

TISHAH B'AV

Creative Mourning

The embers were still smoldering. The rubble that had once been the magnificent Holy Temple in Jerusalem still bore the marks of the Roman battering rams and sledgehammers. The echoes of the war cries and the screams of the innocent still hung in the tortured air. It was a time of excruciating tragedy, of abysmal despair. And at this very time, the Sages declared, “Whoever mourns for the destruction of Jerusalem will merit seeing it rebuilt!”

What an amazing statement! How can the reward for a simple act of mourning be so very great? Moreover, hasn't history brought this assurance of the Sages into question? Two thousand years have passed since the destruction of Jerusalem. Countless generations have shed bitter tears over our terrible national loss, yet none of them has witnessed the rebuilding of Jerusalem. What about the promise of the Sages?

Let us consider the traditional practices the Sages prescribed for the seven-day Shiva period of mourning for a close relative. The mourners sit on low stools as a steady stream of people comes by to console them. What is the point of this custom? Why force mourners to brood over their loss and stew in their misery for seven days? Wouldn't it be better to distract them with milder, gentler thoughts?

The Sages, however, considered it best for the mourner to go through the seven-day consolation rite of the Shiva. Every close relationship is at its root a bonding of two souls that transcends the physical and functions on a purely spiritual level. In fact, the two souls become so attached to each other that separation leaves a gaping void. This exceedingly painful void expresses itself in the feeling called grief. We do not truly grieve for the departed soul, which is at peace, but for ourselves, our pain, the void in our souls. When we console the mourners during the Shiva period we reach out to them in friendship and compassion, and our souls connect with theirs in a deepened bond which somewhat alleviates the void left by their bereavement.

The Holy Temple in Jerusalem was far more than a magnificent edifice, which it certainly was. It was the symbol and catalyst and conduit of the profound bond between the Jewish people and Hashem. It was more a spiritual concept than a physical structure. The destruction of the Temple is a spiritual loss rather than an architectural loss. We no longer have this sublime point of contact with Hashem, and

this has left us with an aching void in our hearts. But when we grieve for the destruction and turn to Hashem for solace, the act of mourning itself creates a new and deepened bond with Hashem, bringing us ever closer to Him. And thus, when we grieve for Jerusalem, we rebuild its essence in our hearts.

A man once went to pay a Shiva call on a close friend whose wife had passed away. In his mind, he reviewed what he would say to his friend by way of consolation for his terrible loss. He considered which mutual memories to evoke and which anecdotes to relate in order to alleviate his friend's pain and grief.

When he came through the door and saw his friend sitting on a low stool, his shirt ripped in mourning, the man was overcome with emotion. He sat down on one of the chairs near his friend, but he could not bring himself to say a single word.

After many long minutes of sitting together in pained silence, the man rose, mumbled the traditional words of consolation and left.

Some time later, the man approached his friend.

"I want to apologize," he said.

"Whatever for?"

"For being quite useless to you during your time of need," said the man. "I had so many things I had prepared to say to you, but when it came right down to it, I couldn't say a word."

The man's friend smiled. "On the contrary. Your emotional silence meant more to me than any of the other visits I received."

In our own lives, we have but a passing awareness of our national loss, of the deprivations of being in exile. Certainly in our own affluent, enlightened times we do not feel the oppression of exile that other generations have experienced. But the deprivations are nonetheless real. We are ensnared by materialistic values, deprived of the fountainhead of spirituality that the Temple represented. We are distant from Hashem. But on Tishah b'Av, when we withdraw from other pursuits and focus completely on the destruction of the Temple, we have the opportunity to recreate a microcosm of that spiritual marvel in our very own hearts.