

TISHAH B'AV

The Jewish Way of Crying

According to the conventional wisdom, time heals all wounds. The pain passes, the memory fades, and we go on with our lives. But two thousand years have passed since the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, and the mourning has not abated. Every year on the Ninth of Av, we remember and weep for our lost world. In fact, the Book of Lamentations from which we read tells the story of the destruction of the First Temple, five hundred years farther back into the swirling mists of antiquity.

What is the peculiar power of this national mourning that resists the erosions of time? And what is its purpose? Early Jewish sources report that similar questions were posed to the Prophet Jeremiah:

A Greek philosopher visited Jerusalem shortly after the destruction of the First Temple. As he walked among the heaps of charred rubble, he heard the sounds of weeping from the direction of the hill which dominated the ruined city. A man dressed in sackcloth was sitting on a stone and looking up at the devastated Temple, his body convulsed by wracking sobs, his radiant face contorted and streaked with tears.

"Are you the famous Jeremiah?" asked the philosopher.

The crying man looked at the Greek. "I am," he said.

"If you are indeed a sage and a prophet," said the philosopher, "why are you crying over sticks and stones? And besides, what is the sense of crying for something that is already over and done with?"

"Listen," said Jeremiah, "do you have difficult philosophical problems which you were unable to resolve?"

"Indeed I do," said the philosopher.

"Tell me what they are."

The philosopher posed all his questions, and Jeremiah answered each and every one to his complete satisfaction.

"All the wisdom with which I answered your questions," Jeremiah concluded, "I drew from those 'sticks and stones' you so derided."

"Truly amazing!" said the philosopher. "And how about my second question? What was the point of crying over the past?"

"That is something I cannot reveal to you," said Jeremiah.

The commentators explain that Jeremiah declined to respond to the second question because the Greek philosopher would not have

understood the answer. It would have required a particularly Jewish perspective, a frame of mind diametrically opposed to the Greek mindset.

What was the answer? Let us look into Jeremiah's own words as he describes his own awful suffering in *Lamentations*: "I am the man who experienced pain through the rod of His wrath. It was me that He led off into a darkness without light. Only me did He strike back and forth with His hand all though the day . . ." Yet suddenly, in the midst of his long litany of tribulation, a note of hope suddenly bursts through. "Yet this remains in my heart, and therefore, I can hope. That Hashem's kindnesses they are not ended, that His mercies are not eliminated. They are renewed every morning, how great is Your faithfulness!" Hashem's kindness has not stopped, it has only gone into concealment.

Even in the depths of despair, Jeremiah grasps at the slender but inextinguishable ray of hope. This terrible calamity that had befallen the Jewish people did not mean His kindnesses had come to an end, that the future was forever sealed. The road back might be long and difficult, but it was open and unobstructed.

Crying over the past connects us to what we have lost and makes it possible to regain it in the future. It reaffirms the value of our special relationship with our Creator and reassures us that we will be able to repair it. But all this is predicated on a profound and transcendent faith in Hashem, far beyond the conception of even the great Greek philosophers.

When the Egyptian princess found the infant Moses crying in the bulrushes at the riverside, she said, "This must be a Jewish child!" But the question arises: During that particular time, the decree of drowning had been extended to include all male infants in Egypt, Jewish or not. How then did she know the child was Jewish? A sage of the previous generation explains homiletically that she identified him by the sound of his crying. Jewish crying is never a capitulation to despair. It is a blend of sorrow and hope.

This coming week, when we absorb the Tishah b'Av spirit of mourning for the destroyed Temples, when we deny ourselves food and drink, when we sit on the ground and read about what we had and what we lost, when we grieve for our fallen ancestors, let us remember that we are not meant to shed tears of despair. Rather, our tears are meant to connect us to the glorious past and keep it alive in our hearts. They are meant to serve as important steps on the long road of recovery. Let us offer up our tears to the Creator in a spirit of hope and prayer for our speedy and complete redemption.