

## **WALLS COMING DOWN, WALLS COMING UP: TISHA B'AV AND THE LAUNCH OF THE HIGH HOLY DAYS**

**© 2013 Rabbi Adina Lewittes**

Coming as it does 3 weeks before the start of the month of Elul, the last month of the year and the presumed start of the High Holy Day season, Tisha B'Av launches us into the realm of teshuvah, or repentance, as the cause for the fall of both Temples was, according to the tradition, our own sinfulness.

Interestingly, as part of the unique Jewish calendar that is informed by both the lunar and solar cycles, our holidays always come at the same time each year, and our Torah readings then follow a similar course each year. And so, the opening portion of Deuteronomy is read every year in the days just prior to the observance of Tisha B'Av, just as it was this past Shabbat. What's the connection?

The book of Deuteronomy, Devarim, is also called Mishneh Torah, literally the repetition of the Torah, as in it Moshe is standing on the eastern side of the Jordan river with the people about to cross and enter the land and he repeats for them various lessons and stories which made their debut in earlier books of the Torah.

His opening speech retells the story of the spies who went into the land of Canaan to evaluate the people's prospects of conquering the land. They came back with a negative report, discouraged the people and unleashed a whole lot of complaining, leading to that generation being denied entry into the land and forced to wander for forty years in the desert until the generation had died off.

Why is this story read in the days prior to Tisha B'Av?

To answer, that we have to delve a bit more deeply into the concept of teshuvah/repentance.

Teshuvah means to return. But return to where exactly?

According to Maimonides, true repentance is completed when we find ourselves in the very same circumstances in which we failed in the past (to do the right thing, say the right thing, speak the right way...) and this time triumph over those circumstances by doing the right thing. So as the people are ready once again to enter the land, Moses retells the story of the spies and thereby reminds them of the need to overcome their fears and not fail again in faith as they did earlier.

It plays out in our own lives and struggles as well: our relationships tend to fail in the same ways, our conflicts at work always seem to stem from the same reasons, our arguments with our parents and our children always seem to be about the same things.

So this return in the Torah to the same test but this time passing it is one meaning of teshuvah which is significant both for our communal and personal journeys, that of breaking vicious cycles. In this light, reading this story in the Torah around the time of Tisha B'Av sets it in this broader context of repentance and renewal initiated by this day of remembrance.

But there is a deeper significance to the reading of this story at this time. Another aspect of return is the sense of returning to the core of who we are; to the potential ingrained within us to be the best that we can possibly be, the most fulfilled and engaged that we are capable of being. This return demands a turn away from denial, from anger, from excuses, in order to face the gulf that exists between who we are and who it is we are capable of being. It's a process of bridging the gap.

Just as the story of the spies represents a distancing of God and the people of Israel, a breach in their relationship, so too Tisha B'Av and the destruction of the Temples represent the severing of the central connection between God and the Jewish people at that time.

The Temple, with its elaborate sacrificial service, was the link, the language, the way in which God and the people of Israel encountered and communicated with each other. For it to cease to exist was to undermine the connection between us.

It's true that the second destruction is what gave birth to rabbinic Judaism. With the genius of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, Judaism redefined where it is that we find God and how it is we relate to God by introducing to us the power of prayer, study and deeds of loving-kindness. But in historical context, the destruction of the Temple was a devastating blow to the relationship between the Jewish people and the Source of Life. The occasion for teshuvah which it inspired, the process of now having to explore how it is we can reconnect to the source of life, vitality, purpose and destiny is the spiritual legacy that the event also bequeathed to us.

When Moses repeats the story of the spies in the Torah reading days before Tisha B'Av he is also calling for reconnection, but he does so with one subtle shift. Whereas in the book of Numbers, where it is reported originally, the blame for the lack of faith was placed squarely on the spies themselves, here the blame is expanded to implicate the people as a whole. Everyone is remembered as having contributed to the moral and spiritual failure of the people. Similarly, the fall of the second Temple is said to have resulted from *sinat chinam*, gratuitous hatred between Jews. Everyone treated each other with contempt and judgment. Everyone had a part to play.

The lesson for us to consider, as we begin to contemplate teshuvah/repentance in this pre-High Holy Day season, is that each of our lives matter. Whether we, as individuals, hide in the denials of our weaknesses or instead turn to wrestle with them has severe implications not just for our personal mental and emotional and Jewish health, but for that of our families and communities as well.

Teshuvah in the sense of returning to the core of who we are and reconnecting with the source and inspiration of life, is the very process of redeeming our history of distancing ourselves from God as did the spies, and our history of the tragic destruction of Jerusalem remembered on Tisha B'Av, a day of disastrous disconnection.

As the tradition has God saying, return to me, and I shall return to you. The connection restored.

But how do we do this exactly? Here's where Tisha B'Av and the weekly Torah reading reveal an even more profound relationship. While it might at first sound callous, the fall of the Temple in Jerusalem is one of the most important legacies the Jewish people have been given. Sounds provocative, maybe even disrespectful. But I mean it in a spiritual, existential way.

I want to be clear: the loss of life, the violence, the suffering, the physical destruction – was a horrible tragedy which ought to be remembered with sadness and remorse.

But the loss of the Temple left us with a lesson about life that is without peer in terms of its ability to nurture and guide us throughout the rest of our history, communal and personal.

The enormous boulders of the Temple coming crashing down teaches us that nothing is permanent, nothing is impervious to the force of change: no building, no edifice, no regime, no government, no scientific theory, no idea or belief. What is permanent and unchanging is the reality that life is constantly changing, bringing us new challenges, new opportunities, new possibilities, in every realm.

Yochanan ben Zakkai's greatest contribution to Jewish life is not in the details of the Rabbinic Judaism he envisioned and we came to live, but in the implication of his teachings that life is by its very design susceptible to change and our best and most effective response is to learn how to move with and through it, and to sometimes accommodate it.

The fall of the Temple led to the exile of the Jewish people. Exile meant wandering, meant no longer having the illusion of a rock-solid (boulder-solid) answer as to where to find God or meaning and how; we now had to search for it. And we've been searching ever since.

Wandering and journeying are mind-opening experiences. In fact, the Torah teaches us that to live life fully we must always be moving and growing. To remain in one place is to stagnate and die. This is

why in the Bible the main paradigm is that of the Exodus, the process of moving out of Mitzrayim, our *meytzarim*, our narrow places, into the vast desert plains of becoming, of growth and possibility.

More than any other phrase in the Torah, the words "*ki eved hayita b'erezt mitzrayim*/for you were a slave in Egypt" are repeated over and over again to remind us that having journeyed to freedom, we must now bring those who are yet enslaved along for the ride and also that we must never stop liberating ourselves

It is not Sinai that captures the Torah's heart, despite the sacred exchange that took place there. Rather, it's the notion of carrying Sinai with us wherever we travel that animates the Torah's teachings. For this reason the precise location of Mount Sinai is forever unknown. It can be anywhere we are.

"*Rav lachem shevet behar hazeh*/You have stayed long enough at this mountain" God said to us at Sinai; a command recalled by Moses in these very opening chapters of Deuteronomy we've been discussing. Go along, move out, journey into life and take this sacred place, these sacred teachings with you.

In a book called Jewish Lives, Jewish Learning, author Diane Tickton Shuster puts it most succinctly: "The language of journey and travel is at the heart of the 'meta-story' of the Jewish people. From Abraham's departure for unknown destinations to Joseph's journey to Egypt, to the Israelites crossing of the Sea of Reeds, to generation upon generation of migrations around the world -- the departures and arrivals, itineraries and landmarks, baggage and paraphernalia of 'Jews on the journey' frame our thinking about Jewish growth and change."

The Torah often warns us against worshipping idols. But idol worship is not simply bowing down to a rock. It is worshipping anything that is unchanging, unresponsive, or inflexible. It is not only God who refuses to be limited in this way. The lesson is that we are not permitted to limit ourselves in this way either. We cannot turn our own lives into stone. When broken down, stone becomes grains of sand, free to be moved and reconfigured by the winds of life, free to assemble into formations

that give structure and meaning, until they surrender to the winds of change once again.

So the falling stones of Tisha B'Av, the rocks getting crushed into sand, go hand in hand with God's call to us in the Torah reading of the same time to move along, to get out there, to search, to question, to explore.

And what we are meant to discover is that the best we can do is build structures in our lives that support us, nurture us, inspire us to grow and to connect, ones that don't inhibit us or allow us to deny or hide from change.

As Rabbi Alan Lew, z"l, noted, the most powerful symbol of this comes from the very end of the High Holy Day season that we've said begins, truly, with Tisha B'Av. The very end of the season is the holiday of Sukkot --the holiday on which we build a fragile hut in our backyards, a hut vulnerable to constantly changing weather, to wind, rain, one in which we live and eat (some even sleep) as a reminder not only of the shelters God provided to us as we wandered through the desert, but even more importantly, of our need to avoid placing our trust in the seeming solidity of our homes, jobs, or relationships; to rather build what we can of them to see us through the inevitable changes they, and everything else in life will go through.

Try to see it in your heads and hearts: the enormous boulders of the seemingly indestructible Temple coming crashing down, and the fragile, temporary, responsive walls of the Sukkah coming up. This is the journey of life that is encapsulated by the High Holy Days. This is the journey of teshuvah, of return, of renewal, of rebirth, a journey we begin again now, on this day of the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av.