

Matir Asurim Holiday Mailer 5782/2022

TISHA B'AV



16th of Tamuz, 5782 ~ July 14, 2022

Shalom aleichem, friends—may peace and wholeness find you!

We are writing to you on behalf of Matir Asurim: Jewish Prisoner Care Network. *Matir Asurim* literally translates as “The One Who Frees Captives.” This phrase from Jewish liturgy refers to God’s power to act for freedom and humanity’s ability to manifest godliness through working for freedom. We are a group of advocates, Jewish clergy, loved ones of incarcerated people, and people with direct experience of incarceration.

We have been meeting regularly since Tevet 5781/January 2021, guided by the questions: What are incarcerated Jews experiencing? What support do incarcerated Jews need that is not being met? We know that many Jewish communities have not done enough to support people inside and people impacted by the prison system.

Since we began meeting, we have started a penpal program and have been creating these holiday mailings, and have been working on building and deepening our relationships with you. We are really glad to be building community with you, across and beyond prison walls.

We would really love to get your input about how these mailings can be the most supportive to you, and we would also love to include your brilliance and wisdom in future holiday mailings! At the end of this letter, we have included a few forms: a feedback form, so you can let us know what you want to be receiving in these mailings and a penpal interest form, if you would like to sign up to be a penpal. If you have any writing (short essays, reflections, poetry, drawings, etc) related to any of the Jewish holidays or Jewishness in general, please feel welcome and invited to send us your submissions so that they can be included in future mailings.

All of the filled out forms can be sent to us at:
Matir Asurim: Jewish Prisoner Care Network
PO Box 18858
Philadelphia, PA 19143

Tisha b'Av (the ninth of the month of Av) is a holy day of grief and devastation in the Jewish calendar. It marks the date of the destruction of both Temples in Jerusalem. Over time, our ancestors have used this day as a day to honor more than just the destruction of the Temple; they added their own stories of grief and histories of persecution to this holiday, and used it as an opportunity to create the space they needed to feel their grief.

While Tisha b'Av commemorates communal suffering, it creates space primarily for individual reflection and grief. We hope that the Torah—the poetry, the questions, the essays, the art, and whatever else you may find in these pages—will be a resource for you to practice and encounter Tisha b'Av, and help you feel connected to the centuries-old Jewish tradition of mourning alone together, and connecting to each other across time and space through shared words and practices.

May you find inspiration in them, and—as Tisha b'Av ends—may you find comfort in them.

We are so grateful to be connected through this Torah, may we merit to imagine and live in a world in which we are all truly free.

With care,

Laynie, Val, Sarit, Cece, Callie, Rena, Meli, Jacob, and all of us at the Matir Asurim: Jewish Prisoner Care Network

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**We would love to include your
voices, ideas, dreams, artwork
and your brilliant Torah in
upcoming newsletters.**

UPCOMING DATES & DEADLINES

please send contributions by the following dates

HIGH HOLIDAYS: SEPT 5, 2022

SUKKOT: SEPT 19, 2022

CHANUKAH: 28, 2022

You can also send us writing that is
not directly related to the Holidays!



Submissions can be sent to
Matir Asurim: Jewish Prisoner Care Network
PO Box 18858
Philadelphia, PA 19143

TISHA B'AV: AN INTRODUCTION

Tisha B'Av / 9th of Av

Saturday evening, August 6th–Sunday evening, August 7th

What is Tisha B'Av?

Tisha B'Av, or the 9th of Av, is a 25 hour fast day that usually falls in July or August. It is a day of lamentation for the destruction of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem, as well as other disasters that have befallen the Jewish people throughout history. Traditionally, people observe the day by reading the Book of Lamentations and by abstaining from the following activities: food, drink, washing, physical intimacy, and wearing leather.

Key Concepts of Tisha B'Av

First Temple (Solomon's Temple, *Beit HaMikdash HaRishon*) — the first central place of worship for ancient Israelites, built in Jerusalem by King Solomon in the early 900s BCE, and destroyed by the Neo-Babylonian Empire in 586 BCE. Jews made pilgrimages to the Temple to offer sacrifices on the altar.

Second Temple (*Beit HaMikdash HaSheni*) — the second central place of worship for ancient Israelites, built in Jerusalem in the late 500s BCE and destroyed by the Roman Empire in 70 CE.

Lamentations (*Eicha*) — a poetic text written in response to the destruction of the First Temple and exile of the Jewish people. Traditionally, Eicha is read both in the evening of Tisha B'Av. Some communities have the custom of sitting on the floor while Eicha is read in order to express grief. Eicha is not a history book about the destruction of the Temple. It is a work of literary and theological art that discusses difficult questions surrounding suffering and faith.

Possible ways to observe Tisha b'Av

- Round foods are a traditional food of mourning in Judaism, reminding us of the circle of life—people face suffering in life, and people also

experience other times of healing and joy. If you have a round food to eat today, eat it with particular mindfulness, reflecting on cycles of grief and healing in your life.

- Choose one activity that is part of your normal routine and abstain from it for 25 hours to mark this day as different.
- Recite the included sections of Eicha aloud in Hebrew or English. You can speak, chant, or sing them. Consider using a tune that feels sad or mournful.
- Journal about a loss that you have experienced, including how it made you feel and where you have found or might find comfort. How can you honor that loss while also moving forward in your life?

D'VAR TORAH

Michelle

B"H

Shalom talmidim! This week's parashah is Behar, in which, in the first paragraph, Hashem is commanding us to observe His seven-year Shabbat for our crop fields and vineyards and concerning our calculations for the cost of sale of fields and crops in Eretz Yisrael and instructing us on what we can and can't harvest and consume or sell during those seventh years.

As we go on however our parashah teaches us of the seven cycles of sabbatical (or "Shemittah") years (49 years) and how the fiftieth year is announced with a special sounding of the shofar on Yom Kippur of that year signifying that it, the fiftieth year is to be called the Yovel year or "Jubilee Year".

This parashah is particular in its significance within our tradition for slaves and for debtors who were forced to "sell" themselves into servitude to repay a debt, as we are commanded to release them all from those statuses and to redeem them and send them out as free persons. Since prisoners are, in most cases, also required to perform menial, manual labor as part of their incarceration, I believe this mitzvah also may have applied to prisoners imprisoned for certain monetary and property offenses. Sadly, we do not live in a world that is bound by halachah, and even if we did, this commandment is no longer applicable as the 12 tribes no longer occupy Eretz Yisrael completely, for if that were the case all the world's prisons would have been drastically depopulated just a few years back, and millions of men and women would be free and have a second chance to be free and do things differently, and, G-d willing, to seek to only do what is good, right and pleasing to Hashem.

My interpretation of this mitzvah is that it is one more way in which Hashem shows all of us, Jew and non-Jew alike, that no matter how much you owe, or whatever you may have done wrong to owe a debt, including prison time, that all deserve forgiveness and compassion. From the simplest, smallest debt to the largest, everyone deserves and should be forgiven and released from bondage.

Another mitzvah given to us in this week's parashah, in pasuk 17, is that we are to never wrong our fellow [see: Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 338: The Prohibition to Distress a Jew Verbally] and we are to fear our G-d. This mitzvah too, is of particular significance to those of us who find themselves incarcerated—not to imply for even a moment that the free world need not pay any attention here! In many instances we may find ourselves angry or impatient with others in the world around us and we may respond by being verbally abusive to our friends, family, and, in many instances, to those charged with the responsibility of our custody and care, the corrections officers, guards, c/o's or whatever you may call them at your facility. Now, Hashem technically is only commanding us not to verbally abuse our "fellow", meaning our fellow Jew, but this mitzvah, if applied to Jew and non-Jew alike, can very probably result in more peace and possibly even kindnesses being bestowed on us by those around us. So, the next time you feel like you are about to lose your cool and are about to yell at or curse out that girl who still has not returned your flat iron or blow dryer, or the dude who screwed up your kosher meal for the third time on the mess line, or the c/o who keeps searching your cell/area everyday as part of his daily "random" three searches, and it is starting to seem not-so-random... (but he never notices your bucket of powerful hooch...). Take a deep breath and think of G-d's commandments that are upon us all as Jews and try to respond with charity, kindness and compassion in your heart and speak accordingly. You never know! That girl may have just been cleaning it up after using it, or that dude may have a lot on his mind and he may actually feel truly terrible about screwing up your meal, your patience may inspire him to hook you up with an extra portion next time or maybe even offer to buy you a few kosher items from the commissary to make up for it, and as for the c/o who is clearly choosing to only search your stuff... maybe he is trying to do you and himself a favor by documenting that your stuff is thoroughly searched more than everyone else's stuff, and thus does not require a full-blown shakedown when the SOG team comes around! As a result you keep your hooch, you don't go to the hole and he does not have to do all that paperwork! In the end, it is all in Hashem's control, according to His will, have a k'zayit of bitachon and live in shalom b'Hashem!

TWO EXCERPTS FROM EICHA*

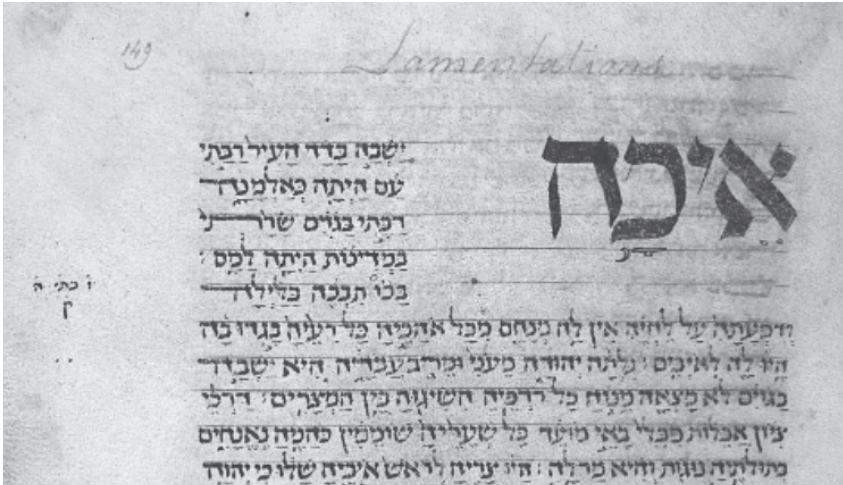
**Eicha, known as the book of “Lamentations,”
is traditionally read on Tisha b’Av.*

איכה | יִשְׁבֶּה בְּדָד הָעִיר רַבְתִּי עִם הַיְתָה כְּאִלְמָנָה רַבְתִּי
בְּגוֹיִם שָׂרְתִי בְּמַדִּינֹת הַיְתָה לָמָס:

Alas! Lonely sits the city once great with people!
She that was great among nations has become like a widow;
The princess among states has become a captive.

בָּכוּ תִבְכֶּה בַּלַּיְלָה וְדַמְעָתָה עַל לַחְיֶיהָ אֵינֶיהָ מִנַּחֵם
מִכָּל־אֲהָבֶיהָ כָּל־רֵשִׁייהָ בְּגָדוּ בָּהּ הָיוּ לָהּ לְאִיבִים:

Bitterly she weeps in the night, her cheek wet with tears.
There is none to comfort her of all her friends.
All her allies have betrayed her; they have become her foes.



REFLECTION

Nathan Diena

In Midrash Eicha Rabbah, a Rabbinic interpretation of the verses of Eicha, the Sages discuss the exile of Jerusalem and the Jewish People. It introduces a different verse from the Book of Ezekiel (12:3), where God instructs the prophet Ezekiel to ‘prepare for yourself the tools of exile...’. A later sage offers a definition of ‘the tools of exile’:

A leather flask, a rug, and a bowl. **Each and every one of them must serve two purposes:** You place flour in a leather flask and place it beneath your head; you eat and drink from a bowl; a rug is for sitting and to sleep upon. (Eicha Rabbah 1:22, Sefaria Midrash Rabbah translation)

Elsewhere, the Jerusalem Talmud (Berachot 2:4) relates that the Messiah will be born on Tisha B’Av. The Sages debate what Messiah’s name will be: Zemach, which means ‘**blooming/sprouting**’, or Menachem, which means ‘comfort’. These two possibilities reflect two different perspectives on our period of exile: on the one hand, it can be a time of growth, and on the other hand, we sometimes need a kind word of comfort.

With these dual perspectives in mind, we can draw insight into the strange statement about tools of exile having two purposes. In exile, items must serve two purposes; we must hold two truths. At times, we will flourish (Zemach), and at other times, we want to be comforted (Menachem). Tisha B’Av teaches us to embrace both of these, and that our most difficult moments may also sprout redemption.

TRY TO PRAISE THE MUTILATED WORLD

Adam Zagajewski, translated by Clare Cavanagh

Try to praise the mutilated world.

Remember June's long days, and wild strawberries, drops of rosé wine.
The nettles that methodically overgrow the abandoned homesteads of exiles.

You must praise the mutilated world.

You watched the stylish yachts and ships;
one of them had a long trip ahead of it, while salty oblivion awaited others.

You've seen the refugees going nowhere,
you've heard the executioners sing joyfully.

You should praise the mutilated world.

Remember the moments when we were together in a white room
and the curtain fluttered.

Return in thought to the concert where music flared.

You gathered acorns in the park in autumn
and leaves eddied over the earth's scars.

Praise the mutilated world and the gray feather a thrush lost,
and the gentle light that strays and vanishes
and returns.

TRANSCRIPT OF

“CULTIVATING RESILIENCE THROUGH THE PRACTICE OF LAMENT”

Dr. Koach Baruch Frazier

Shalom aleikhem. My name is Koach Frazier, and I live at the intersection of hate and oppression here in America. I am Black. I am trans. I am Jewish. And I am absolutely determined to thrive. I am an activist, a musician, a healer, a spiritual leader and for almost 15 years, I helped people engage more fully in their lives through the power of better hearing, as an audiologist. I've marched on the streets with my drum alongside fellow freedom fighters on the streets of Ferguson. I sat down in the Capitol with fellow Jews, in solidarity with Dreamers. I have trained Jews and non-Jews about the intersection of anti-Blackness and antisemitism.

And now, I'm in rabbinical school. And I can tell you that one of the things I've learned as an audiologist, and particularly, as a musician, is that listening is so important—and not just hearing what people are saying, but listening, really listening. And it's made me listen better. Listen for those soft voices yearning to be heard all around me, listening to the truth, even when it hurts. And listening to the pain and sorrow of my own soul. Because, you see, living here in America, with antisemitism and anti-Blackness and transphobia, I wake up every day with the news that someone with one or more of my identities, one of my siblings, is dead. And just as I've leaned into the grief, there's word that another sibling has been killed. It seems as if there is no time to mourn. But a beautiful part of our tradition is that when we mourn, we stop time. We don't go to work. We don't go to school. We sit on the floor. We tear our clothes. And our community comes and gathers so that we have space and time to grieve. We cannot have business as usual when tragedy strikes, because how can the healing process begin if we have never stopped to acknowledge that healing is actually necessary?

So back in June of 2016, right after the massacre at the Pulse nightclub, my friends and I—we were at that moment when we knew it was time to grieve. Forty-nine of our trans and queer siblings of color were murdered, simply for existing, and we were in mourning. So, this group of friends called Justice Beats, a rag-tag group of queer and trans people of color in St. Louis, decided to pick a public space on the queer side of town, and we would, for 49 days, drum, say their names, and we would mourn. Sometimes, three or four people joined us, and sometimes 20 joined us. There was even a sister gathering here in New York City organized by my friend Shoshana. But no matter how many people came, overwhelmingly, people said: “I am grateful to have a space where I can show up authentically without having to hide my sorrow.” They realized that their grief was welcome there.

Just like it is in the Hebrew Bible. Lament is found throughout the entire book. Most famously, in Eikha, in the book of Lamentations, where the first line says: “How, how is it that this lonely city sits here, when it used to be filled with so many people?” Talking about the destruction of Jerusalem. And then in the Psalms, from Psalms 130, it says: “Out of the depths, I cry to you, O God! Hear my cry! Attend your ears to my pleas for mercy.” These verses sounded just like the people that I was marching on the streets with. But after you have experienced tragedy after tragedy after tragedy, it becomes difficult to stop and mourn. But you see, lament, it has a formula, as I have learned it. And formulas can be useful in times of crisis and uncertainty. This is the gift of our ancestors, giving us the spiritual technology to help us stay on this road of resilience and healing. And so I’d love to share this formula with you tonight.

The first element of this formula of lament is address: Dear Universe, the Source of all Life, Whoever is out there, Whatever is out there!

The second is expressing your distress. Why in the world are my siblings, my trans women of color, continuing to be killed? Why?

The third: This is where you stop, and you remember that there was a point in time before now, where there was destruction or death, or there was

tragedy and it was in front of you. And somehow, some way, you made it through, and now it's behind you and you're still here. Part of lament is remembering you're still here—that you can make it through.

The fourth element is the plea. This is what's going to make it so I can start healing. This is what I need to repair the harm that was done to me. This is what I need.

The fifth element is gratitude. Maybe it's gratitude knowing that one day, you'll be on the other side of this one, too. Maybe it's gratitude knowing that you used to be on the front end of something and now you're on the back end. It may be gratitude for allowing yourself, giving yourself the gift of being in your grief, and allowing your body and your soul and your mind to experience it, so you can get on the other side of it.

So, no matter where you are in that process and no matter where you are today, I want to invite you to take a moment and think about that thing that gives you grief, think about that thing that makes you lament. I'm going to give you a few seconds to think it, to think about it. I'll invite you to take a deep breath with me. And just like in St. Louis, on the streets on the queer side of town, I'm going to invite you all, together, to shout out your truth to the universe. So get that thing, I'm going to count to three, and let's see if we can give the universe our truth. One ... two ... three. Shout it out!

Sometimes, we're the people shouting out our grief in our mourning, and sometimes, we're the folks who gather on the street corner and hold space for the other ones' grief.

I hope, my prayer, is that you feel the universe, feel your community, and most importantly, you feel yourself, with you, through your grief and your sorrow. And one day, when you're on the other side of it, you'll know this healing and resilience that comes through lament.

MODERN KINAH

This mostly alphabetic acrostic is based on the traditional Tishah B'Av liturgical poem (kinah) Eli Tzion, created by the Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism.

Wail, America, with your prisons, like a woman in labor,
Like a child from the neighborhood, his friends dead and gone.
We cry out to God—
Alone in our cells—to anyone who will listen.
Beaten down by systems that
conspired in our failure, we
Demand something different.
Exiled from the dream of America, we live its nightmare
Freedom: lost Fear: our new companion
Gone are rights to body, labor, movement, vote, dignity;
Hope: a temptress, mouthing empty promises
Isolation: our most insidious torture. The world beyond these walls, will it have
a place for us?
Lament for what has been done, rattle the bars, crack the bones
Move stone hearts which grind down men to meal. Say our names!
Our stories are our power, however dark, still our truth.
Quiet is the night, its own dark and lonely cell
Restore to us some hope for redemption
Save us all from cycles of violence, systems of oppression, racism
Woe the nation that locks up its children, throws away young men and women
Excised from the body politic
Year in, year out, waiting for opportunity, for freedom, for change
Zealous in the hope that we are all more than the worst thing we have done.
Wail, America, with your prisons, like a woman in labor, Like a child from the
neighborhood—his friends dead and gone.

COMFORT & REGRET: A MEDITATION ON TISHA B'AV

Rabbi Becky Silverstein

The Talmud teaches (Masechet Berachot 32b) that from the time the Temple was destroyed, the gates of prayers have been locked, but the gates of tears have remained open. All year long we have had access to Gd through the spiritual technology of crying—through our tears, our raw emotion.

Tisha b'Av begins a cycle of seven haftarot, prophetic readings, on consolation, as we move from mourning to the possibility and celebration of a new year, we are guided by a cycle of. After we do the spiritual work of Tisha b'Av—to open and give voice to grief of devastation—we do the spiritual work of opening ourselves to comfort and consolation as we prepare to stand with our communities before Gd on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

נַחֲמוּ נַחֲמוּ עַמִּי יֹאמֶר אֱלֹהֵיכֶם

Comfort, comfort, my people, said your Gd

(Isaiah 40:1)

The Shabbat after Tisha b'Av is known as *Shabbat Nachamu*, the Shabbat of comfort and consolation. During that Shabbat, the *haftara* opens with this line and continues with a prophecy that triumphs Gd's return to Jerusalem. At first, I read this line and its context as centering the experience of Gd's people, that we are the ones who need to be consoled. Gd, through Isaiah, is speaking to the exiled Jews, after all. There is a disconnect between this reading and the Hebrew grammar. The verb, נַחֲמוּ / comfort, is in the plural imperative (“y'all comfort!”) and the noun, עַמִּי / my people, in the singular. Perhaps the people are present as witnesses to the consolation of another.

Pesikta Rabbati, a midrash crafted between 600-900 BC, teaches:

נחמו נחמו עמי אמר ר' ברכיה הכהן נחמוני נחמוני עמי בנוהג שבעולם כרם אם יהיה לאדם ויבואו ליסטים ויקצצו אותה למי מנחמים לכרם או לבעל הכרם וכן לאדם יהיה בית ויבואו הליסטים וישרפו אותו למי מנחמים לבית או לבעל הבית אתם כרם שלי כרם ה' צבאות בית ישראל (ישעיה ה' ז') ובא נבוכדנצר והחריב אותו והגלה אתכם ושרף את ביתי אני הוא צריך להתנחם

“Comfort, comfort, my people (Isaiah 40:1),” say R’ Berakhiah the Kohane, should be read, “Comfort Me, comfort Me, O my People.” In the way of the world, if a man owns a vineyard and robbers come and cut it down, who is to be comforted, the vineyard or the owner of the vineyard? And so, too, if a man owns a house and robbers come and burn it down, who is to be comforted, the house or the owner of the house? You are My vineyard. But Nebuchadnezzar came and, having destroyed it, exiled you and burned My Temple; it is I that need to be comforted.

Instead of others comforting Gd’s people, the midrash reads this verse as a commandment for *us* to comfort *Gd*; this midrash frames the opening line of Isaiah 40 as Gd’s request for comfort. Why does Gd need comforting? What can that open for us—people created in Gd’s image? When the Temple was destroyed, Gd lost Gd’s house, the central locus of Gd’s presence in the world. While Gd’s presence fills the whole world, it was in the Temple where Gd was connected to us, Gd’s partners in creation.

There is another option. The root, נחמו, translated here and above as “comfort,” can, in another grammatical structure mean “to be sorry,” “to regret,” and to reconsider.” We probably don’t need the dictionary to tell us that to be in a state of wanting comfort can be the inverse of feeling sorry or regretful. Perhaps Gd regrets some part of Gd’s role in the destruction of the Temple and the exile. I imagine, if I may, that regret being located either in regretting the creation of humanity at all or regretting allowing the conditions for the destruction to emerge. The regret might also be an expression of Gd’s longing to reconnect with Gd’s people.

In his sermon, *I Do Regret*, Rabbi Aaron Alexander recently taught: “Regret. It’s difficult. It’s also divine. And it’s definitely essential for any kind of authentic repentance—of any potential change in course, any return home, wherever it is.” The cycle of destruction, consolation, and opening to new possibilities is neither linear nor reserved for this specific moment in the Jewish calendar. Yet, this moment calls our attention to it and provides us the opportunity to practice opening to grief, naming regret, seeking comfort, and engaging in teshuva, sacred repair. Our individual comfort need not be a source of shame, but can instead be, like all things, a place to connect with the spark of divinity / humanity within us and a foundation for seeing new possibilities.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR REFLECTION

Rabbinic Judaism (that is, modern Judaism that centers on prayer and observance of commandments and holidays) emerged only after the destruction of the Temple, because ancient Jews needed to create a new way to practice Judaism after they could no longer bring sacrifices to the Temple. How can our own experiences of grief, sorrow, or anger inspire us toward creativity and innovation?

Do you believe that God destroyed the Temples as punishment for the misdeeds of Jews? Or is it the fault of the (Babylonian and Roman) oppressors? When we experience loss and grief, does it feel more meaningful to focus on changing what is within our control, on accepting what is out of our control, or both?

Does our relationship with God feel different when we are mourning versus when we are celebrating? How can that relationship bring us purpose and resilience in each case?

ONE ART

Elizabeth Bishop

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.

READER'S THEATER FOR KAMTZA AND BAR-KAMTZA

adapted by David Schwartz

The following mini-play is an adaptation of a traditional story about what caused the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, adapted from the Babylonian Talmud Gittin 55b-56a.

ACT 1

SCENE 1

(Setting: A mansion in Jerusalem)

Narrator: Jerusalem was destroyed on account of Kamtza and Bar-Kamtza

Host: Servant, I'm throwing a feast. Please invite my friend Kamtza.

Servant: Yes, sir!

SCENE 2

(Setting: The same mansion in Jerusalem)

Narrator: The servant mistakenly invited the host's enemy, Bar-Kamtza, instead of his friend, Kamtza.

Host: Bar-Kamtza, what are you doing here, sitting at my feast?! You know I don't like you. Get up and go away!

Bar-Kamtza: Since I have already come, let me stay and I will give you money for whatever I eat and drink. Just don't embarrass me by sending me out.

Host: No, you must leave.

Bar-Kamtza: I will give you money for half the feast. Just don't send me away!

Host: No, you must leave.

Bar-Kamtza: I will give you money for the entire feast, just let me stay.

Host: No, you must leave.

Narrator: The host took Bar-Kamtza by the hand, stood him up, and took him out.

ACT 2

SCENE 1

(Setting: Just outside the mansion in Jerusalem)

Bar-Kamtza: Since the Rabbis were sitting there and did not protest the actions of the host, even though they saw how he humiliated me, they must be content with what he did. I will go and inform against them to the Roman emperor.

SCENE 2

(Setting: The Imperial palace in Rome)

Bar-Kamtza: Your Majesty, the Jews are rebelling against you.

Emperor: Who says that this is the case?

Bar-Kamtza: Go and test them. Send them an offering on behalf of the government and see if they will sacrifice it.

Emperor: I will send with you the best three-year-old calf.

SCENE 3

(Setting: On the road to the Temple)

Bar-Kamtza: I will give the calf a blemish on its upper lip, or maybe on its eyelid. This way it will be blemished according to Jewish law, but not according to Roman law. The Jews won't be able to sacrifice it, but they won't be able to satisfactorily explain it to the Roman authorities, and revenge will be mine!

ACT 3

SCENE 1

(Setting: The Temple)

The Rabbis: Even with this blemish, we should sacrifice the animal as an offering. It's important to maintain good relations with the government.

Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkolas: If the priests do that, people will say that blemished animals may be sacrificed as offerings on the altar.

The Rabbis: If we don't sacrifice it, we must prevent Bar-Kamtza from reporting this to the emperor. We should kill him so he cannot betray us.

Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkolas: If you kill him, people will say that one who makes a blemish on a sacrificial animal ought to be killed.

Narrator: As a result they did nothing, Bar-Kamtza's slander was accepted by the authorities, and consequently the war between the Jews and the Romans began.

SCENE 2

(Setting: Outside Jerusalem)

Rabbi Yochanan: The excessive humility of Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkolas destroyed our Temple, burned our Sanctuary, and exiled us from our land.

Rabbi Elazar: Come and see how great is the power of shame, for the Holy One, blessed be G-d, assisted Bar-Kamtza, who had been humiliated, and due to this humiliation G-d destroyed the Temple.

THE PLURALITY OF MOURNING

Rabbi Lauren Tuchman

I've been thinking a lot lately about the profound wisdom of our Jewish calendrical cycle. We are not a linear people—our years are cyclical and, as we move through the cycle, our tradition asks us to embody the specific mood or energy of each moment, year after year, even as we ourselves are in a constant state of flux. For many years, when the Three Weeks—the period in the Jewish calendar that marks the destruction of the Temple, beginning with the 17th of Tamuz and continuing through Tisha B'av—came around, I wondered how I would find meaning in this time. Connecting viscerally to the *churban*, the destruction of the Temples, was not something to which I had an immediate or easy access point. I did always believe deeply in the utility and importance of collective mourning, but on some level it felt hollow. That is, until this year.

There is so much to grieve right now, and as the losses of our world continue to pile up, as many of us feel weighed down by past and present grieving, it feels like our holy tradition is calling out to us, crying alongside us. In the Talmud (Masechet Taanit 29b-30b), there is an extended discussion about how one ought to prepare for and observe Tisha b'Av. Numerous rabbinic opinions are recorded pertaining to many aspects of the day itself and the days which precede and follow, traditionally referred to as the “nine days.” The text asks: Should we begin mourning for the full nine days prior to Tisha b'Av, or mourn for merely a week before? If Tisha b'Av falls on a Sunday, is there even a week of mourning before, or does Shabbat nullify the mourning practices? When can a person do their laundry? What if they only have one garment and Tisha b'Av falls on Friday—can they wash their garment for the honor of Shabbat? And what about Torah study—is Torah study prohibited on Shabbat? Are you allowed to learn Torah? Maybe you can only learn the sections you're familiar with. How ought we commemorate this time?

I am profoundly moved by the way in which the rabbis engage in this back-and-forth. After the *churban*, the rabbinic project began in earnest in Yavneh

because the rabbis understood that we were living in a radically altered world and they wanted desperately for our traditions to survive. We are heirs to their ingenuity. As I learned this Talmudic text in Tractate Ta'anit, I kept coming back to the way in which the rabbis were working out for themselves and future generations just how we would commemorate Tisha b'Av specifically and honor the destruction of the Temple more broadly. Writing just hundreds of years after that trauma, there was no consensus. To me, this lack of consensus points to the very human reality that the way we grieve and mourn is radically individual. Some of us need those safe containers to hold the pain. Our tradition masterfully created a staged process for mourning the deaths of dear ones for that reason. We move from *shiva* (seven days immediately following burial) to *shloshim* (the thirty days of mourning) to observing the *yahrzeit* annually—because we know that even as time progresses, we need a ritualized way to return to the loss and re-emerge into the world again and again, year after year.

Just as our rabbis were not of one mind about how to commemorate the loss of the Temples in Jerusalem, I know many of us are wrestling with a plurality of thoughts and feelings about grieving at this time. Society often teaches us to bottle up emotion and stay as far from death and pain as possible. Where's the space for the rawness, the realness, the honesty, and the complexity as we hold our loss? May the wisdom of our rabbis and our calendar provide us with some solace and grounding in whatever we are grieving. May the fluidity with which the rabbis have an honest back-and-forth about how to commemorate this time provide us with fodder for how we mark our own time of trial and calamity.



Matir Asurim is looking for art or images to accompany our holiday mailings. Offerings might include: illustrated prayers, *Birkhat Ha'bayit* (house blessing), blessings of protection, interactive art, coloring pages, comic strips, shvitim (meditative images of the name of Hashem), illustrated depictions of Torah, and other treasures.

Please include a brief (2-3 sentences) description of your work.

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