Post-Shoah relevance of Tisha b'Av

Mordechai Beck discusses the special relationship between man and God on the saddest day in the Jewish calendar

If, as Oscar Wilde is reputed to have observed, "experience is the name we give to our failures," then Tisha b'Av is the Jewish experience writ large.

To the verse in Ecclesiastes, "A time to weep," Rashi adds: "on Tisha b'Av." Although he had a wide range of possibilities — he lived in Christian Europe at the time of the Crusades — Rashi saw in this day the quintessential nature of the Jewish experience. When Jews cry, it is for the destroyed Temple, for an unredeemed world.

Yet why, it may be asked, does the great sage not address here the issue of private loss — of parents, children, a loved one? Why does he prefer to focus on a loss which is abstract, deep in history, distant? Is there no connection between public and private mourning?

Perhaps Rashi's view is formed by his sagacious forebears, and in contrast to popular sentiment. To mourn in the abstract is initially more complex than to weep for someone we have known; but, paradoxically, such mourning is far more durable.

The loss of kith and kin fades as all those who knew them are themselves lost to the ravages of time. But the loss of a symbol transcends generations.

Were something similar to the destruction of the Temple to occur today — and certain parallels come to mind immediately — the response would be obvious. There would be huge media coverage of the dying and the dead, graphic film of savage destruction, an endless display of human misery on television and in the newspapers.

The audiences would remain impotent, adding their silence to the anguish of the victims. Yet, as with much media coverage, its "shelf life" is limited — a few weeks, a few days, or even hours, until another disaster occurs and the focus switches elsewhere.

By contrast, the rabbis did not use Tisha b'Av primarily to recall horrors. A number of anecdotes do appear in the Talmud — for

A message for all ages: reciting dirges and the Book of Lamentations at the Kotel on the Fast of Av

exactly what they were doing. They knew how to select events.

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"The sages understood that you could not mourn day in and day out. The Karaites donned sackcloth and ashes to bewail the ruins of the Temple. Their act was written out of Rabbinic Judaism, anathemised."

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are included, insofar as they fit the schema of the day.

"Elsewhere, events are telescoped, and are then commemorated on the same date. These are rabbinic strategies for remembering events, as though they recur throughout history. It is a kind of ecology of memory."

But this model breaks down. In the past two centuries, Jews have reacted differently to disaster.

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were easy prey to outside forces? And what was the answer: social revolution, emigration, Zionism? Were these ideological responses only to catastrophes?"

These questions reflect a critical turning-point in modern Jewish consciousness. They come to a head in responses to the Holocaust, which many see as eclipsing even the destruction of the Temple.

Says Roskies: "Even Elie Wiesel's first book, 'Night,' ends with a call for revenge — Jews go out in search of Nazis! Yet look what happens.

"François Mauriac compares Wiesel to Jesus, because he has come from the Kingdom of the Dead, he is a witness. Christian theology turns the Shoah into a mystery. Once it is appropriated by another audience — here, a Christian French one — it loses its specifically Jewish dimension."

This interpretation of events also influences the Jewish world. "We make video testaments by old survivors, but they are no substitute for a new liturgy," Roskies asserts.

"The March of the Living on European soil I call the stations of the cross. Young, sensitive schoolchildren are sent to these stations — Maidanek, Auschwitz — and are then taken to the *Kotel* [Western Wall]. After the suffering comes the resurrection. The Shoah has been turned into something outside history, totally existential."

Yet the alternative, of keeping silent, is also no solution. "I have not yet said this in print," confides Roskies, "but I think it is true that the Holocaust-deniers among us are to be found in the strictly Orthodox community.

"Their return to pre-Holocaust styles of dress, their outward behaviour, suggests that the Holocaust did not really affect us, or our relationship to God."

An echo of Roskies's concern is hinted at in a story related in the Mishnah (Nazir 5:4). A group of diaspora nazirites reaches Jerusalem in order to make their obligatory sacrifice at the end of their period of vows. When they reach Jerusalem, they discover

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By contrast, the rabbis did not use Tisha b'Av primarily to recall horrors. A number of anecdotes do appear in the Talmud — for example, in tractate Gittin, which describes the parlous condition of the inhabitants of Jerusalem in the years of siege leading to the destruction. But descriptions of war and pillage are far more numerous in the apocryphal books of the Maccabees and in Josephus's "The Jewish Wars."

Similarly, when the rabbis sought out an appropriate text for the day, they did not take a contemporary account of the events, but rather the haunting Book of Lamentations, a poetic version of what the prophet Jeremiah witnessed at the destruction of the First Temple, many centuries before the rabbis flourished.

Poetry is a sop against grief. It gives us distance from that which would otherwise be overwhelming. The inspired muse outlasts transitory human pain.

According to Professor David Roskies, of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, this approach was intentional. "I am convinced," he asserts, "that the rabbis knew exactly what they were doing. They knew how to select events.

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Roskies's books — "Against the Apocalypse," "The Literature of Destruction" and, latterly, "A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling" — confront the question of what is remembered and what is not, what becomes canonised and what is neglected or forgotten.

He told me: "The normative system of recording and coding events remained in place until the 19th century. To have lasted over such a long time, and through so many dispersions, is an extraordinary feat.

"Moreover, the repertory of the historical events was expanded very little. If you look at the additions to the *kinnot* [dirges] for Tisha b'Av, only those referring to the burning of the Talmud in Paris in the 13th century, to the Crusades, and to the massacre at LeBois, are included, insofar as they fit the schema of the day.

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"The first thing the *haskalah* [Enlightenment] movement did," Roskies observes, "was to challenge the theology of Jewish suffering — that sin and retribution are the driving forces of Jewish history.

"But then they were confronted with the need to find an alternative: if suffering were not from God, from where was it? They began to examine the immediate historical context, and to document each event on its own terms.

"Why in 1871, for example, was there a pogrom in Odessa? What could possibly have prompted the non-Jews to act as they did? Things were going so well; Odessa was the Eldorado of the south.

"What was the explanation? Was it because Jews were isolated, or because they were so steeped in medievalism that they

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Although one sage, Nachum the Mede, excuses their vows, the majority opinion declares that the vows are still binding. How is this possible, when it is flagrantly clear that the nazirites are unable to expedite their sacrifice without the Temple?

It is similarly said of the 18th-century Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, of Berdichev, that every time he wrote a marriage contract, he would declare that the wedding would take place in the restored Jerusalem. But if, by the time of the wedding day, the Messiah had not arrived, it would take place in Berdichev.

Thus, too, the Mishnah. The rabbis are not being perverse; rather, their decision may be read as a plea to God: restore our Temple, otherwise how will these pious nazirites be able to fulfil the vows they made to You?

Without bringing God into our historical equations, memory has little meaning. Tisha b'Av teaches us that, just as we have obligations to God, so does God have obligations to us.