

We live in a world that teaches us to blame others for our failures and struggles. Whether our health, our finances, our stalled careers, our emotional unhappiness, our often narcissistic and litigious society has trained us to look outside ourselves to justify our suffering. We explain our anger or pain by telling ourselves that someone offended us, our boss overworked us, or a merchant was dishonest with us. In contrast, Judaism asks us to turn inward when faced with conflict: did I play a part in bringing this on? Could I have done something to contribute to my dis-ease? The classic expression of this is in the rabbinic texts explaining reasons for the churban/destruction of both the 1st and 2nd Temples: the first due to sins of idolatry, murder and sexual immorality and the second due to *sinat chinam*, free, unbridled hatred between Jews.

We are a people who believe that goodness will prevail over evil, so when evil seems to be winning, we assume there must be something wrong with the good, meaning our team. And more, as it's been said, individuals and communities who don't engage in self-reflection are bound to repeat the same mistakes -- a lesson illustrated by the Temples falling on the same days, centuries apart. Introspection, then, in all circumstances, is crucial.

“Eichah”, the opening word in the Book of Lamentations that we read on Tisha B'Av, literally means, “How did this come to be?” The midrash teaches us that the first “Eichah” was that original “Ayeka” in the Garden of Eden, a word spelled the same way, of God calling to Adam and Eve, “Where are you” – spiritually, psychically? How has your state of mind and state of being affected today's realities?

Sometimes this type of thinking is applied in a way that's profoundly disturbing and offensive: blaming the Shoah on Jews who were Zionists, or on those who were secular; or recently, a Satmar Rabbi in NY blamed the deaths of the three Israeli teens, Eyal, Gilad and Naftali, z"l, on their parents because they took their children to live on the West Bank. We are appalled by those statements, as we should be. So consider how the ancient citizens of Jerusalem felt being told that their city's devastating destruction, the loss of their children to famine, sisters and daughters to rape, their homes to fire and pillaging was **their** fault. And yet, we persist in revisiting those teachings on this day of Tisha B'Av, reading Jeremiah's graphic, blame-filled account of the first destruction in the Scroll of Eichah.

It's a paradox: on the one hand we reject that kind of self-blame for such calamities, and we especially want to avoid the risk of suggesting that those who attack us or cause us pain are somehow not really to blame. Yet, on the other, those teachings affirm that our actions matter, that our choices indeed have consequences, that we

can affect the fate not just of our own lives but of our communities, even of the world – for bad and for good.

To wit, regarding Tisha B'Av, Rav Kook taught that the churban of sinat chinam, the (2nd) destruction caused by unbridled hatred between Jews, will only be healed and redeemed and Jerusalem restored when we can show one another ahavat chinam, free and unbridled love and respect. Our actions are the tikkun, the correction, even as they may have contributed to the brokenness.

Let's frame it this way: Judaism, ancient and modern, understands that conflict with others requires that we look deeply at ourselves, and that resolution to conflict with others requires a healing within, an inner tikkun as part of the solution to our outer troubles. With regard to Tisha B'Av, Judaism has never exonerated our enemies for the pain and suffering they've caused us. It never justified the aggression of either the Babylonians or the Romans, or the many others whose actions on this day in history caused suffering for the Jews: the Crusades, the Inquisition leaders, or the Nazis, God Forbid. But, in a profoundly humbling, if provocative way, it has asked us to consider what role we ourselves may have played in making ourselves vulnerable.

This, I think, is a lesson that's particularly hard to embrace this year.

Tisha B'Av comes at a time of great pain for us. Jerusalem and all of Israel has been under sustained attack for a month. Civilians have been terrorized by an endless barrage of rockets falling all over the country. We've been engaged in a dangerous war in Gaza, have lost (at the time of this writing) 64 young soldiers, a 4th civilian yesterday in an attack in Jerusalem, and of course the death toll in Gaza is said to be around 1800, a significant number of those being terrorists, but of course many are innocent children, men and women. We uncovered a terrifying network of tunnels from Gaza into Israel to enable surprise attacks on Jewish kibbutzim and cities. And as the IDF pulls away from Gaza we don't know if we've managed to destroy them all or not. We don't know fully to what extent the IDF actions in Gaza have diminished our vulnerability or for how long.

Outside of Israel, anti-semitism, barely masquerading as anti-Israelism, in Europe is in a terrifying upswing. People have been comparing events now with those of the 1930's, like a Belgian doctor refusing to treat a Jewish patient, stores there boasting sings that read "Dogs welcome, Zionists absolutely never", a Hungarian mayor burning Netanyahu and Peres in effigy, Israeli dancers from Ben Gurion University being asked to remove themselves from performances in Edinburgh, Jewish property vandalized in France, raucous and violent demonstrations in major cities including Berlin with protesters yelling "Slaughter the Jews". Hostile demonstrations have taken place throughout the US and Canada, as well as in South America and Africa. People have even dared to speak of their fears of a second Shoah.

And yet, even within this climate, observers throughout the world have acknowledged, on some level, the role Hamas plays in the deaths of its own citizens, hiding rockets and launchers in schools and hospitals and other civilian settings knowing the IDF will be forced to target them in retaliation for Hamas attacks, and have proclaimed the right of Israel to defend itself from terrorists. 85% of Israelis have been in favor of the war, which is unusual for such a diverse, multi-vocal society. World leaders have decried the vicious anti-semitic outbursts we've seen, and the Jewish community, while there's certainly been dissent, has strongly embraced the justness of this war, the morality of the actions of the IDF, and the absolute right of the State of Israel to protect its citizens from current and future threats.

Given these circumstances, how does the legacy of Tisha B'Av which asks us to look within during times of suffering for whatever we might have done to bring it on ourselves resonate this year when our suffering and angst seem to have such moral and existential clarity?

To be sure, it is often those who exude moral certainty who need to be most engaged in a process of self-reflection. Still, what might we bring to the discussion this year?

Some of the more obvious thoughts might include the horrific murder by Jewish vigilantes of Mohamed Abu Khdeir, the Palestinian boy who was burned to death right after the bodies of the three Israeli teens – Eyal, Gilad, Naftali, ז"ל – were discovered, and the gangs of Jewish Israelis heard yelling "Death to the Arabs" these days including, most recently, Ultra-Orthodox Jews shouting "Death to Arabs" yesterday morning after the bulldozer attack in Jerusalem. Israeli police had to evacuate a bus of Arab workers out of concern for their safety. And, of course, there is the larger picture of what just about everyone agrees is the unsustainable reality of Israel ruling over the Palestinian people and the urgency of finding a long-term solution to the conflict.

But do those very real and disturbing issues reflect the kind of inner soul-searching that Tisha B'Av demands? Is there a larger question to which those issues belong?

Rabbi Daniel Gordis, Senior Vice President and the Koret Distinguished Fellow at [Shalem College](#) in Jerusalem and often referred to as one of the most thoughtful advocates for Israel, posted an essay two days ago in the Jerusalem Post that answers our question in a most profound, challenging way. Titled "When The Guns Fall Silent", Gordis describes the angst and anxiety that fill the generation of young Israelis today who know that it is largely up to them to defend and protect our country, putting their lives and dreams and hopes at risk for a conflict that seems to have no end, no resolution, making their inevitable sacrifices seem meaningless, purposeless.

To them and for them, Gordis admonishes, we have to be able to answer the fundamental question of **why** we live in a protracted state of war, both with our enemies in the Arab world and the swelling ranks of anti-semites around the world. We have to be able to articulate a meaningful and compelling vision of Israel and Judaism, both a country and a way of life, that fulfills the historic Jewish belief in a land flowing not only with milk and honey, but with compassion, understanding and peace. As Gordis writes, *“So **why** are we here? That’s the question which is going to hang heavily over this country when the uniforms return to the closets and the guns get put away. It’s the question these kids will want to hear their society discussing. They will want to know that this is a fight for our homes, but also for a vision. They want to believe that this fight is worth the lives of the children they haven’t yet had.”*

Gordis continued, *“Unless we’re under fire, we never discuss the chasms between us. Unless we’re under attack, we no longer ask who is going to live here, and how we’re going to live together. When we’re not at war, there’s no national conversation about how Jewish Israel should be, and how Israel should be Jewish.”*

And then Gordis concluded, *“When the guns go silent, are we really going to abide a Haredi sector that, for the most part, did nothing to protect this home? When the dust settles, what are we going to do about the Jewish thugs who beat up Israeli Arabs? When the dust settles, will we know how to pick up where Herzl, Jabotinsky, Kook and Berdichevsky left off? This is an earthquake, let there be no doubt. When the guns go silent, we’re going need to renew a vision that blends resolve with tolerance, strength with utter decency, individual freedom coupled with a sense of serving something greater than ourselves.”*

Thousands of years ago, a divine decree was made on this day that a generation swayed by spies and dismayed by the seeming impossibility of success in the land of Israel was to wander and die off in the desert. Perhaps this year we can offer an inner tikkun, an inner correction to that decree, and prevent this generation from surrendering to dismay by bequeathing to them a renewed, reinvigorated sense of mission, as a country and as a people.

This year, Tisha B’Av has arrived just as Israel begins to disengage from a war most understood as defensive, in spite of the destruction it entailed. Maybe today, the inner searching prompted by Tisha B’Av should be reframed: less about how we may have sinned to make ourselves vulnerable to war and terrorism, and more about what we are capable of achieving to strengthen ourselves as a society and as a spiritual and cultural tradition to ensure a future of integrity, purpose, and peace – with our enemies, of course, but first and foremost with ourselves.

