

Service of the Heart (תדובע בלה): Exploring Prayer

This week's column was written by Rabbi Samuel Barth, Senior Lecturer in Liturgy and Worship, JTS.

Tish'ah Be'Av

These words will reach you during the nine days that lead to the fast on Tish'ah Be'Av, the day we mourn the destruction of the first and second Temples and many other tragedies of Jewish history. It is traditionally a complete fast—from sunset until sunset—with Yom Kippur the only other such fast day in the Jewish calendar. There is a Hasidic teaching that no halakhah concerning fasting on these days is needed, for “on the black fast of Tish'ah Be'Av, who could eat, and on the white fast of Yom Kippur, who needs to eat?”

The rituals of Tish'ah Be'Av guide us not merely into an understanding of destruction and mourning, but into a living emotional encounter and experience. The book of Lamentations opens with the onomatopoeic word “*Eicha!*”—a primal sound of utter despair and grief. It is the sound uttered by David as he hears of the death of his beloved Jonathan and Jonathan's father, King Saul: “*Eich! Naflu gibborim*” (Aaach! How have the mighty fallen; II Sam. 1:27). The melodies of Tish'ah Be'Av are primal and haunting: the melodies of tears and desolation, the sounds of yearning for a world destroyed that will not return, and melodies that give soul to the *kinot*, the poems of lamentation and grief.

Tish'ah Be'Av recalls events that are historical, but it is not a day of history. Tish'ah Be'Av is an *encounter* with our history. We are increasingly conscious that Jewish history is far from an unfolding series of tragedies: there are many epochs of security and substance, with great flowerings of Jewish culture and learning. So perhaps it is fitting to invest this day each year with the memories of destruction. We recall not only the destruction of the Temples, but also the exile from Spain, and there are those (including my teacher Rabbi Dr. Louis Jacobs [z"l]) who suggest that the Shoah might be most fittingly commemorated on this day.

The poem *Eli Tsiyon* (Weep O Zion) is well known throughout Ashkenazi communities, and has a melody that has become the leitmotif for Tish'ah Be'Av. The liturgy of the Spanish and Portuguese communities includes a haunting poem called *Aleichem Eidah Kedoshah* (To you O holy Congregation I would ask these questions) with a refrain that echoes a different time: “*Mah nishtanah halailah hazeh mikol haleilot*” (Why is this night different from all other nights?). There is a poignant irony in this question of the lavishness of seder night being reprised on the night of the black fast. And yet, Tish'ah Be'Av is a powerful night, a time of learning and yearning, a time to ask questions.

May our journey into the memories of sorrow deepen the breadth of our lives, our understanding of our history, and our commitment to the future.

As always, I am interested in hearing comments and reflections on these thoughts about prayer and liturgy. You may reach me at sabarth@jtsa.edu.

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Torah from JTS

Devarim 5773

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Daniel Nevins, Pearl Resnick Dean of The Rabbinical School and Dean of the Division of Religious Leadership, JTS.

A Just and Sustainable Society

What is your vision of a righteous city? This is an important question, because this week is known as Shabbat Hazon, the Sabbath of Vision, and the vision offered by our prophets is that of a city that has gone astray, abandoning the path of righteousness. In our haftarah, the book of Isaiah opens with the chilling depiction of a “faithful city” (*kiryah ne'emanah*) that has become distorted into harlotry. What sins does Isaiah associate with such faithlessness? It is not ritual error but ethical failure that he decries. If so, then what would a righteous city look like? Is such a vision within our grasp?

Shabbat Hazon leads into the black fast of Tish'ah Be'Av in various ways. The opening chapters of Deuteronomy and Isaiah, which we read this week, set the stage for the calamity that will be described in horrific detail by the book of Lamentations. In Midrash Eikhah Rabbah, we read that three prophets used the language of Eikhah (how?!) to describe the sorrows of Israel. Moses, who saw the people in its glory, asked, “How can I bear their burden alone?” Isaiah, who saw Israel in its fallen state asked, “How did the faithful city become a harlot?” And the book of Lamentations, traditionally attributed to the prophet Jeremiah, saw Jerusalem destroyed and asked, “How did the great city become like a widow?”

These three questions are all phrased with the Hebrew word for *how* (*eikhah*). In the same text, Rabbi Nechemiah says that the word *eikhah* indicates lament (*kinah*). Rabbi Yehudah says that it indicates reproach (*tokhecha*). Reproach and lament go together of course. The destruction of Jerusalem is exceptionally lamentable because it is viewed as a self-inflicted wound. From Moses to Isaiah to Jeremiah, we can trace Israel's descent from arrogant power to dissolute immorality and then on to utter destruction.

This path from privilege to catastrophe points back to the opening question—what is our vision of a righteous city? Does the place where we live fit the bill? What would it take to restore it to a center of justice and compassion? What is the role of the religious community in creating a just and sustainable society?

Isaiah's words are chilling. He tells the people not to rely on ritual alone. They may have been meticulous about prayer and sacrifice, but they have oppressed the poor and ignored the cries of those who suffer. Zion will be rebuilt through righteousness, he says in the closing line of the haftarah. There will be righteous judges and the city will once again be faithful. Only a just society can survive. This is the repentance envisioned by our great prophets. How does it square up with our own reality?

Despite the challenges of our current economy, we Jews continue to live in a position of great privilege. In North America, we have large and prosperous communities with great synagogues, day schools, and other impressive organizations. In Israel, we have an entire State with its impressive apparatus of government, military, education, health, and industry. Individuals struggle economically and many institutions are fiscally challenged, but the Jewish communities of Israel and the Diaspora still have unprecedented resources. We can be described aptly by the Eikhah of Moses—the Jewish People is large, powerful, and prosperous—what is it doing with its might?

It is the second Eikhah of Isaiah that ought to grab our attention however. How are our communities perceived? Have we fostered righteous conduct within and without, or are our communities viewed as selfish and materialistic? We can all point to examples of excess, but it seems to me that a growing number of our congregations have indeed embraced social justice as a standard feature of religious life. Some host homeless shelters and soup kitchens; some support sustainable farming; some have taken great efforts to make their communities inclusive and welcoming to people who previously felt excluded.

Now that I am no longer a congregational rabbi, I will admit that my personal involvement in shul is focused heavily on the ritual arena—I often volunteer to read Torah or teach, but have been less active in my synagogue's prodigious social justice program. One of my goals this year is to change my own behavior and to integrate social justice work into my personal practice.

Shabbat Hazon is the beginning of our long season of repentance. This week, we will end the book of Eikhah with the famous line, "Turn us, Lord, to You, and we shall return; renew our days as of old." May we embrace this mission of return both individually and communally so that our cities become known, once again, as faithful towns filled with justice and compassion.

The publication and distribution of the JTS Commentary are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee and Harold (z"l) Hassenfeld.

A Taste of Torah

A Commentary Written by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, Director of Israel Programs, JTS

Taking Two to Tango

This coming Shabbat, we begin the fifth and final book of Torah as we read Parashat Devarim, the opening of the book of Deuteronomy. Moses addresses the People in Moab, just as the next generation under the leadership of Joshua is about to enter the Land. It is both a time for retrospection and introspection. The narrative of the Israelites and laws of Torah are repeated as Moses delivers his final charge. Interestingly, one midrash from Deuteronomy Rabbah 1:6 compares the word *devarim* (words) to *devorim* (bees). Namely, Moses's stinging critique of the Israelites is likened to that of a bee. Just as a bee's sting causes its own death, so too does Moses trigger his own end in taking the People to task. One senses Moses's frustration bordering on contempt as he laments both the People's disobedience and his own inability to enter the Promised Land. Where is such a message conveyed most vividly?

Joseph ben Isaac Bekhor Shor draws our attention to Deuteronomy 1:37–38, in which Moses declares, "Because of you the Lord was incensed with me too." To what is Moses referring? The B'khor Shor writes,

Because you were people of little faith I should have explained explicitly that I [Moses] would bring forth water from the rock. Instead, I [Moses] said, "from this rock shall we bring forth water for you!?" And you responded, one could not possibly think that water would flow from a rock—it is a coincidence! So for this reason God was strict. For if you had interpreted my words the way they were intended—namely, "that you would think that God will do a miracle like this for you and we will bring forth water from this rock"—just as God ended up doing. If so, then you would have seen it was done at the commandment of God. And God would not have been so strict. Because I didn't explain carefully, God was strict [with me]. That is the meaning of "because of you."

In the *peshat* (literal sense) of Torah, it seems Moses is blaming the People for his impatient response of striking the rock (rather than talking to it) and for the subsequent punishment of being denied entry into Israel. Our commentator, however, succeeds in giving us a more nuanced picture. Reading between the lines, he imagines Moses not only blaming the People but also *himself*. Moses, in the imagination of the B'khor Shor, reprimands himself for not being clear enough in his message. Had Moses explicitly said that the water would be the result of the command of God, it could have birthed a very different reality. God would have been sanctified in that moment, and Moses would have entered the Promised Land. Certainly, Moses's bitterness and keen desire to take the People to task is justified. Our commentator, though, succeeds in painting a thoughtful and sophisticated portrait of an experienced and wise leader. Both the shepherd and the flock are responsible *together*. Neither can "go it alone."

The publication and distribution of A Taste of Torah are made possible by a generous grant from Sam and Marilee Susi.