

The Tragedy of Tisha B'av and the Redemption of Pesach

Jewish tradition recognizes that God makes His voice heard in many different ways. One of them is by way of the connection between events and the calendar, the link between a particular date and a divine message associated with it on a recurring basis.

The calendar makes clear that history isn't haphazard. It expresses divine order. It indicates God's involvement in the affairs of mankind. It demonstrates the *seder* of heavenly curse or blessing. Two vivid examples stand out as prime illustrations: One speaks in the language of punishment and retribution, the other via the loving tone of reward and redemption.

The first is the tragic day of the ninth of Av, the fast of Tisha B'Av. The second is the 15th of Nissan, the day commemorating our liberation from the slavery of Egypt, celebrated ever since as the festival of Passover.

The ninth day of the month of Av has, for millennia, been identified with the most terrible tragedies of Jewish history. It is almost beyond belief — and certainly far beyond statistical probability — that one and the same day could have served as the identical date for the greatest catastrophes



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to befall the Jewish people. On the ninth of Av, the First Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians. That alone would have been enough for it to become marked as a day of national fasting and mourning. But history reconfirmed Tisha B'Av's tragic reality five centuries later. When the Romans approached the Second Temple and put it to the torch, the Jews were shocked to realize that their Second Temple was destroyed *on exactly the same day as the first*.

A short time later, the Jews rebelled against Roman rule. They believed that their leader, Simon bar Kochba, would fulfill their messianic longings. But their hopes were cruelly dashed in 135 CE as the Jewish rebels were brutally butchered in the final battle at Betar. The date of the massacre? Of course — the ninth of Av!

The First Crusade was declared by Pope Urban II on July 20, 1095 — and when Jews looked at their calendars they realized to their great

consternation that the Hebrew date was the ninth of Av. 10,000 Jews were brutally slain in its first month and Jewish communities in France and the Rhineland were decimated; a grand total of 1.2 million Jews were killed by this crusade that started on the ninth of Av.

The Jews were expelled from England on July 25, 1290 — the ninth day of Av. Similarly, the Jews were expelled from France on July 21, 1306 — the ninth day of Av. In 1492, the Golden Age of Spain came to a close when Queen Isabella and her husband Ferdinand ordered that the Jews be banished from the land “for the greater glory of the church and the Christian religion.” The edict of expulsion was signed on March 31, 1492, and the Jews were given exactly four months to put their affairs in order and leave the country. The Hebrew date on which no Jews were allowed any longer to remain in the land where they had enjoyed welcome and prosperity for centuries? Of



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course you know it had to be — the ninth of Av.

More recently: Historians agree that World War II and the Holocaust were actually the long drawn out conclusion of World War I, which began in 1914. Barbara Tuchman wrote a book about that first great World War, which she called *The Guns of August*. Had a Jewish scholar written the book, perhaps it would have been titled with a more specific date than just a month. Yes, amazingly enough, the First World War also began, on the Hebrew calendar, on the ninth day of Av, on Tisha B'Av.

And still more: On August 2nd, 1941, on the ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av, SS commander Heinrich Himmler received approval from the Nazi party for “The Final Solution.” One year later, to the day, the plan was formally implemented, the plan for the genocidal elimination of the entire Jewish people. On the ninth of Av 5702 (July 23, 1942), the mass deportation of all the Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto began, en route to the death camp of Treblinka.

And yet still more: The Jewish community center in Buenos Aires was bombed, killing 86 and wounding

300 others, on Monday July 18, 1994. On the Jewish calendar, the ninth of Av, 5754.

These cannot all be meaningless coincidences. Indeed, Jewish scholars long ago linked them to a biblical incident. Tisha B'Av has a Torah source. The tragedies of the ninth day of Av are all rooted in the same story responsible for the Jews being denied entering the promised land of Canaan on their journey from Egypt. The trip from Mount Sinai could have been a very short one. The wandering in the wilderness might have taken just weeks instead of forty years were it not for the sin of the spies — a sin which so greatly angered God that He decreed that entire generation needed to die out before the Jews could enter the holy land.

The Torah tells us the story. God had assured the people of the blessings of the Land and of their ability, with divine assistance, to readily conquer it. But the people doubted God's word. They insisted on sending out spies to verify for themselves the truth of God's promise. Twelve spies, one for each tribe, scoured the land; ten returned with a fearful and negative report. When the Jewish people heard

the pessimistic words, they wept. And God was profoundly angered by their lack of trust and faith. It was then that He decreed that this generation was unworthy of seeing the fulfillment of the promise that they doubted. They would need to spend forty more years in the desert until the last remnant of these people with insufficient faith passed away. The day of that sin, when the Jews wept for no reason, was the ninth day of Av. “You wept today for no reason,” God declared. “Whenever there will be occasion in the future to weep, it will continue to be on this very day.” (*Ta'anit* 29a)

That edict was a powerful statement about the concept of calendric linkage. God is not only the creator of the universe. He continues to be involved with it. History is not a series of coincidences or inexplicable fate. And that truth is repeatedly demonstrated by the remarkable correspondence between specific dates and their significance for the Jewish people.

Tisha B'Av is rooted in tragedy. Its recurring message is the threat to Jewish survival. And yet remarkably enough there is within it a message of consolation and comfort. What is the name of the month whose ninth day

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has been so filled with misfortune? It is Av — the Hebrew word for father. No matter what happens, our Father is still in heaven and we are still His children. God knows what is happening. God cares. He will never forsake us. It is the message of the calendar and its seemingly impossible coincidences that at the same time reassures us of God's presence in spite of all the calamities that befall us.

And that is how the tragedy of Tisha B'Av remarkably enough became linked with the joyous festival of Passover.

Just as the ninth of Av was destined for sorrow, Passover was set aside for salvation. And just as Tisha B'Av has its list of horrible events throughout history, the 15th of Nissan has its moments of divine intervention for blessing. The sorrows as well as the joys of the Jewish people share divine scrutiny and direction.

It was on the 15th of Nissan that our ancestors in Egypt had the courage to take the blood of the lamb, the national god of Egypt, and smear it on their door posts, the most public demonstration of their rejection of Egyptian idolatry and their faith in God. As reward, God proclaimed, "This is a night of anticipation for

the Lord, to take them out of the land of Egypt; *this* night is the Lord's, guarding all the children of Israel *throughout their generations.*" [Exodus 12:42] Because of the Jewish commitment to God on this night of the 15th of Nissan, this very day will be blessed with similar moments of joy and divine recompense in the future, culminating with messianic redemption. It is the concept of calendric linkage — but this time for positive purpose.

The lack of faith of the Jews in the desert on the ninth day of Av a long time ago doomed it to perpetual mourning. The demonstration of faith by the Jews who observed the first Passover on the 15th of Nissan imbued that day with everlasting blessing.

It is at the Seder that we open the door for Elijah, the prophet appointed to announce the Messiah's imminent arrival. It is at the Seder that we pour a cup of wine for Elijah to demonstrate how confident we are we will surely be privileged to greet him. It is at the Seder, on the very same night of the 15th of Nissan when our ancestors were first redeemed, that we demonstrate our faith in a historic repetition of that moment.

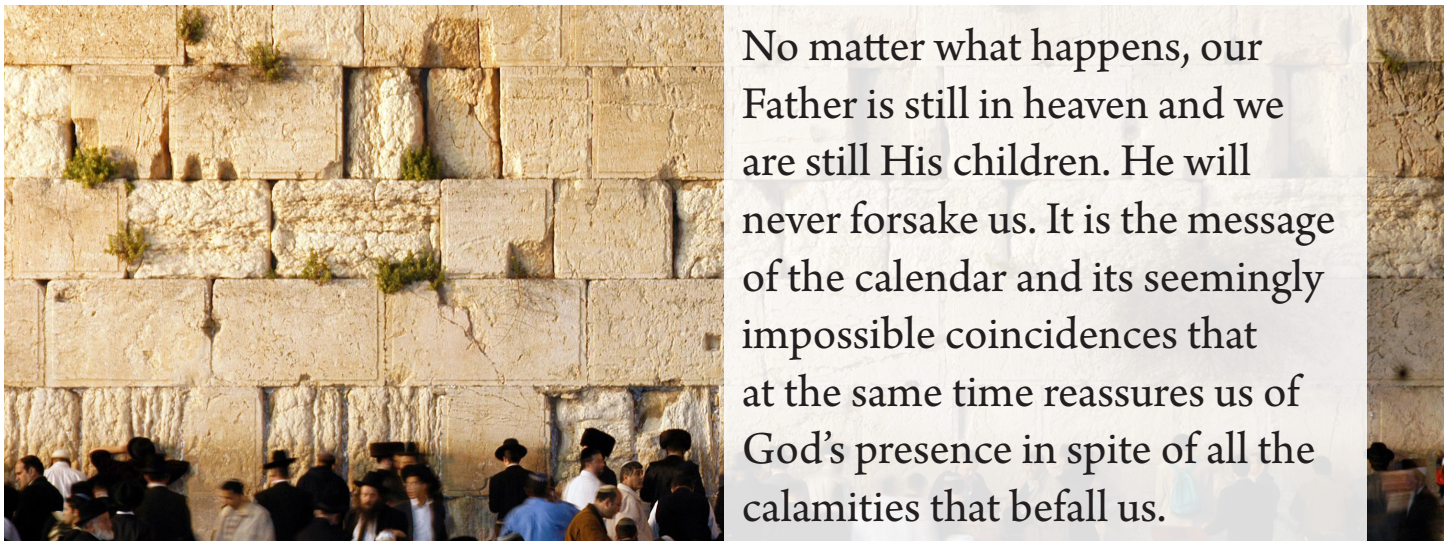
It is at the Seder as well that we have

a remarkable custom that seems very strange — a custom that links the two days we have seen were decreed to two such dissimilar and contrasting verdicts. On the very night we look forward to redemption, we have a tradition of eating a hard-boiled egg, which many commentators explain is meant to commemorate the meal of mourning immediately prior to beginning the fast of Tisha B'Av.

What is the meaning of this seemingly bizarre connection?

It is the same truth that is expressed in yet another amazing way. Tradition teaches us that *Messiah will be born on Tisha B'Av*. What can the two possibly have in common? The answer is profound: From the tragedy of the one comes the redemption of the other. By rectifying the sin of the lack of faith responsible for the divine decree of Tisha B'Av, we will be worthy of the blessing of redemption.

What both of them, the 15th of Nissan and the ninth of Av, share is recognition of the Seder of history. To grasp the recurring message of the calendar is to confirm God as the ultimate power behind human events — and to believe with certainty the fulfillment of our prophetically promised destiny.



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