that five tragedies occurred on the 9th of Av: The sin of the spies occurred resulting in the generation of the desert not being allowed to enter the Land of Israel; the first Temple was destroyed; the second Temple was destroyed; Betar – the final Jewish stronghold against the Romans – fell; the spot where the Temple stood was plowed. Additionally, the Jews were forced out of Spain by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella in 1492 on Tisha B'Av. Tisha B'Av is widely accepted as the default day to commemorate all tragedies that have befallen the Jewish people, including the Holocaust.

Every effort should be made to fast on Tisha B'Av. Anyone for whom fasting poses a serious medical (or other) issue should consult with their rabbi about their *halachic* options.

Seudah Mafseket

The final meal we eat before the fast is the *Seudah Mafseket*. Traditionally, it comprises only one course – bread and a hard-boiled egg dipped in ashes. The *Seudah Mafseket* should be eaten while sitting on the ground, or low to the floor, and should not be eaten in a group.

Prohibitions of the Day

Tisha B'Av has the same prohibitions as Yom Kippur:

- a. no eating or drinking
- b. no bathing
- c. no anointing with oil
- d. no leather shoes
- e. no marital relations

Additionally, on Tisha B'Av we are limited in the Torah that we may learn. Since learning Torah brings us joy, we only study material that relates to the somber mood of the day.

Because Tisha B'Av parallels *shiva* -- the most intense period of mourning – we also have the custom to sit low to the floor for the first half of the day. Many people also have the custom of sleeping on the floor or lessening their comfort during sleep by using one pillow less than they normally do.

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE HALACHOT OF TISHA B' AV (CONT.)

Greetings

We do not greet people on Tisha B'Av, as is the practice of mourners. If someone greets us, we can return the greeting.

Morning preparations

On the morning of Tisha B'Av, we may not wash our hands and face in the normal manner. Rather, just as on Yom Kippur, we wash *negel vaser* (morning washing of the hands) only up to our knuckles. We may use the residual water on our fingers to wipe away sediment from our eyes. The *bracha* of *al netilat yada'im* is said.

Talit and Tefilin

We do not wear *talit* or *tefilin* during Shacharit on Tisha B'Av to show our intense mourning. *Tefilin* is referred to as *pe'er* – the Jewish people's glory. We do not display our glory during our most intense time of mourning. Rather, we delay wearing *tefilin* until Mincha when the intensity of our mourning is less severe. The *talit katan* is worn without a *bracha*. Those who do not wear a *talit* during *davening* should answer *amen* to the *bracha* of someone who does.

Liturgical additions

At night we recite the Book of *Eicha* (Lamentations) in which the prophet Yermiyah (Jeremiah) describes the destruction of Jerusalem.

As part of the evening and morning services we recite *kinot* -- liturgical poems lamenting the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem. Because Tisha B'Av is the day on which we commemorate the many tragedies that have befallen the Jewish people, we also recite *kinot* for other calamities including the Crusades, the expulsion of Jews from Spain, and the Holocaust.

During the Mincha *amidah*, in addition to the addition of *aneinu*, which is recited on all fast days, a special addition of *nachem* is included in the blessing of *boneh Yerushalayim*. There are some contemporary authorities who feel that this paragraph – which describes Jerusalem in ruins – is no longer appropriate, given the fact that we have been blessed with the State of Israel with Jerusalem as its capital. Alternative versions of the paragraph have been proposed and are recited by some individuals and congregations.

At the same time, we do not recite *tachanun* on Tisha B'Av. When *Meshiach* comes, Tisha B'Av will become a day of great celebration, and the prophet Jeremiah refers to Tisha B'Av as "*moed*" – a holiday.

The Day after Tisha B'Av

Tradition teaches that the fires that destroyed the *Beit ha-Mikdash* burned into the 10th of Av. We therefore continue the stringencies of the nine days until *halachic* noon of the 10th of Av. In years in which the 10th of Av falls on Friday, we may resume those activities that are required to prepare for Shabbat immediately after the fast (i.e., laundry, haircuts, shaving, etc.). However, the prohibition against swimming and listening to music continues until *halachic* noon on Friday.

LOVE WITHOUT BOUNDARIES

Rabbi Hanan Schlesinger

One thousand nine hundred and forty years ago, on the seventeenth day of the Hebrew month of *Tamuz*, the Roman armies that had been besieging Jerusalem for many months breached the walls protecting the holy city and begin massacring the defenders and inhabitants, destroying everything in their path. Three weeks later, on the ninth day of the month of *Av*, the Holy Temple was put to the torch and the last vestiges of Jewish sovereignty went up in flames. Our long and bitter exile among the nations began.

Just a short time ago Jews the world over commemorated the seventeenth of *Tamuz* as our ancestors have done for generations, mourning and fasting from dawn to dusk, thereby ushering in the three week period of semi-mourning that culminates in the Fast of the Ninth of *Av*.

The Talmud in Tractate *Yoma* tells us that although the Jews of two millennia ago were righteous and pious and meticulous in the observance of the commandments, the Temple was destroyed because their society was infected by the scourge of *Sinat Hinam*, causeless hatred. But what exactly is causeless hatred, and why is it sufficient reason for the destruction of our Temple and the dispersion of our people? Just over a hundred years ago, Rabbi NaftaliTzvi Yehuda Berlin explained very succinctly that causeless hatred is religious hatred - suspicion, intolerance and violence fueled by religious faith and fanaticism. Indeed the Talmud records that there were twenty-four different factions vying for influence among the Jews of the time, and the preeminent historian of the period, Josephus Flavius, writes that even while the Romans were pouring into the city of Jerusalem through the breach in the wall, the warring parties among the Jews were more intent on fighting each other than on fending off the Romans. Zealotry for what is most important, that without which there would be

no meaning to our lives and no foundation for our existence - God and Torah - paradoxically proved to be our undoing.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of the modern settlement of the Land of Israel, wrote that if we were defeated and sent into exile because of *Sinat Hinam*, we will merit redemption only through *Ahavat Hinam*, causeless love, love without boundaries and without distinctions. But how can one love those with whom he fiercely disagrees, those who violate the Torah, those whose actions seem to be bringing about the dilution of Judaism and the disappearance of our people?

Here Rav Kook enunciated a number of crucial principles: 1) the Torah, deeply studied and broadly conceived, is the foundation for all truth; 2) all common human truths, even interpretations of Torah, are partial and cannot provide full truth; 3) all approaches and philosophies contain some truth value that must be uncovered; 4) the highest and most divine truth is the most comprehensive one which creates a structure that finds room for all the partial truths under one umbrella.

We must learn Torah intensely and broadly, but also with humility, with full awareness that the Torah that we know and the beliefs that we espouse represent only an infinitesimally small part of the full divine Torah, and that even this small part has reached us only through the filter of our limited human understanding. Many truth claims and possibilities have some validity and we must respect and love them. It is incumbent upon us to clarify their foundational principles and to find therein sparks of divinity which can be incorporated into our ever expanding sense of Torah, at the same time that we discard the dross.

The forest is composed of a myriad of trees, and although some are more crucial than others, all are necessary. We must never dismiss even one.

We must endeavor to give them their proper place, and we must never mistake one tree – or two or three - for the larger forest. We are called upon to live lives of *Ahavat Hinam*, embracing harmony with all Jews and with all of creation, expanding ourselves as we expand the palace of Torah. May full redemption come thereby to our people and to the world and “the fast days of

mourning and sadness shall be turned into occasions for joy and gladness” (Zechariah 8:18-19).

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Notes to: Tisha B'av, The Hurban, and the Lessons of Sodom

1. Consider Avraham's complaint to Hashem regarding Sodom - *ha'af tiseh tzaddik im rasha* (Bereishit 18:23), which is normally translated as "would you destroy the righteous with the wicked?" However, this translation would fit much better if the Torah had written the definite article - "*ha'af tiseh **ha**-tzaddik im **ha**-rasha*" - or the plural form as *tzaddim im r'sha'im*. Perhaps *tzaddik im rasha* is its own category of someone who combines both characteristics - he is righteous **with** wickedness. We know Hashem will destroy pure evil as he did with the flood, but could the pretense of good - albeit superficial - somehow mitigate the evil? The problem is that when evil and good are so interconnected, good people will become corrupted to the point where this society of "good and bad" could not produce even ten people who were mostly righteous.

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