

Matir Asurim Mailer 5783/2023

TISHA B'AV





**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: AUGUST 25, 2023

SUKKOT: SEPTEMBER 8, 2023

CHANUKAH: NOVEMBER 17, 2023

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

WHO WE ARE

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! There is 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

22 of Tamuz, 5783 ~ July 11th, 2023

Tisha B'av (the 9th of Av) begins the season of transformation and teshuva that lasts until the completion of the High Holidays. On the 9th of Av, Jews commemorate the devastation brought about by the destruction of the Temple. We add meaning to this day by commemorating other historical calamities that befell the Jewish people throughout time. It is a day of grief, of sadness, and of remembering.

Traditionally, people observe this holiday by reading the Book of Lamentations (called "Eicha" in Hebrew) and by abstaining from eating, drinking, washing, wearing leather, and other pleasurable experiences.

The following are some of the key concepts associated with this holy day:

- 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

- Choose one activity that is part of your normal routine and abstain from it for 25 hours to mark this day as different.
- 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?

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. 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?

May this season of grief reach you with resilience and openness.

With blessings for tzedek, rachamim, v'shalom,
justice, compassion and peace,

Laynie, Sarit, and all of us at Matir Asurim: Jewish Care Network for
Incarcerated People



cover artwork:

"Refuge" by Amy Beutens, an accompanying description can be found on page 15

Table of Contents

On Fasting by Feral Jew	8
“How?!” A Roadmap for Transformation by Virginia Avniel Spatz	12
Refuge by Amy Beutens	15
A Prayer for Breaking by Sarit Cantor	16
Releasing Emotion by Lev Shir	17
Excerpts from Kaddish by Melanie Kaye/Kantrowtz Sarit Cantor	19

ON FASTING

Feral Jew

For many years I have had a tumultuous relationship to fasting. I often found it too overwhelming to be reminded so viscerally of times I did not have access to food, or was in too much distress to stomach the food that was available to me. But fasting can also bring us closer to The Divine, and how They experience everything without any blocks or hesitation. Going without food for an entire day makes us alike to The Divine in that She does not have a body to feed with food and drink. He would feast on the smoke and ash of burnt offerings in The Temple thousands of years ago, but is unbothered by the need to frequently eat and drink that comes with having a body.

Fasting combined with specific time for mourning and grieving gives the pain: ancient, past, present and future a time to cry out, to release. And if we mindfully fast we have the opportunity to engage with the pain and feel the intensity in a communal and secure way, that is also aligned with our own ability. The goal is to feel, heal and move through the pain with each other and The Divine. Because of that it is extremely important to find ways to soothe yourself and keep you aware of the finite nature of the fast. Fasting is supposed to be hard but not tortuous. It's supposed to allow us to have an embodied and spiritual experience of the pain that sits in us, our ancestors, The Divine, and the world before and around us. But also, to remind us there is an end to pain and grieving. At the end of the fast we get connection and food with the people around us. And through that experience and movement through the grief and rage we may have the chance to heal, balance and turn over parts of our Selves and The Divine. After all, if we are able to release some of that agony we might just feel more focused, joyful, peaceful, and unburdened by the pain of life. Those parts that are in agony (inside our Selves and contained in The Divine) will know they have not been forgotten, that they will be felt again, and that time will be carved out for them.

But in order for those parts to release and relax they must feel like they're

being specifically heard and considered. I suggest sacrificing what feels painful but possible, and keeping what feels necessary.

Following are some suggestions for the upcoming fast day tisha b'av (the 9th of av, this year July 27th). This day is for communal mourning of many major calamities in Jewish history, and the current trauma that we continue to experience. The holiday begins at erev tisha b'av (sundown before tisha b'av/night of July 26th) with a pre-fast meal of a single piece of bread and a hardboiled egg dipped in ash, eaten sitting on or low to the ground. If you are not able to eat this specific meal, that's ok. It's more important to find a way to have a small meal on the floor to separate the fast from the rest of time. The strictest observance instructs us not to eat or drink anything until next sundown. The first half of the day is spent low to the ground, and people are encouraged to pray selichot, which are prayers admitting sin, asking for forgiveness, and asking for mourning and grief to be turned to joy and celebration. As well as chanting or hearing somebody chant eichah (literally: oy!) aka Lamentations, the megillah (scroll) that remembers the destruction of the Second Temple in 69 CE. If you are not able to get your hands or eyes on these texts that's ok. What's most important is the spiritual and emotional work done in preparation for and throughout the fast.

Suggestions for Fast Preparation: The day before tisha b'av try to take some time by yourself or with a trusted person(s) to sit and internally prepare. First, practice some slow, deep breathing. I like to visualize the breath or energy moving up and down my legs for some breaths; then moving up and down through my whole body, meeting and cycling through my chest or other parts of the body that are needing support; and then have a couple of deep, long inhales followed by short, heavy releases of air and energy. Then, once your mind is calmer and you are less bothered by thoughts and anxieties that may be coming up, you might try asking a few questions to your internal Self. You can ask these silently or out loud, whatever feels most natural to you.

Maybe start with "Do you feel able to fast?" and follow up with things like "What would make this fast feel possible?" "What would be overwhelming to sacrifice during the fast?" "What would bring me closer to The Divine during the fast?" "What would help you feel love and connection during the fast?".

It's important not to try and think our way through these questions, but to allow whatever pops into our mind when we prompt ourselves to be the unchallenged answer. For me comfortable fasting looks like not eating any food but continuing to drink water, coffee, and smoke cigs. Food feels painful but possible to sacrifice for a fast, water and coffee feel necessary to keep me moving through it, and smoking feels like it brings me closer and opens my spirit to The Divine more. Your answers may look similar or completely different. There is a chance you are not given any answers, and that parts of your Self do not want to talk about fasting. If this is the case it is important not to push them, maybe try asking again later, doing more deep breathing, or talking about your desires, confusion, anxieties, etc with your trusted person(s).

Reminders for During the Fast: During the pre-fast meal recall how The Divine used to feast on the ash and smoke of our offerings in The Temple. Breathe deeply into the transition out of "regular" time and into the fast that will bring you closer to the most difficult parts of our Selves and times of agony. Remind yourself that you are not alone in this endeavor, many people now, before and after us do this fast, and experience this pain. The Divine experiences it always, without any boundaries. As we slip into the fast, the walls we build around our own pain and the pain around us may start to crumble. We may start to share some fraction of The Divine's ever intensifying experience of loss and pain.

Throughout the fast it is important to be kind to your body and soul. The first half of the day is supposed to be spent low to the ground. One, to mimic the mourning rituals observed during Shiva (the 7 days after a loved one dies), but also because it is harder for your body to move up and down when you are fasting. You may feel entirely exhausted, fatigued, or overwhelmed with pain. If you can lean into it and cry or wail or yell or simply lay in that feeling, it's important to do so. When it becomes overwhelming I find it helpful to practice prayer, song, ritual, or text study. These are all actions that reinvigorate the body and spirit. They might give you a burst of focused energy while they're being done, and a much needed break from the intensity of pain that we call in during the fast.

At the end of the fast I find it most pleasurable to share a slow meal with trusted people, and to do the brucha shehakol (blessing for combined foods) before eating together. Following is the traditional version of this blessing. When you are ready to bless and eat (and everybody must be ready because there should not be anything said nor any time between saying the blessing and eating the food) raise a piece of food in your hand, fork, spoon, etc and recite the following:

**BARUCH ATAH ADONAI ELOHEINU MELECH
HA'OLAM SHE'HAKOL NIH'YAH BIDVARO**

~

**BLESSED ARE YOU, HASHEM OUR G-D, CAUSE OF THE
UNIVERSE, THROUGH WHOSE WORDS ALL THINGS
COME INTO BEING.**

∞

"HOW?!" A ROADMAP FOR TRANSFORMATION

Virginia Avniel Spatzr

"How" is the sort of word that is used a lot without getting much attention. But this small, often overlooked word is very important to a time of transformation in the Jewish calendar. The word creates a kind of roadmap for heading into, and climbing out of, Tisha B'av, the lowest point of the Jewish calendar.

"How [Eikhah]" is the first word, and the Hebrew title, of the Book of Lamentations, read on Tisha B'av. It is also a key word in the Torah and prophetic readings for "Shabbat Chazon," the sabbath of vision, right before. Together, the "how" readings cover a lot of emotional territory. In English, "how" can be used to express different ideas:

Frustration: "How are we supposed to do this?!"

Disbelief: "How could this happen?"

Despair: "How awful!"

Questioning: "How does this work?"

The Hebrew word "**eikhah**" has similar uses in the Bible, generally, and in readings for Tisha B'av and Shabbat Chazon:

"**Eikhah/How** can I, alone, bear the trouble of you!...

...the burden, and the bickering!"*

-- Deuteronomy 1:12, Torah reading for Shabbat Chazon

Frustration: Moses re-telling complaints about the People's behavior in the wilderness

"**Eikhah/How** has the faithful city become perverse?...

She was full of justice, righteousness lived in her. But now murderers

-- "**

-- Isaiah 1:21, prophetic reading for Shabbat Chazon

Disbelief: God criticizing the People in Isaiah's prophecy, set in 8th Century BCE

"Eikhah/How lonely sits the city!..."

Once great with people! She was great among nations, now alone and vulnerable.

Once a powerhouse, now just one of the ruled."*

-- Lamentations/Eikhah 1:1, reading for Tisha B'av

Despair: mourning destruction of the First Temple and exile, 6th Century BCE

"How did we get here?" and "How do we go on?"

-- centuries of Jewish teaching about destruction and tragedy

Questioning: Jews trying to find meaning and move forward through disaster

**Bible translations by V. Spatz, based on Jewish Publication Society 1985.*

These "Hows" outline a difficult journey, built into the Jewish calendar. Following this annual journey can remind us that building community is hard work that can easily get off track.

How did we get here?

The Book of Deuteronomy opens with Moses and the People at the end of a forty-year journey. They stand on the river's edge, imagining life on the other side. When they first escaped into the wilderness, a "promised land" seemed just around the corner. Decades later, the People have been through a lot, and Moses is listing their mistakes and his disappointments, crying, "How can I manage this burden!" This is a community in trouble and out of balance. Maybe not all that different from our own?

The Book of Isaiah opens a long time later, on the other side of the river. But the vision of a "promised land" now seems like a nightmare. Isaiah tells the People they are focused on the wrong things and have become a burden, even to God: "Your rituals are a burden to me... Your hands are full of blood." (Isaiah 1:14-15). The prophet's harsh words point to a whole nation troubled, out of balance, and wondering: How could dreams of justice and righteousness go so deeply wrong?

Vision of a "promised land" seems in the past. Tisha B'av mourns loss of dreams and hopes, as well as lives and homes. This won't be the only time in history that Jews ask: "How?! How did our visions turn into this painful mess?!"

We have always struggled to share burdens in our communities. We've always fallen short of our visions. That is one message of the "How" readings. But it's not the only message.

How do we go on?

The "How" readings also tell us that we are expected to do better, individually and collectively:

Learn to do good.

Devote yourselves to justice;

Aid the wronged.

Uphold the rights of the orphan;

Defend the cause of the widow. -- Isaiah 1:17

Where did our ideas of community fail in the past? What visions must we mourn? Shabbat Chazon prompts us to envision something truly new, and imagine steps toward needed change. Tisha B'av reminds us to expect failure and to mourn our losses. But the calendar nudges us forward. There are seven weeks from Tisha B'av to the new year. The "How" readings give us our homework, well in advance. We have work to do. And that work starts with "Learn."

Refuge
Water color and
pencil, and text by
Amy Buetens

Demolition and
destruction
have shaken my
foundation.
Exiled in sadness,
loss, and grief.
Shocking and
uninvited.
Isolated in 'no means
of escape' mentality.
Multidimensional
trauma.

Change is imminent.

I accept collapse and
setbacks.
I will rebuild.

I will not cling to established structures and status quo.
I will not fill with panic or apprehension.
I will not project my discomfort, inner turmoil, chaos, anger, confusion, or
resentment onto others.

All your breakers and your waves have rolled over me.
A divine intervention and psychic detoxification.
Shaking me out of complacency and cracking me open.
Motivating awakening, revolution, and evolution.
I am held in an unending and infinite love and find comfort and refuge in
your hand.

"Refuge" by Amy Buetens can be found on the cover of this mailer.



A PRAYER FOR BREAKING

Sarit Cantor

Speaker of Justice, Freer of the Bound, You of Many Names:
Help us to learn what it means to crumble
witness us amidst the rubble
let our pain and our sorrow
be transmuted into soil
grow into medicines that nourish the hearts & bodies & dreams of those
to come.

May we find you in our speechlessness, in our wailing;
may we find you in our ripped clothes and raw skin;
in our deepest ruin, may we have the strength to remember
that breaking waves do not compromise the ocean
that this ruin is a practice of communion.

May we remember that our relationship with you
lives in the parts of us
that push the cracks open;
that this breaking is holy;
that this ending is co-creation, is composition, is sovereignty,
it is the power to emerge on the other side.

RELEASING EMOTION

Lev Shir

On Tisha b'Av, we are given the opportunity to grieve personal and collective loss. But is it really possible to truly grieve at a predetermined time? Some may feel that spontaneous emotion is a more authentic expression than ritualized mourning. Some may find it really difficult to access feelings of grief, and others may find it difficult to feel anything but grief! What can it mean to have a specific time to attune more fully to loss?

Like other Jewish holidays, the magic and meaning of Tisha b'Av emerges in cycles. It's not just one single day, it's a moment that we keep coming back to, year after year, to grieve a loss so gigantic and ongoing that it could never be fully grieved by a single person or even a single generation. In addition, Tisha b'Av sits in the wheel of the year just before Elul, the month leading up to Rosh Hashana and the new year. This day of heartbreak opens our hearts to the slower work of teshuvah (spiritual reflection and return to wholeness), and invites out feelings that may be sidelined in our daily lives so that we can know ourselves better.

In their podcast episode about the holiday, Ezra Furman and Agnes Borinsky of "2 Queers 4 Questions" bring in a theoretical lens inspired by the psychologist Donald Winnecot, explaining that "much of what we fear, and what haunts us, and what organizes the defense mechanisms we build...have to do with things in our past that we haven't experienced yet. These experiences, that shape us and organize our psychology so deeply, sometimes we haven't given ourselves a chance to experience them and to feel them. And until we experience and feel them, we fear them happening in the future." They explain that these can be personal traumas and losses, but can also be the longing for something we never had or never got to experience. In a way, Tisha b'Av is a ritualized, collective salve for the corrosive impulse to try and outrun our own experiences of loss and grief. It can give us permission to experience, even in our imaginations or simply through the motions of ritual, a degree of the loss that has so deeply affected the collective spirit and psychology of the Jewish people.

The Talmud teaches that "from the day the Temple was destroyed the gates of prayer have been closed...but even though the gates of prayer

are closed, the gates of tears are not closed.” (Brachot 32b) But how can we access the transformative power of our tears? For many of us, it’s a challenge to allow ourselves to cry at all. Personally, I find it really hard to cry, even when I feel like I could really use a big sob! Sometimes I find myself worrying, if I can’t shed a real salty tear on Tisha b’Av, am I stuck behind the locked gate? Am I doing it wrong!? But the wisdom the rituals of Tisha b’Av are slow, imaginative, and embodied. Even if we can’t personally remember and feel what it was like to watch the Temple be destroyed, we can still sing the words of Lamentations as if they were my own words. Even if we don’t feel deprived in our own modern daily lives of the Temple, we can give up comforts for a day to feel an echo of that deprivation in our bodies. So, if I don’t feel moved or able to cry, I can use these imaginative and embodied tools on a smaller, more internal scale too.

Here is my recipe for releasing emotion when I want to but don’t feel able to cry:

1. Find a space for myself to feel. Sometimes it’s good to be alone, sometimes it’s good to be with other people. In bed before going to sleep, while bathing, outside, or in a prayer space – sometimes I can plan where you want to cry, other times I have to meet the moment wherever I happen to be!
2. Acknowledge and affirm that my body is wise, and its authentic expressions hold power and wisdom.
3. Acknowledge and affirm that I have agency in the world of my feelings. I don’t have to try to feel more than I am able to.
4. Take some deep breaths.
5. Try to notice where in my body I feel some emotion. Often if I am sad or overwhelmed, I feel a lump in my throat or pressure in my chest. If I can’t locate a specific place, I let myself imagine that I can feel my heartache in one small part of my body, like just my fingertips or just my ears.
6. Lay a hand on that place in my body, try to feel my breath reaching that place.
7. Take a deep breath, and then hum or sigh on the exhale. (I find humming really helps loosen a lump in my throat). Repeat this step as many times as you need.
8. If humming feels good, I try singing to myself. A wordless melody, or short comforting tune, helps express some of my emotions. Doesn’t matter how it sounds!

9. If I'm really stuck, I ham it up! I don't even have to make noise, just try to make my face look as sad as it possibly can. Maybe I will throw hands up and silently (or loudly!) wail "WHYYYY!" or whatever dramatic phrase I can think of (with awareness of the people who might be around me). Sometimes I rub my achey heart and just say "Ow! Owie! Ouch!!" over and over. The point here is verbalization. If it makes you laugh more than it makes you cry, that's an important expression too!

10. Close out with one more deep breath in and a sound on the exhale: "bleh!" "ahh..." "hmmmm..." "shhh." I close my eyes for a moment, give myself a little squeeze, shake my body around or stretch, drink some water, and continue with my day.



EXCERPTS FROM KADDISH

Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz

let me be strong as history

let me join those who refuse

let there be time

let it be possible

let no faction keep me
from those who suffer

let no faction keep me from those who needed a home
and found one

[let no faction keep me from those who had homes
and lost them: stolen, walled off, razed, occupied]

If I were to mourn properly
I would not be done.



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.

Honorariums will be provided for selected artwork.



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