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# The First Tisha B'Av Since October 7

*Jewish history saw the transition from the Covenant of Fate to the Covenant of Destiny, and back again*



IN TISHA B'AV in 1934, the Labor Zionist youth movement named HaNaor HaOved, affiliated with Israel's Histadrut (Workers' Union), went on a camping trip, much to the chagrin of Berl Katznelson, one of the Histadrut's founding leaders. The following day, on the tenth of Av—when Jewish tradition stipulates we commemorate the final embers of the fire that burned the Temple—the Hebrew newspaper *Davar*, of which he was the founding editor, contained his impassioned denunciation of the movement's flouting of the day's significance in Jewish memory.

It is inconceivable that someone did this deliberately. It is inconceivable that the pioneering youth counselors, who educate toward

“a life of fulfillment”—that is to say, the efforts of freedom from exile and of repairing the lesions and defects in us due to the destruction—it is inconceivable that they did this while being aware of what they were doing.

After lamenting the apparent ignorance of the Jewish youth leaders to schedule such a recreational activity on a day devoted to remembrance, Katznelson offered a clarifying declaration about the relationship between Jewish memory and the secular workers’ revolution to which he was committed.

What is the value and what is the product of a freedom movement that does not have roots, and forgets? ... The movement of resurrection would be unable to do anything at present if the people of Israel did not keep in their heart the stiff-necked holiness of the memory of the destruction. If it did not dedicate to its memory and its sense and its behavior the life of the day of the destruction from all other days? This is the strength of the consolidated and fertilized essential symbol of the history of a people. If Israel did not know how to mourn for generations the destruction on a memorial day, all the severity of the feeling for those who died before it, of those who have just lost their freedom and their country, we would not have had Hess and Pinsker, Herzl and Nordau, Sirkin and Borochoy, A.D. Gordon and Y.J. Brenner, and Yehuda Halevi could not have created “Zion, Will You Not Ask?” and Bialik would not have written “The Scroll of Fire.”

The list of thinkers at the end is notably secular (all except the one who happened to have lived nearly a millennium earlier). Katznelson’s declaration reflects, beautifully and forcefully, the role of Tisha B’Av in the history of Zionist consciousness and the intensity of

mourning that accompanied Israel throughout the years of exile.

But the nature of the day underwent a huge change with the establishment of the state and an even greater change after the Six-Day War. The feeling of victory seemed to displace the many centuries of destruction and mourning, generating the sense that we were living in messianic times in which the narrative of Jewish history would finally shift from one of tribulation to one of triumph.

Immediately after the liberation of Jerusalem in June 1967, a group of religious scholars gathered in Jerusalem under the name The Movement for the Judaism of the Torah, with the aim of addressing questions about the renewal of halakhah (Jewish law) in the State of Israel today. One of the first topics discussed in their group was the Tisha B'Av liturgy — its description of Jerusalem as a “mournful, ruined, wretched, and desolate city” — and its apparent obsolescence in this moment of redemption. The members of the movement honestly and thoroughly claimed that this is now a false prayer: Far from wretched and desolate, Jerusalem is being rebuilt. They formulated a new prayer, based on “consolation,” the main purpose of which was to change the prayer from the present tense to the past (“the city that was destroyed”).

Then came the Yom Kippur War, when Israel’s near-defeat had a sobering effect on the messianic fervor. In response, the country split into two distinct directions. One side pulled Israel east, toward traditionalist and religious nationalism. The other pulled Israel west, toward secular liberalism. These opposing winds kept blowing, eventually forming the storm of judicial reform, until October 6, 50 years to the day after the start of the Yom Kippur War — when the split began.

The eastern and western pulls weren’t merely figurative but literal. Those imbued with the eastern spirit excitedly gravitated toward the Temple Mount, the Cave of the Patriarchs, Joseph’s Tomb — places

associated with the roots of the Jewish national story in the Bible, in the east. The Western intellectuals chose to turn a cold and alienated shoulder to exactly these places. To them, these sacred sites were symbols of the Jewish occupation and control of the Palestinian people.

But there was something these spirits had in common: an undeniable feeling that the exile had ended. In the language of Jewish thought, from the secularists of Labor Zionism to the religious writings of Joseph B. Soloveitchik, this paradigmatic change was defined as the transition from a “Covenant of Fate” to a “Covenant of Destiny.”

The Covenant of Fate expressed the existence of the Jewish people as a persecuted minority in the lands of the Diaspora, beholden to the choices and external powers around them. It was a mode of survival built on a common memory of powerlessness.

The Covenant of Destiny was configured around the opposite: power and agency, the will to express the Jewish experience through a national mission, unencumbered by external powers, seeking to realize its special role in history as a member in the family of nations, to be an *am segula*, a term often translated as a “treasured nation,” but more accurately, a “dignified one.”



For many generations in the Diaspora, Tisha B’Av served as the spiritual center of the Covenant of Fate. It represented, in the words of the mishnah, the many calamities that had befallen the Jews as a part of this covenant, beginning with the seed of exile: “On the Ninth of Av it was decreed upon our ancestors that they would all die in the wilderness and not enter Eretz Yisrael” (Mishnah Ta’anit 4:6).

But ever since the arrival of the eastern and western winds, even Tisha B’Av has been marked in terms of the Covenant of Destiny.

Fewer tears over the days of destruction and more sweat over building the character of the state. For the past several decades in Israel, Tisha B'Av has been a day of reflection on where we are going as a nation, with discussion circles and panels held both in the places of the east (such as the Old City) and the west (such as Rabin Square).

On the most recent Tisha B'Av—last year, during the height of the anti-coalition protests—I sat on one such panel with journalist Gal Gabai, my partner in 929, the Israeli Tanakh project that seeks to bring the Book of Books to the heart of every Israeli. The event was held in the City of David, a heritage site located in the heart of a Palestinian neighborhood in East Jerusalem, at the foot of the Temple Mount and the Western Wall. Needless to say, this is a place with an eastern spirit, and most of the thousands of attendees that night were Jews who identified with that powerful wind and came to this place precisely on the night of Tisha B'Av to say to their God in heaven: “We returned to Zion, we returned to build Jerusalem.”

For Gal Gabai, entering this site was fraught. Her spirit is of the west, which directed her gaze toward the Palestinian neighbors watching beyond the walls, from the streets of Silwan, the Arab neighborhood that surrounds this ancient site. Still, she wanted to be there, bound as we all are by the Covenant of Destiny, to meet with her eastern-spirited brethren, to connect with them in truth on this powerful day of remembrance, a genuine encounter to protect against the kind of baseless hatred our sages say led to the Temple's destruction on that very spot nearly two millennia ago.

At that event I felt with full force that we, Israeli society, find ourselves in an exhilarating and special phase of challenge and revival, a window of historical time that invites us back into our real space to become an independent nation that realizes itself here. Even with so many problems to be solved, so many realities to be changed, so many bumps to be smoothed out along the road—I thought, *Who can cry*

*on our Tisha B'Av as the generations before us cried? What would my grandparents who were murdered in the Holocaust give to walk down the cobbled steps of the City of David?* In that period of great domestic turmoil, I still felt wrapped in the Covenant of Destiny.

And Gal felt the same way. In our conversation there was no room at all for the Covenant of Fate. Like the old Tisha B'Av liturgy, it felt obsolete in the light of a new covenant between ourselves and between us and God, the Covenant of Destiny that asks something deep from us: to thrive rather than survive. We didn't even think to talk about pogroms or of our heritage of victimhood. We are the fruits of the tree planted and rooted in the secure Land of Israel, not the Diaspora wanderings. What mattered in that conversation was not what we had experienced at the hands of other peoples but what the work of our own hands can give to the world. We sat from a place of home, not of refuge—a beacon, rather than an island. It was the feeling of a dark day turned lighter.

Then, only two months later, we woke up on the morning of a different holiday, Simchat Torah, this one turned from light to dark.

In an instant, the post-exilic winds, both east and west, stopped. There we were, thrown from the messianic age back into the feeling of exile, standing still with trembling hearts—seemingly from the Covenant of Destiny back to the Covenant of Fate.



Like the post-exilic return to the east, this return to the Covenant of Fate and its stories of the Jewish past was more than a feeling. It was literal. My first personal encounter with the October 7 tragedy was with Rotem Matias, the 16-year-old son of Shahar and Shlomi Matias, grandson of Professor Ilan Troen, who wrote of his loss in these pages. Rotem survived the attack on his family home in Holit

because his mother, Shahar, shielded him with her body. The bullet that killed her pierced him as well, and she lay on top of him for hours as life left her.

Standing in his grandparents' home, Ilan pointed to a picture on the wall: "That's my mother," he said. In 1919, her parents were murdered in their home when a yearslong series of attacks known as the Petliura Pogroms came to her village in Druzhne, Ukraine. She survived the attacks only because Ilan's grandmother pushed her under the bed when the marauders entered the house. Ilan's mother left her village for another Diaspora community: Boston. There, she rejuvenated the family tree and named her son after his heroic grandmother. And now, more than 100 years later, her great-great-granddaughter was murdered in nearly exactly the same way, in the act of saving her own child in her home.

Telling me this story, Ilan stopped abruptly. Restraining himself, he said to me: "But that was there, and now it's happening here."

Suddenly, I was reminded of something Joe Biden said Golda Meir had told him many years ago: "We Israelis have a secret weapon," she said. "We have nowhere else to go."

When the exile of Europe became unbearable, hundreds of thousands of Jews migrated to a new exile in the Americas. This is what the Jewish people have always done. Exile after exile, wandering and more wandering. But as the Torah tells us of exile:

[You] will flee from them by many roads; and you shall become a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth...even among those nations you shall find no peace, nor shall your foot find a place to rest. God will give you there an anguished heart and eyes that pine and a despondent spirit. The life you face shall be precarious; you shall be in terror, night and day, with no assurance of survival (Deuteronomy 28:64–67).

So many times it was our dream to find rest and inheritance in other lands, but the Torah was clear about this futility.

The pain of this Tisha B'Av comes not only from the horrific events of October 7, but from the burden of our former Covenant of Fate. Here in Israel, our first non-Diaspora destination, the last stop on our exilic journey, the catastrophe of Black Shabbat forced us from the Covenant of Destiny—the clash of the east and west winds—back into the Covenant of Fate.

The historic lesson of this moment is the persistence of the Covenant of Fate: the hostages and their families, the refugees from the north, the injured and fallen from the war.

This year, our Tisha B'Av is more similar to those marked by the generations that came before us, those whose memories Berl Katznelson knew were so precious. From the arguments about our future we shifted to the tremblings of our past. Perhaps with this we feel a bit closer to those who came before us and to the covenant they carried.

Now we carry both covenants, and this year, as in the past, we will get up from the ground, daven mincha, and march to the remnant of our temple, the Western Wall, and stand there to end the fast with a promise and hope that we will do everything in our power to be worthy of this house. \*