

Shabbat V'Etchanan
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Shabbat Shalom. As you know, this past week we commemorated Tisha B'Av, the saddest day of the Jewish year. It is on this date that both of the ancient temples were destroyed, and, since then, the rabbis have attributed many other sad occasions to this date, as well. To commemorate, we fast, we refrain from other pleasures, and we sit on the floor and read the Biblical account of the first Temple's destruction as chronicled by Jeremiah, known as the book of Lamentations or Eicha.

Now, you may think me a little odd when I tell you that Tisha B'Av is actually one of my favorite days of the Jewish calendar. I don't mean that I actually *enjoy* the day, but rather that, for me, Tisha B'av tells us much about Judaism. The day is in fact, to my mind, a perfect distillation of one of the central themes of the Jewish faith: history matters. Think about it for a second. Tisha B'av is unlike most Jewish holidays that celebrate past events because it is stripped of all myth. There are no stories of the supernatural or miraculous. There is no splitting of the Red Sea, there is no thunder at Mount Sinai, no oil lasting eight days. Tisha B'av is pure, raw history, with no contrivances to give what happened greater meaning. Rather, it is a day we designate on which to remember exactly what happened and, by itself, that is powerful enough.

There is no better illustration of what I'm getting at than the archeological dig alongside the Western Wall in the Old City of Jerusalem, which I'm sure that many of you have been to. There, beneath the section of the wall that is known as Robinson's Arch sits hard proof that the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE actually happened. A couple dozen large stones—limestone building blocks about three feet in each direction—lie piled on the ground, some 50 or 60 feet below the top of the wall. But the markings and shape and size of these stones make it clear that they were actually from the Temple building on the summit. So, how did they get where they are today? Very simple. The Romans threw these large building blocks down onto the street below as they proceeded to dismantle Temple brick by brick. Hard to get more concrete proof than that.

We may not know exactly what the splitting of the Red Sea was or how the Torah was received, but as for the events we commemorate on Tisha B'Av – well,



there's no question that the physical evidence confirms the historical record. So, when I look at those stones on the ground and then cast my gaze above to the top of the Temple wall, the span of centuries melts away. The past suddenly becomes very much part of the present.

But, of course, the demolition of the Temple structure is not merely a historical event, and Tisha B'Av not simply a marking of the Roman dismantling as having occurred, but instead the history is bound by tragedy: the destruction of the Temple building meant the end of the Jewish community in Israel as it had developed over centuries. Tisha B'Av is a day designated to try to understand a profound loss, a commemoration of what our people once had that abruptly and violently disappeared.

As an aside, I think this is why many modern Jews have a hard time taking Tisha B'Av too seriously. Why should we be sad about losing Temple-based Judaism? We certainly don't want it back, do we? Animal sacrifices? High priests? The whole system is foreign—even bizarre—by contemporary standards. Still, whether you seek the return of Temple Judaism or not—and I'm certainly not advocating for it—all Jews must recognize that with the destruction of the Temple came the utter obliteration of the community stability and cohesion of our ancient brethren, not to mention the loss of many, many lives.

In today's Torah portion, we encounter a different kind of tragedy in the opening passage. Addressing the Children of Israel as they stand poised to enter the land that God has promised them, Moshe declares plainly, (Deuteronomy 3:25-26): "Let me, I pray, cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan, that good hill country, and the Lebanon. But the Lord was wrathful with me on your account and would not listen to me."

Moshe, who has devoted his life to leading the Children of Israel to the Promised Land, is denied entry into it. Indeed, the opening word of the Parsha – V'etchanan – "and he pleaded" conveys the pain that Moshe is experiencing: the tragedy of never being able to achieve his dream. His is not the tragedy of loss, but of the unattainable. The poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson famously suggested that Moshe's form of tragedy is even worse than the kind we commemorate on Tisha B'Av, when he wrote "Tis better to have loved and lost/Than never to have loved at all."

Regardless of their ranking, though, the confluence of these two models of tragedy squeezed into this one week is fascinating to me, even jarring, and so I wanted to explore with you for few moments whether we see anything of ourselves, of our modern world, captured in—compressed into—these two ancient tragedies?

Let me start by putting out a somewhat frightening and depressing proposition. It struck me as I was touring around Israel for a few weeks with my

wife Karen earlier this summer that this beautiful, glorious, but deeply troubled, land balances on the knife edge between these two tragedies, between a state of total loss and a condition of never able to attain. Why do I say that? Well, regarding the tragedy of total loss, such a notion is, sadly, too familiar. We all know that Israel is a country constantly under threat of destruction. There are no shortage of parties out in the world who seek to become the modern-day Romans or Babylonians, who take the total elimination of the Israeli state as their sworn duty.

Yet, during this visit, the tragedy of the unattainable also loomed. I saw for myself up close what many others have spoken and written about: not only the intractable situation with the Palestinians, but also the hatred for Arabs that the conflict has generated among some Israelis. Not only the intense religious tensions between the ultra-Orthodox and everyone else, but a political and social system that seems structured to harden that discord and drive a deeper wedge between Jews. Not only the rising cost of living, but a rapidly widening inequality, and a governmental system too dysfunctional to craft policies to ease the burdens. It feels like Israel is in a deep hole, and the only thing anyone knows how to do is to keep digging. Israel has become a country whose grand visions for itself seem not simply unachieved, but unachievable.

Now, I recognize that I'm overstating the case here. The Israeli economy over the last decade has been one of the strongest in the world. More patents per capita than any other country; continuous building of infrastructure, both public and private. Indeed, it is impossible not to be utterly amazed at what this tiny country—a country that does have to constantly fight for its survival—has been able to accomplish in just 64 years.

But Ari Shavit makes the point in his remarkable book, *My Promised Land*, that this economic and material success now takes place largely at the individual level. However, as a society—as a community—the “the ‘yes-we-can’ ethos” has been disturbingly absent over the last few years. As he writes about the past decade or so, “[U]nder the glow of an extraordinary success story, anxiety was simmering. It was not just Left-Right politics anymore. It was not just secular versus religious. Something deeper was taking place. Many Israelis were not at ease with the new Israel that was emerging.... Although most Israelis still loved their homeland and celebrated its blessings, many lost their unshaken faith in its future.”

I would say this faith has been broken, in part, by the constant existential threat Israel faces. The underlying fear, this need for a defensive crouch, as it were, seems to have imposed on Israeli society a stunting of the imagination, a focus on surviving to the exclusion of thriving. Put another way, the tragedy of total loss has become inverted, pressing Israel to the brink of the tragedy we encounter through

Moshe: the state of never reaching one's aspirations. In his poem titled "Wildpeace," Yehuda Amichai expresses this state of mind in the opening lines, "Not even the peace of a cease fire/not even the vision of the wolf and the lamb/ but rather/as in the heart when the excitement is over/and you can talk only about a great weariness."

So, where does that leave us in thinking about Israel and, more to the point, in Israelis thinking about themselves? Shavit offers an answer at the end of his book. "There will be no utopia here. Israel will never be the ideal nation it set out to be... But what has evolved in this land is not to be dismissed. A series of great revolts has created here a truly free society that is alive and kicking and fascinating.... There was hope for peace, but there will be no peace here. Not soon. There was hope for quiet, but there will be no quiet here. Not in this generation.... So what we really have in this land is an ongoing adventure. An odyssey."

And I think this is where the lessons of the dual tragedies of Tisha B'Av and of Moshe can be most valuable in helping to build our understanding of modern Israel. We must see these tragedies not as symbols of heartache and loss, but rather recognize that they have passed. In both cases, we learn that tragedy is not the ultimate winner – history is. Moshe did not enter the land, but Joshua did and the Children of Israel became the builders of a great nation for centuries. On Tisha B'Av the Temple was destroyed, but from its absence sprung a Judaism stronger, more vibrant, more practical than one rooted in a culture of animal sacrifice and the priestly class. Tragedy is temporary; history endures, prevails even. And this is Shavit's point, I think, as well. Israel's situation might appear tragic, but it is not, for tragedy implies an end, a series of events that conclude in an irreversible state. Israel is instead on "an ongoing adventure", a journey with no end, history marching ever onward.

Of course, we mortals experience only a tiny slice of history for ourselves, and, as such, we hold an inevitable bias for the present. That is, we think that that what we know now is more permanent than it really is, that facts and forces that dominate today are more immovable than they are. Change across vast tracts of time is more difficult to conceive and impossible to predict, so let me leave you with a little mental trick I use to help grasp the grand sweep of history. If you think of history in terms of generations, rather than singular events, the machinations and tensions of daily life fade and are replaced by more expansive themes and the *gradual* pace of change becomes more apparent. As Shavit notes, there may not be peace in this generation, but that does not mean there will never be peace. Remember, the nation of Israel has existed for less than three full generations. Assessing its future only in terms of the present belies the power of history.

As we sit here today in the summer of 2014—the latest cease-fire failed and the voices of anti-Zionism reaching a feverish pitch—we are right to feel grave

concern for our people's homeland and worry that it lies precariously balanced between tragedies. But on this first Shabbat of consolation after Tisha B'Av, we must remind ourselves that history has a way of rendering tragedy moot. This doesn't mean that Israel (and we, for that matter) should be passive observers of history. We must actively and continuously propel Israel's mission forward, but must also realize that, in doing so, if this mission is not achieved in our lifetime, it is not tragedy, it is but a slice of history. Ultimately, in the understandably frightening space between the unachievable and total loss lies a land and a nation that will endure beyond what we can even imagine.

Shabbat Shalom.