

Beyond Tikkun Olam: An Agenda For Tisha B'Av

Wed, 07/10/2013

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Tisha B'av – the day of mourning for the loss of both Temples in Jerusalem and for the end of Jewish sovereignty until 1948 -- is often marked by turning inwards, by examining the senseless hatred and other societal failures that the Talmud blames for the destruction and exile. For some, this is a day to focus on tikkun olam (repairing the world) and to heed the words of the Prophets by protesting against corrupt leaders and injustice.

(Tisha B'Av this year begins on the evening of July 15, and extends for 25 hours.)

But other equally compelling messages arise from these national traumas, ones that highlight the inherent distance between Israelis who live with daily threats of yet another war of destruction, and many younger American Jews who look at Israeli realities from a distance. From Israel, Tisha B'av is a reminder of the unfathomable pain resulting from powerlessness in the face of invasions from Babylonia and Rome, the loss of sovereignty, and the chasm of destruction that awaits a people unable to defend itself. Israelis look beyond their narrow borders – commuting distance for many Americans – and see the savage violence in Syria, unchecked for two years, in which the global machinery formed under the banner of human rights is entirely irrelevant. The images from Libya, Egypt, Gaza, Sudan, Libya, and other parts of the region are not much better.

In this context, most Israelis understand that if we let down our guard and fail to defend the Jewish nation-state, restored at great cost only 65 years ago, we will again be reduced to a powerless and pitiful people. Without sovereignty and under constant threat, the ability to further noble goals, including tikkun olam, are largely unattainable.

In contrast, Jewish groups that strongly criticize Israeli policy give little weight to sovereignty and Middle East realities, instead highlighting the prophetic tradition and tikkun olam (now generally interpreted as synonymous with promoting social justice). This ideology, which eschews power and particularism while embracing victimhood, human rights, and universalism, dominates campus discussions of Israel, contributing significantly to Jewish alienation from Israel.

The messaging focusing on turning swords into plowshares, welcoming the stranger and helping victims is only part of the story. Jewish tradition also recognizes the terrible side of human nature, the potential for horrible and violent actions, and the yetzer harah – the evil inclination that every individual is born with. Indeed, much of halacha (Jewish law) is focused on taming and preventing such expressions of inhuman behavior through regulations and institutions. And at the same time, the tradition explicitly and repeatedly recognizes the necessity of self-defense – of going to war in order to secure the freedom and survival of the Jewish nation. The famous dictum of Hillel from Pirkei Avot [The Ethics of the Fathers] enjoins us first to be for ourselves, and then, with our security and survival in hand, to expand our commitment to people who are outside the fold in need of assistance.

Similarly, the Jewish tradition of realism in a threatening world enjoins us to “rise early and strike first” when confronted with an implacable enemy; pacifism is alien to the Biblical history of struggle. In 2,000 years of exile, dependence and powerlessness, these principles were largely forgotten, and at unimaginable cost to millions of Jewish lives. But the return to sovereignty and the presence of half of

the world's Jewish population in Israel has also forced Israeli society to relearn these lessons of political survival in an inherently hostile world.

In contrast, Jewish peace groups in the diaspora that lead the criticism of Israel over alleged "human rights violations" and endorse the Palestinian narrative of victimization and suffering, are far more influential than their Israeli counterparts. In this context, the "occupation" is an unmitigated evil from which the history of war and terror has been conveniently erased, and in which a simple return to the 1949 armistice lines and Palestinian sovereignty would magically end the violence. And the Israeli Arab minority, including the Bedouin population that is occupying ever-greater expanses of the Negev, is patronizingly adopted as civil rights causes, imposing the American experience on the entirely different Israeli political and social landscape. In the process, some have turned Israel into the ultimate evil empire of the 21st century, justifying boycotts and other forms of demonization.

The majority of Israelis, as demonstrated repeatedly in voting and other forms of political behavior, understand that these situations are far more complex. The Israeli "peace camp" gains only a small portion of the votes -- not because of a massive right-wing conspiracy, or some inherent wish to fight wars and control the lives of millions of Palestinians, but because there are no better and realistic alternatives to survival. Every day, Israelis confront Palestinian total rejection of Jewish sovereignty and the other realities on the ground.

Perhaps during the period before and during Tisha B'av, and extending into the High Holy Days and through Yom Kippur, instead of preaching their strongly held views and criticisms of Israel, those Jewish leaders in the diaspora highly critical of Jerusalem's policies should humbly seek to understand its realities. Tikkun Olam starts at home, beginning with seeking to overcome the alienation and *sinat chinam* [causeless hatred] from within.

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