

A Tisha B'Av Message

*** Note: this was written several years ago, but is still applicable today...**

Devarim 8:7-10



For the LORD your God brings you to a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths, springing forth in valley and hills;

A land of wheat and barley, and vines and fig-trees and pomegranates; a land of olive-trees and honey;

A land where you will eat bread without scarceness, you will not lack any thing in it; a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you may dig brass.

And you will eat and be satisfied, and bless the LORD your God for the good land which He has given you.

The blessed land of Eretz Yisrael – God's eternal gift to the Jewish nation.

Do you remember Tish'a Be'Av?

Last Tuesday*, the 9th of Av seems so far away, but not as far away as the memory of what that day represents – the destruction of our two holy Temples in Yerushalayim. Tuesday come every week, whereas we have an entire year to keep our minds concentrated on “real life” before we have to think again about the Bet Ha'Mikdash.

I mention the 9th of Av because our parasha has much to do with how we conduct ourselves on that day.

Tish'a Be'Av is identified with fasting. Indeed, what is

Tish'a Be'Av without fasting, isn't it the very essence of the day!

But that is problematic. Tish'a Be'Av is a day of mourning. But mourning does not engender fasting. The most halachically severe laws of mourning are in effect for a parent who passed away. The mourning period for a parent is 12 months, for other relatives it is 30 days (in all cases kaddish is recited for 11 months). The renting of a mourner's garment is on the left side near the heart for a parent, for all other deceased relatives it is on the right side.

But, however severe the mourning over a parent, there is no halacha that requires the mourner to fast. True, that from the time of death until the burial, the soon to be mourner may not eat meat or drink wine, but he may eat and drink all else.

So why did the rabbis institute the refraining from food on the national mourning day of Tish'a Be'Av?

I suggest:

Open a siddur (prayerbook) to Birkat Hamazon (grace after meals) and slowly study the text.

In the first chapter we acknowledge that it is HaShem who provides sustenance for all things He created, and concludes with the blessing:



Blessed are You HaShem who sustains all

In chapter two we offer praise to HaShem for the basic foundations of our Jewish lives: The gift of Eretz Yisrael, the exodus from Egypt, Brit Mila (the sacred, eternal covenant between HaShem and the Jewish people), the gift of life and for the food that sustains us.

This chapter includes the verse in this week's parasha:

And you will eat and be satisfied, and bless the LORD your God for the good land which He has given you.


The concluding blessing is:



Blessed are You HaShem for the land and for our sustenance.

Chapter three is our prayer to HaShem that He deal compassionately with His people Yisrael and His city Yerushalayim and Zion, and restore the Davidic Monarchy and Bet Hamikdash.

It concludes with the blessing:

 *Blessed are You HaShem who in His compassion rebuilds Yerushalayim. Amen*

The above three chapters have the halachic status of a Torah based mitzva. The fourth chapter is a later rabbinic addition to commemorate the burial of the defenders of the great city of Betar, following the destruction of Yerushalayim.

It too deals with the appearance of the Mashiach and ultimate redemption of the Jewish people in Eretz Yisrael.

Birkat Hamazon is so thoroughly Eretz Yisrael, that I often wonder why it is not deemed to be a part of the land (agricultural) mitzvot which are observed only here.

Our holy rabbis, in their wisdom, declared that Tish'a Be'Av and its "satellite" days of mourning over Yerushalayim (17th of Tamuz, 3rd of Tishrei, 10th of Tevet) should be days when we refrain from eating. Because eating would require us to recite Birkat Hamazon that permits us in some small way to identify with the Bet Hamikdash and Eretz Yisrael.

It was the rabbis' intention to **heighten** the feeling of total devastation at the loss of our Bet Hamikdash, the abolition of our national independence and our forced exile from Eretz Yisrael, to the extent that we may not even mention these holy matters even in Birkat Hamazon, because by refraining from eating we will not be obligated to recite Birkat Hamazon.

This was perhaps the original intent of our rabbis, and I am quite certain that the desired effect of feeling our total devastation was accomplished. But, unfortunately, as we became more accustomed to life in the galut, especially in the "golden" ones, our sharp religious-national reactions became dulled. The music in the word YERUSHALAYIM became common place, even wearisome, and Birkat Hamazon became a tedious duty.

I am acquainted with holy people in Eretz Yisrael who wash for bread even when they are not hungry, just to become obliged to recite Birkat Hamazon and identify with the Holy Land, Yerushalayim and the Bet Hamikdash. (The same can be achieved when eating one of the "seven agricultural products of Eretz Yisrael" which requires one to recite "mai'ain shalosh", although it is not universally agreed upon that this blessing has a Torah status).

How strange it seems to me, that a Jew living in Chicago and eating bread made from wheat grown in Kansas, declares the sanctity of Eretz Yisrael, Yerushalayim and the Bet Hamikdash. The kindest word I can find for this conduct is "ludicrous," when in reality it is much more serious than just ludicrous.

I thank HaShem every moment of my life for freeing me from that state of self denial, when He permitted my wife and me to descend from the silver wings of an El Al eagle, to take our 4 steps on the holy soil of this land and stoop to kiss the ground sanctified by our Father in Heaven.

Nachman Kahana

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