



JEWISH COMMENTARY

Not Everything Is Tisha B'Av

MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK

IN 1977, the newly elected prime minister of Israel visited the United States and appeared on NBC's *Meet the Press*. He was immediately asked about his meeting with President Carter, but before Menachem Begin addressed the issues of the day, he had more pressing matters on his mind. His response highlighted how different he was from every Israeli premier before or after:

I would like to say a few words about the day we now meet, because of its universal importance. Today, in accordance with our calendar, it is the Ninth of the month of Av. It is the day when, 1,907 years ago, the Roman Legions, the Fifth and the Twelfth, launched their ultimate onslaught on the Temple Mountain, set this temple ablaze and destroyed Jerusalem, subjugating our people and conquering our land. Historically, this is the beginning of all the suffering of our people dispersed, humiliated, and ultimately now a generation physically destroyed. We remember that day and now

have the responsibility to make sure that never again will our independence be destroyed and never again will the Jew become homeless or defenseless. Actually, this is the crux of the problems facing us in the future.

In one elegant statement, Begin summarized a great deal about the day known as Tisha B'Av, the saddest moment marked in the Jewish calendar. On the day, Jews remember not only the destruction of Jerusalem and the burning of the Temple, but all the tragedies and the horrors of Jewish history.

It was on the Ninth of Av that the expulsion of the Jews from England was decreed in 1290, and it was on or around that day in 1492 that the expulsion from Spain was completed. In Ashkenazic liturgy, elegies are read not only for the Temple but also for those who died and were martyred in the Bar Kochba revolt in the second century C.E., and for the Jews of the Rhineland murdered by Crusaders in 1096.

As part of his visit to America, Begin met personally with Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik to seek rabbinic guidance for his proposal that Yom HaShoah—Holocaust Remembrance Day—be marked in Israel on the Ninth of Av, so that those murdered by the Nazis be mourned and remembered along with the Jewish communities destroyed in the past. Whether or not one

MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK *is the rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City and the director of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University.*

agrees with this idea, the fact that it was pursued by Begin, who was more personally connected to the Holocaust than any other Israeli leader was, reflects what the Ninth of Av is all about: remembering and mourning not only the destruction of Jerusalem but the attempted destruction of Jewry throughout history.

Yet the rabbis of the Talmud connected the Ninth of Av to one other day in Jewish history—one that was not a moment for weeping, but in which Jews wept all the same. It was around the Ninth of Av, they tell us, that scouts sent by Moses returned from the Holy Land to Israel's desert encampment and described the challenges facing the people in conquering and settling the site promised to Abraham.

The Israelites wept as they heard the testimony of the spies, unable to see the incredible opportunity awaiting them. According to the Talmud, God told Moses that though Israel now was engaged in an unreasonable act of mourning in failing to see the gift that the Holy Land embodied, in the future the Ninth of Av would be a day on which true tragedies would be remembered. The Talmud thereby teaches us that the inability to distinguish between a true tragedy and the regular, or remarkable, challenges of life is contemptible, and that it is a source of sadness when Jews cannot tell the difference between challenges and tragedies.

It is with this in mind that we must approach the reaction of many when the Knesset, three days before Tisha B'Av, approved limitations on the Israeli Supreme Court. The Times of Israel immediately presented us with the remarkable headline: "Judicial overhaul opponents see parallel to Tisha B'Av, saddest day in Hebrew year." Indeed, comparisons to the destruction of the Temple abounded. A meme with the words *shisha b'av*, "the sixth of Av," was circulated on the Internet, with the comparison to Tisha B'Av being made even by prominent Israeli writers. Some Israelis announced that though they did not usually fast on the Ninth of Av, they would do so this year to mourn what the Knesset had wrought.

I do not wish to discuss the merits or flaws of the government proposal. Rather I want to make one point only: One cannot compare the tragedies of the Jewish

past to a democratic vote by the Israeli Knesset, however mistaken one might believe that vote to be. To make this comparison is to recommit the sin of the spies and their audience among the Hebrews, and to repeat the error of our ancestors in the desert millennia ago. Sharing a meme with the words *shisha b'av* dangerously demonizes a vast part of the Israeli electorate by comparing voters to the Romans who destroyed Jerusalem. And one can react only with horror to the statement by a Jew that a vote by the Knesset is more worthy of mourning than the deaths of Jews throughout history.

In arguing that the memories of Tisha B'Av obligated him to protect the physical well-being of the Jewish state, what Begin was also implying was that in the story of Israel, some—though not all—of what the Romans had wrought had been undone by the rise of the State of Israel and the miracles that followed. The Temple is not yet rebuilt, and hatred of the Jews still festers, but a rebuilt, united Jerusalem stands under Jewish sovereignty. If those who suffered in the events marked on the Ninth of Av would have been shown images of our own age—a united Jerusalem featuring a Jewish government, a Judean desert in

bloom, and Jewish homes rebuilt throughout the Holy Land—they would have rejoiced at this vindication of Jewish yearnings. And if they would have been told that during all this, the parliament of the Jewish state would then vote to limit the ability of a Supreme Court to pronounce administrative decisions as "unreasonable," their awe would not be diminished by an iota, no matter the flaws or virtues of this vote.

And so it must be stressed—though as I type these words, I still cannot believe that it must be stressed—that however much one might disagree with the Israeli coalition's agenda, it is not Tisha B'Av. It is not the Holocaust. It is not the destruction of the Temple. It is not the expulsion from England, or Spain. It is not the auto-da-fé. It is not the massacres of the Crusades. To argue otherwise is to desecrate the memory of the martyred and the murdered, the exiled and the expelled, those who died with faith in the future of Jerusalem on their lips, and who would react with wonder at the miracles of our age. 📖➡️

One cannot compare the tragedies of the Jewish past to a democratic vote by the Israeli Knesset, however mistaken one might believe that vote to be. To make this comparison is to recommit the sin of the spies and their audience among the Hebrews, and to repeat the error of our ancestors in the desert millennia ago.
