



Parshat Devarim
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A Reason to Mourn
by Rabbi Wesley Gardenswartz
Temple Emanuel, Newton, MA

Question: When and where in the history of the Jewish people could Jews get spit on, hit in the head with sharp objects, and cursed, for the offense of praying in public? The answer, tragically, is Jerusalem, the Kotel, just this past Monday, the first of Av. Jewish women tried to pray at the Kotel, and their prayer spawned hatred, clashes, violence and riots.

There has been some improvement. It used to be that Jewish women could get arrested for the offense of praying a service like ours at the Kotel. But a recent court ruling reinterpreted existing laws to allow at the Kotel what any woman can do here: pray, read Torah, and wear a tallit. The basis of that decision was that the Kotel does not belong to the Haredi community; does not belong to the Orthodox community; does not belong to any one community; but belongs to the Jewish people. The court ruled that women could pray with tallitot and could read Torah at the Kotel. They too are part of the Jewish people. The Jerusalem police indicated that they would respect the court's ruling. But in response, the Haredi community sent hundreds of yeshiva students and haredi school girls to the Kotel, first thing Monday morning, to block women like the women here from praying at the Kotel. These Haredis called the women Amalek, and called the Jerusalem police Nazis.

We Jews have been persecuted, expelled, harassed and humiliated over the years. But who would think it would happen in Jerusalem, the holy city, today? And that the people doing it would be other Jews?

Maybe the Women of the Wall were there to provoke, not to pray.

One woman who was there, Ilana Rosansky, explained what drew her to the Kotel, and what happened once she got there. To provoke. Or to pray. You be the judge.

I have a friend who, like Angelina Jolie, is having surgery later today in Boston. Like Angelina Jolie, she too carries that potentially dangerous gene BCRA 1. She will be operated on today, Rosh Hodesh Av [this past Monday] in a hospital in Boston. Chanah bat Nitsah is her name.

I went to the prayers today with a k'vittel (a small piece of paper with a request for healing for her) to be hopefully placed in a crevice of the Kotel, tucked into my siddur. But, the police did not allow the Women of the Wall to even enter the women's prayer section or to get close to the Kotel. So I reached out—I leaned over the police barrier and implored, begged, pleaded with young Haredi girls and teens and older women who had...access to the Kotel.

“Please, would you do a mitzvah for me—for my friend—and place this note in the Kotel?”

Again and again I beseeched the Haredi women. They not only spurned my request, but they cursed me (on Rosh Chodesh Av!!!) They cursed my friend. They said things like: “It's your fault.” “She deserves it.” “May she die from cancer.”

May she die from cancer. What do you do with that?

What you do with that is a national day of mourning, Tisha B'av, that we mark this coming Monday night and Tuesday.

Tisha B'av gets a bad rap, and in some ways for good reason. It is this sad day, annoyingly plunked down in the middle of the summer, when we are supposed to be happy. And its rituals—like reading Lamentations and fasting—speak of Jerusalem destroyed and the Jewish people exiled. But we have Israel today. Some have therefore asked: do we even need Tisha B'av anymore? That is a legitimate question.

If the reason for Tisha B'av were that the Romans destroyed the Temple and exiled our people from Jerusalem, you could argue that we no longer need the day.

But the rabbis of the Talmud did not argue that the reason for the day is military defeat. Rather, they argued that the reason for the day is *sinat chinam*, Jews hating Jews. We don't mourn the Romans defeating us. We mourn Jews hating Jews.

Unfortunately, that rationale has not become dated with time. To the contrary, that rationale is more urgent and compelling than ever. Tisha B'av compels us to go a place we don't usually go, and to talk about a subject we don't usually talk about.

Ordinarily, in this congregation, when it comes to Israel, the message is: Go to Israel. Love Israel. Support Israel. Judge for yourself with your own eyes. When you first walk into the building, and you walk into the atrium, the first thing you see is not one but two posters urging people to go to Israel on the December family mission. That is after 37 of us just got back from Israel this week after studying at Hartman. That is after another 16 people from the minyan went to Israel in the spring. Within the space of six months, three congregational trips to Israel. Go to Israel. Love Israel. Support Israel. That is our natural message.

And there is of course so much to love. The life-saving and life-enhancing science and technology. The courage of its soldiers. The strength of its citizens who forge the region's only democracy in the midst of all those enemies who want to destroy it. The Torah that comes out of Jerusalem, the best Torah in the world. The fair judiciary. The free media. The capacity to be relentlessly honest and self-critical as the Jewish homeland builds a nation devoted to social justice. So much to love.

And yet, Tisha B'av reminds us of another side of Israel that also exists. Another side of Israel that is also true. Even though it is one that we don't usually like to think or talk about.

I'll put it this way. When our Hartman group was in Israel last week, Micah Goodman talked to us, and he asked us: Can I be honest with you? We said yes. Please be honest with us.

He said he has a fear about Israel and North American relations, which is that one day North American Jews will wake up and realize that their Judaism—Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, progressive Judaism—is officially invalidated in Israel. Because Israel does not have separation of church and state, because the state has given Judaism over to the Chief Rabbinate, and because the Chief Rabbinate is Haredi, official Israel does not recognize our religious practice. Our rabbis are not real rabbis. We cannot perform lifecycle events in Israel. Our prayers are not real prayers. We could not do this service at Judaism's holiest site. If we were to try to do what we are doing now—davening together in an egalitarian fashion, as is our custom—at the Kotel, we would be cursed and spit at. What happened to the Women of the Wall would happen to us, and it is the most florid form of rejectionism of non-Orthodox forms of Judaism that is the official position of the Chief Rabbinate, and therefore of Israel.

That is where Tisha B'av comes along.

There is brokenness that is unfixed. Jews still hate Jews. We need to mourn this. We need to own this. We need to own our brokenness as a people.

Tisha B'av has a message that is countercultural. We like happy endings. If you watch Law and Order, or CSI, the bad guy is always caught, tried, convicted, and sent to jail within the hour. Case closed. Problem solved. Within an hour. If you watch Disney, the villain always loses, the hero always wins, the innocent young lovers always get married and live happily ever after. We want our endings happy.

Tisha B'av comes to teach us that all of life is not a Law and Order episode. All of life is not CSI. The problem does not always get solved in an hour. All of life is not a Disney movie. We want our Disney ending. In a deep sense, the message of Tisha B'av is that there is not always a Disney ending. Deal with it.

Tisha B'av is needed, now more than ever. If I were ending this sermon truly in the spirit of Tisha B'av, I would just say see you Monday night, and Shabbat shalom.

But I cannot transcend my own American and Jewish instinct to find some hope somehow somewhere. And so, though this violates the sober and somber realism of this mournful period, I must end with a single note of credible hope.

Changes are happening on the ground affecting individual Haredis that will in time affect the community as a whole. The Knesset is expected to pass legislation ending the draft exemption for Haredi yeshiva students so that the burden of military service is shared more equitably. In fact, some Haredi young people have already started serving in the Israeli army, a move which has provoked scorn and anger. A recent Times piece profiled a 24-year old Haredi soldier. Fellow Haredim spit at him and chased him, calling him "Germ!" and "Traitor!" He has to carry tear gas for self-defense. But he loves being a Haredi, and he loves Israel and the Israeli army, and he is bound and determined to do both. He says: "I want to contribute and to be an equal citizen, to advance and to integrate." The more Haredim that serve in the army, the more Haredim will begin to integrate in the country, the more that the Haredi communities will change one person at a time. That is in the fullness of time.

But in the meantime, Monday morning proved yet again that what was true 2000 years ago is still true today: Jews hate Jews. We need to mourn this. We need to own our brokenness as a people. That we will do Monday night. And yet, we can at the same time still pray, still hope, and still work, towards the prophetic message of Martin Luther King, true in this country, true one day in Israel, please God, that the arc of history is long, but it bends towards justice. Shabbat shalom.