



Temple Israel
An Engaging, Diverse Jewish Community
Portsmouth, New Hampshire

What to Make of *Tisha b'Av*?

Tisha b'Av begins this year on the evening of Wednesday July 29, and ends on Thursday night, July 30. It is traditionally observed as a fast day. For many Jews, this day (the ninth day of the month of Av) may be seen as an unwelcome interlude in the midst of summer pleasures and respite. As this summer, in particular, presents us with unusual challenges and stresses, the idea of connecting with collective grief may also seem unappealing. For many it might seem difficult to connect with a day designed to immerse us in a collective experience of mourning and grief – one that spans all of Jewish history – across time and space alike, just as we are negotiating our own very immediate fears and losses. On *Tisha b'Av* we mourn the destruction of two temples of which we have no personal memory and for most Jews, no true desire to rebuild. We recall other Jewish tragedies that have occurred on this date, such as the expulsion from England in 1290 and the expulsion from Spain in 1492. We remember also, the mass deportation of Jews from the Warsaw ghetto to Treblinka which began on the eve of *Tisha b'Av*. On this day we enter into a short period of mourning for events that span nearly 2500 years of persecution, exile, expulsion, and slaughter. Time and space are collapsed as we connect with our ancestors. Their tragedies are our tragedies

For post-modern Jews, *Tisha b'Av* is often characterized as an observance that reinforces a collective identity of victimization. For many—if not most—American Jews, *Tisha b'Av* has been rejected because of its identification with perpetual victimhood. Nevertheless, history provides a framework for understanding the present moment and establishing the vision we strive for. The arc of Jewish history tells a story that has implications for every human being. It reveals essential information for the healing of this fractured world, still seething with baseless hatred and violence. Jewish history tells the story of a people labeled as ‘other’ and persecuted on this basis. While persecution is not unique to Jewish history, its consistency throughout the western world and across multiple historic periods provides us with a powerful lens for viewing certain aspects of human nature.



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What relevance does *Tisha b'Av* hold for us today? It demonstrates and confirms the dangers of demonizing others. Recent Jewish history attests to the truly horrific implications of such attitudes.

Current world events reveal how easy is the tendency to demonize the 'other.' Tragically, we have too many current examples within our own communities and on the world stage. It is our responsibility to not only look outward, but to look inward at how we may contribute to this malady. How do we think about those who are different from ourselves? How do we generalize about African Americans, Palestinians, Muslims, Jews of different denominations and Jews of no religion?

Traditional Jewish teachings about *Tisha b'Av* assert that while we have endured terrible tragedies, we also share in the responsibility for exiling God's presence from the world. The Talmud teaches that the Second Temple was destroyed due to *sinat chinam*- baseless hatred within the Jewish community. While Jewish tradition has taught that the destruction and exile were acts of Divine retribution, for most people today, the concept that God metes out reward and punishment for our actions no longer resonates. Yet there is an important truth that lies within this teaching. Baseless hatred within a community destroys relationships and eventually causes the destruction of the community itself. In this sense, the Divine Presence is exiled.

Many Jews and others often ask the question: where was God during the Holocaust? To that question one might answer: God was in the hearts of the rescuers; those who did not allow the propaganda of their time and the pressure of external authority to expel God from their hearts. Dr. Eva Fogelman, in her book *Conscience and Courage*, describes the qualities of those who resisted Nazi propaganda and coercion and risked their lives to rescue Jews. She interviewed hundreds of rescuers and describes their motivations. She concludes that the majority possessed a strong sense of morality and learned from an early age to think for themselves and tolerate, if not embrace, those considered different from themselves.



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Maintaining an awareness of the divine spark that resides within everyone must be an essential goal for any sacred community, for our families, and for our systems of education. Our tradition teaches that every human being is created *b'tzelem Elohim*- in the image of God. Let us reconsider *Tisha b'Av* as an opportunity to build something new from the ashes of the past- a world wherein we consciously acknowledge our shadow sides, embrace our common humanity, and affirm the value of our diversity.

To that end I propose that we, as a community of all ages, engage in a special *Tisha b'Av* ritual this year. Beginning now, in the days leading up to *Tisha b'Av*, let us create a public community art installation in our courtyard at the site of the Hands of Hope sculpture. Let each of us, on our own time, bring a stone, as one would bring a stone to mark a visit to a grave, and place it, or stack it, somewhere near the sculpture's foundation. Over these days the monument will grow as a collective expression of grief over the condition of our world.

On *Tisha b'Av* itself, I will sit in front of the sculpture, and chant Eichah/Lamentations by candlelight. The service will be livestreamed. Up to twenty members of the community may join me in the courtyard. In keeping with the traditions of this observance, please consider sitting on the ground (bring a blanket) if you are able, or otherwise, bring a chair. A candle, flashlight or cell phone will also be useful to follow the service. Please respect the usual safety protocols: mask-wearing and physical distancing. Reservations can be made through the temple office, at the link provided in the email above.

After *Tisha b'Av*, I invite you all to stop by the courtyard on your own time and take home a stone from the sculpture or from the bucket of stones at the site. Decorate the stone with a word or pattern that expresses your hopes for our world and then bring it back to the sculpture in the courtyard, placing it near the Hands of Hope. In this way, we might create a living community monument to inspire and support us in the journey.

Rabba Kaya Stern-Kaufman