

Tisha B'Av

A common misconception in Judaism is that, just like in any other religion or culture, we have holidays to commemorate past events. For example, we celebrate Pesach to remember what happened when we left Egypt. However, while remembering how we became free is a part of the Pesach holiday, it is not primary. In Judaism, the timeline is circular. What does this mean? Every year at different times of the year, we go through the same times. Imagine all the months of the Jewish calendar in a circle; now imagine going around the circle every year over and over again. Every year we experience the special energies that are associated with that month or time of year. For example, Pesach has the energy of redemption; this is why we have a tradition that we will be redeemed in the month of Nissan (the month where Pesach takes place). The mitsvot and halachot that are associated with each holiday simply help us ride the wave of energy associated with that time of the year. This means that the holidays are as relevant now as they were at any other time in our history.

So what is the special energy of the month of Av? The month of Av is the month that is engulfed by severe din (judgment from above). Many people mistakenly think that we are fasting and observing laws of mourning during the month of Av because of the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash. What they fail to understand, however, is that the reason why the Beit Hamikdash was destroyed during this time was because there is severe judgment during these days; ultimately, the reason why we have many restrictions culminating as a fast day is because at the time of judgment a person has to be extra careful with his or her actions. Perhaps the best proof for the severe judgment of this day is the many tragedies that took place on tisha beAv; the day when the spies came back with their bad report about the land of Israel (incidentally that night the men, not the women, who believed the spies all started to cry and Hashem said you cried for nothing so later on in history you will have something to cry about (Taanit 29b), 15,000 people died every year for 40 years while the Jewish people were in the wilderness as a punishment for the sin of the spies (Midrash Eichah Rabbah) all the people would go inside graves which themselves dug and each year 15,000 didn't come out, the destruction of both the first and second batei hamikdash, the expulsion of Jews from England in 1290 and Spain in 1492, the start of World War I (as a result of Germany declaring war on Russia on Tisha beav of 1914), and more. These aren't mere coincidences.

The special judgment on these days is so severe that the shulchan aruch says we have to avoid danger at all costs. This is why swimming, vacations, and taking adventure trips are prohibited. The severity of this judgment reaches its peak on the ninth of Av. This is why on this day we have the five prohibitions that we also have on Yom Kippur: no eating and drinking, no wearing leather shoes, no have marital relations and no anointing the body. All five of these prohibitions serve to allow a person to forget about the body and instead concentrate on the soul.

Not Wearing Leather Shoes

The deeper reason for not wearing leather shoes was covered in the Yom Kippur devar Torah. Please look back at that devar for a review.

Refraining from Eating and Drinking

Now let's look at the idea of refraining from eating and drinking. Perhaps an analogy will help us comprehend this rather complex idea. In the physical world when two things are not attached naturally together, something else is needed to hold them together. For example, if we want to attach a piece of wood to a piece of metal then we need glue or screws to make this connection. In the same sense, the body and the soul are two things which are not naturally connected due to the fact that they are mere opposites; the body is physical while the soul is not. Therefore, Hashem made it so that food would be the glue or the screw that keeps these two entities together. This is why when a person doesn't eat he or she feels faint; the soul is slowly leaving. If a person doesn't eat for a long time then this becomes permanent and becomes what we define as death. A person who is alive and a person who is dead have only one difference in the physical sense and that is that a person who is alive has functioning organs while a person who is dead doesn't. The soul is what keeps the organs working. The body after death is the same and the organs are the same – the only difference is that there is no soul to keep it working. In fact, many doctors have attested to the fact that, although when a person dies there is still the same body remaining, there is a certain glow which goes away and is rather noticeable. In short, food is what keeps the soul and the body together.

The Nefesh Hachaim (by Chaim Volozhn, the student of the Vilna Gaon) explains that this is the reason for the karbanot (sacrifices); the sacrifices serve as the food of the world. Just like when a person doesn't eat, his or her soul begins to leave and he or she feels faint, when the world does not have the Beit Hamikdash where the sacrifices (food) can be brought, the world becomes faint. The world becomes faint because there is no karbanot to keep the world's soul (Hashem) in it. This is one of the reasons why the world today is really detached from spirituality and anything beyond the physical, as opposed to how it was in past.

How do we fix this? We need a slight background to answer this. According to the deeper sources, the areas of the body that have more than one function are set up that way for a reason. They show that those functions must be related in some way. The mouth has three functions namely eating, speaking, and kissing. These three functions are related in the sense that they all produce a certain connection. Let's look at this more deeply. Eating as we said before connects the body to the soul. Speaking connects a person to another person and connects the ideas of the brain to the outside world. Lastly, kissing connects two persons, as well, on a more intimate level. This is why humans from all cultures kiss with their mouths. It is the area of connection and thence, the area that is sensitive to stimulation from another person.

Now let's look at the previous question: how do we fix this faint world without a Beit Hamikdash to bring sacrifices in? The answer is with another work of the mouth, namely tefila (prayer). As we said, the mouth has within it the power of connection, and the same way that food can keep Hashem's presence in the world, the other function of the mouth, tefila, can do so as well. In fact, the three functions of the mouth are also the three functions of the Beit Hamikdash (temple). Sacrifices in the temple relate to eating with the mouth, prayer in the Beit Hamikdash relate to talking with the mouth, and finally the two cherubim (images of the two golden childlike angels who embraced), which were inside the kodesh kadashim, represent kissing with the mouth.

Other Reasons for Fasting

One of the many reasons for fasting is because fasting, in a sense, is like bringing a korban. During the days of the Beit Hamikdash, the fats of the korbanot were consumed in the fire after they were slaughtered. Similarly, when a person fasts, his body burns fat in order to make up for the lack of nutrients.

When Bilaam wanted to curse the Jewish people, he said, “kalem,” which literally translates as “destroy them.” The commentaries explain that if one rearranges the letters backwards they spell “melech,” which means “king.” The commentaries continue to explain that the letters of the word melech stand for **moach**=brain, **lev**=heart, and **keved**=liver. They further explain that the liver, according to the deeper sources, always relates to physical lust, the heart represents emotional desires, and the brain represents the intellectually driven desires. With this background, we can understand the curse of Bilaam. He wanted the Jewish people to work according to the word “kalem,” which has the order **keved**=liver **lev**=heart and **moach**=brain. He wanted them to go first after their physical desires, see if it fits well with their emotional desires, and, only after that, use their intellect to see if it is right or wrong. However, for a person to be melech=king over his body he needs to first assess if what he is doing is right according to his intellect, then take into account his emotions and only after that, take pleasure in the physical enjoyment of what he or she is doing. When a person fasts, his body has limited resources for the different organs. The priority, however, is always given to the brain, then the heart and finally the liver. Fasting limits the amount of nutrients that the sensual and lust driven parts of the body get, and instead gives it to the brain. This way a person can finally do teshuva without the barrier of the physical needs of his body getting in the way.

Lashon Hara

Chazal say that the first Beit Hamikdash was destroyed because of the three cardinal sins: idolatry, murder and adultery. The sages also say that the second Beit Hamikdash was destroyed because of *sinat chinm* (baseless hatred), which culminated in speaking lashon hara. Simple logic allows us to conclude that speaking lashon hara is as bad as the three cardinal sins!

In fact, if we look in the Torah, we see that the reason why we went into galut (exile) was because of lashon hara. Originally, the snake spoke lashon hara about Hashem telling Chava that Hashem doesn't want her to eat from the tree because He is afraid she will become a God like Him. This led to the sin of eating from the tree, which caused the first exile of the world – the exile of Adam and Chava from Gan Eden. We see furthermore that the only reason why the brothers sold Yosef into slavery was because he spoke lashon hara about them. The selling of Yosef led to the migration of the Jewish people from Eretz Yisrael to Mitzrayim; this was the second major exile mentioned in the Torah. After leaving Mitzrayim, the Jewish people were supposed to go straight to Eretz Yisrael, but because the spies spoke lashon hara about Eretz Yisrael, they spent 40 years in the desert. Finally, the second Beit Hamikdash was destroyed as a result of baseless hatred, which manifested itself in people speaking lashon hara about one another. Now we can understand why the sages put the sin of lashon hara at par with the three cardinal sins; after all, it is because of this one sin that we are in galut (exile) today.

As mentioned previously, now that the Beit Hamikdash is no longer around, our tefilot take the place of the korbanot. There is an idea that the same tool that is used for bad can not simultaneously be used for good. With this in mind, we can perhaps understand why it is so important to refrain from speaking lashon hara (negative speech about our fellow Jew even if it is true). The same mouth that we use for speaking lashon hara can not be used for our tefilot. It is no wonder why many of our prayers go unanswered – our mouths aren't fit for prayer.

The Antidote for Lashon Hara

So how do we fix this problem? There is an idea that the only way to fight the yetser hara (evil inclination) is to use its own tactics against itself. How does the yetser hara fool a person into speaking lashon hara? It does this by magnifying the bad that a person sees in his fellow Jew to the point where his friend associates him with the one negative trait that he has. The only way to fight this is to do the exact opposite; a person has to magnify the good he sees in his fellow Jew. Just as a mother who is changing her baby's diaper doesn't think the baby is intrinsically disgusting, so too we shouldn't think that our fellow Jew is a bad person. Just like the dirty diaper, a temporary thing which can be changed, so too every person has only a temporary body, and once that is removed he or she has a soul which is a piece of Hakadosh Baruch Hu (God).

Rabbi Aryeh Levin mastered this trick to an extreme degree. One snowy day as he was walking through the streets of Yerushalayim, a Palestinian threw an orange at him. The orange hit him in the head and he fell down. Without missing a beat, Rav Aryeh turned to the man and said, "Thank you." Surprised, the man asked Rav Aryeh, "Why do you thank me?" Rav Aryeh replied, "You could have thrown a stone but you threw an orange."

On another occasion when Rav Aryeh was visiting the local Prison, he came upon a room where the Palestinian inmates were being held. Rav Aryeh asked the guard to increase the lighting in the room so that the inmates wouldn't have to be in the dark. A few moments later, one of the inmates started screaming in Rav Aryeh's direction saying, "That Zionist Jew! We should all spit in his face." Hearing this, the guard turned to Rav Aryeh and said sarcastically, "That's their payback for the kindness that you showed them." Again without missing a beat, Rav Aryeh turned to the guard and said, "Why do you criticize them? Look at how committed they are to their cause that they can't be bribed with extra lighting!"

To always see the good in people and try to magnify it as much as we can is the antidote to speaking Lashon hara. Rav Yehuda Levi m'Berditchev once saw a Jew eating on Tisha beAv. He turned to the Jew and said, "You must not know it's a fast day today!" The Jew turned to Rav Yehuda Levi and told him, "I am well aware that it's tisha beAv." Rav Yehuda Levi then responded, "Well then you must be very sick to be eating on a fast day, refua shelema! (you should feel better!)" The Jew again answered with a smug expression, "I am not sick at all, in fact I feel as good as ever." Now think – what would you do if you were in Rav Yehuda Levi's position? Rav Yehuda Levi looked up to the sky and screamed in a happy voice, "Hashem (God)! Look at how good your people are! This Jew had two chances to lie but his conscience didn't let him!" Again we see to what extent we have to go in order to look at the good in people and magnify it.

It is All for the Good!

The Gemara says that in the month of Av one must minimize his rejoicing. The Gemara does not say one must be sad, but rather it says one must *minimize* his simcha (happiness). This means that a person has an obligation to be happy all the days of the year. The Chazon Ish once said that for a person who knows how the world functions, there is no sadness for him. The question then becomes how can we be happy if our Beit Hamikdash stands in ruins?

Perhaps we can start to answer this question by looking at the meaning of the name of the month of Av. In Hebrew the word “av” means “father.” Chazal teach us that the Beit Hamikdash was destroyed in the month of Av to teach us that just like when a father punishes his child he does it for his or her own good, so too, Hashem brought all the tragedies in the month of Av for our own good. Although we can’t see it at the moment, ultimately we will know that it was all a chesed. The Chafetz Chaim said once that people who complain Hashem and His ways are not just, are comparable to a person who comes to shul for the first time and complains to the gabbai (person in charge of the synagogue) that he is being unfair in his distribution of the aliyas. The gabbai gives out aliyas based on who got an aliyah the previous week while taking into account many other things – such as who has a simcha coming up or who has a yeirtseit (memorial for the dead) coming up. Just like that person would be foolish to question the gabbai after his first day in shul, we would be foolish to question Hashem without knowing about our previous lifetimes and without knowing Hashem’s master plan. The only thing we know is that it is all for good, “gam zu letova”.

There is a story about Rabbi Elimelech miLezhinsk which demonstrates this point beautifully. Whenever the people had problems or tragedies, they asked Rabbi Elimelech to pray for them and instantly the problem would disappear. Following his death, the people had to withstand many tragedies. One of the people in the village was very puzzled with this phenomenon. He asked Hashem: I know that when a person passes away he has more power to influence what goes on in this world; how come Rabbi Elimelech is no longer praying for us? That night Rabbi Elimelech came to him in a dream and said: When I was alive I saw the problems and thought they were bad so I prayed to Hashem to take them away. But now that I am in shamayim I see that everything that happens is ultimately for the good. No bad ever happens, so I never pray!

Even the destruction of the temple was ultimately for our own good. The commentaries explain that one of the reasons why Moshe Rabbeinu wasn’t allowed to go to Eretz Yisrael was because of the sins that the Jewish people would do in the future. Everything that Moshe Rabbeinu did was permanent: he gave us the Torah (the Torah is forever), he made us into a nation (the nation of Israel is eternal), etc. Therefore, if he would have taken us into Eretz Yisrael and built the Beit Hamikdash, that too would have become permanent. This meant that if the people would have sinned then they themselves would have to be destroyed instead of the Beit Hamikdash!

The Talmud relates the following story that happened 50 years after the destruction of the second Beit Hamikdash:

Rabbi Gamliel, Rabbi Elazar Ben Azaria, Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Akiva were walking to Yerushalayim... At the Temple Mount they saw a fox leaving the ruins of the holy of holies, the innermost sanctuary of the temple. They cried but Rabbi Akiva laughed. They asked “Why are you laughing?”

He asked them “why are you crying?”

They answered, “The place about which it is written any alien (non-kohen) who approaches shall die, now has foxes walking on it! Shouldn’t we cry?”

He said to them, “That is why I am laughing....The prophecy (of the ultimate redemption) of Zecharia is contingent upon the prophecy (of destruction) of the prophet Uria. Regarding Uria it is written, “And, therefore, because of you, Zion shall be plowed like a field. In Zecharia it is written “The old men and women will return and sit on the streets of Yerushalayim.....Now that the prophecy of Uria has been fulfilled, we know that the prophecy of Zecharia will also be realized...”

*They said to him, “Akiva, you have comforted us! Akiva you have comforted us!
(translation from: Gateway to Judaism by Rabbi Mordechai Becher)*

Rabbi Akiva understood that destruction was necessary for the final redemption and so he was able to laugh even amidst the darkness. That is the kind of attitude we should all strive for as well.

Everything is for good and even the tragedies of the month of Av are ultimately for good. This is why we have a tradition that tells us that the Moshiach will be born on Tisha beAv! This is also why the book of lamentations 1:15, 2:7 calls Tisha Beav a “moed” (holiday)!

Why the Ninth and not the Tenth?

The Gemara brings down an opinion which says that we should fast on the tenth of Av instead of the ninth because that is when most of the Beit Hamikdash was burned. However, the halacha goes according to the opinion that we fast on the ninth because that is when the Beit Hamikdash was set on fire. The question is why did the opinion to fast on the ninth ultimately win if the Beit Hamikdash was really destroyed on the tenth? The answer is that the sins of the Jewish people reached a maximum on the ninth of Av. That is when the judgment was most severe. However, with the burning of each of the stones of the Beit Hamikdash, came atonement for the sins of the Jewish people. Therefore, the people’s sins on the tenth were mostly atoned for and therefore we fast on the ninth when our sins were at a maximum. In fact we see that some of the restrictions such as sitting on a bench or chair are no longer applicable after midday on the ninth. This fits in with our idea because the Beit Hamikdash was set on fire in the afternoon! Once the Beit Hamikdash was burning, it took away from our sins and so we take away from the restrictions associated with the day.

One proof for this is that when the Romans came to destroy the Beit Hamikdash they dragged the cherubim (a statue of two angels in the kodesh kadashim who faced each other when Hashem was happy with the Jewish people and who faced away from each other when Hashem was not happy with the Jewish people), which were embraced in an intimate manner, in the streets and made fun of the Jewish people for having such “profanity” in their holy temple. The question is – why were they embraced at a time when Hashem was so mad at the Jewish people that he decided to allow the temple to be destroyed? The answer is that as the Romans were defiling and destroying the temple, the Jewish people’s sins were being atoned for, and as a result, the cherubim faced each other. Therefore, we see clearly that even the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash was for own good!

It must be noted that the first Beit Hamikdash was defiled on the 7th, 8th and 9th and burnt on the 10th.

Halachot

On Tisha beAv, one is not allowed to eat, to drink, have relations, anoint the body, or wear leather shoes. Working is forbidden, and learning Torah is also forbidden on Tisha beAv since it brings joy to a person to delve into it. However, sections of impending doom in the book of Yirmiyahu, the book of Iyov, Midrash Eichah, third chapter of Moed Katan, and stories of the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash in the fifth chapter of tractate Gittin and Talmud Yerushalmi are allowed to be studied. Even regarding these permitted passages, one is not allowed to delve into them because analyzing the beautiful devar Torahs contained in them gladdens the heart. One should also try to vary his sleeping habits ie. sleep without a pillow or on the floor. Some have a custom to place a stone under their pillows. In the birkot hashachar the sefardim do not say the bracha sheasah li kol sarki. One should not wear fine clothing on Tisha Beav. One may not rinse his mouth on Tisha Beav. One should not do anything that will distract him from the spirit of the day. Even though driving is permitted one should not engage in work which distracts one from feeling a sense of mourning. One the morning of Tisha Beav men should put on tefilin at home say the shema and go to shul without tefilin. They should put the tefilin on again for mincha.

From the night of the ninth until noontime on the tenth, we don't sit on a chair or a bench. After the fast on the night of the tenth, Sefardim are allowed to bathe, shave, and get a haircut (the Arizal says it is best to get a haircut before midday on Friday and it is best to wait till Friday to get the haircut); however they are not allowed to eat meat, drink wine, or listen to music until the eleventh of Av. Ashkenzim aren't allowed to do any of those things until midday of the tenth of Av, after that they can even partake of meat and wine.

Rabbi Ben Tziyon Abba Shaul explains that the reason why eating meat and drinking wine is still forbidden throughout the tenth for Sefardim is because the entire reason for not having meat and wine has nothing to do with mourning. In fact, we know that mourners have meat and drink wine. The reason why eating meat and drinking wine is forbidden is because in the times of the Beit Hamikdash, we consumed of the meat that was brought as a Korban and poured the wine on the mizbeach. We refrain from doing this to remind us that the Beit Hamikdash was destroyed and we are unable to do that now. The reason why it is forbidden on the tenth is that the korbanot which would have been brought on the ninth would only be consumed on the tenth and so we refrain from partaking of them until the tenth. This also fits in with the previous idea of why we fast on the ninth and not the tenth.

By: Navid Danesh

If you are interested in receiving more of these devar Torah through email please contact Navid Danesh at ndanesh100@yahoo.com.