

Tisha b'Av, Twice

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A quick introductory note: Tisha b'Av, the fast of the 9th day of the month of Av, commemorates the two destructions of Jewish temples in Jerusalem - first (and not necessarily historically) by Assyrian armies in 587 BC¹, and again by the Romans in 70 AD. The Roman conquest ended the hereditary rule of the high priests, which had been centered on the Jerusalem temple. That hereditary rule, and the bloodline-based caste system it created (a three-tier system of Israelites, Levites, and Kohanim) claimed its origins and found its legitimacy in the divinely mandated authority of the mythical bney Amram - Moses, Aaron, and Miriam - who consolidated their power through massacres of those who proposed non-hierarchical alternatives to their family's rule (see Bamidbar/Numbers 16:3-14).

One: Time

This year of toppling statues and rethinking the rituals of historical memory has made me think about the destruction of temples, and whether it's something to mourn. Partly because I find the practices of Tisha b'Av compelling, as a deeply secular cultural worker whose work often draws on myth and ritual. Partly because I'm remembering an old friend's experience being told by a progressive Jewish organization that a drash she wrote them for the fast could not include even an implied criticism of having a hereditary priesthood. Partly because the month of the Christian calendar that ends with Tisha b'Av this year is dotted with observances which are in some ways part of the same story.

244 years ago this month, the reigning member of the Hanover family was told in a letter that the lands and people who formed his inheritance were not his to treat as he saw fit.

231 years ago this month, the reigning member of the Bourbon family was given the same message by militant mass direct action.

41 years ago this month, the reigning member of the Somoza family stopped disputing the same argument, after several years of mass armed uprising.

All these dates are celebrated as victories, however limited, for human freedom, and steps, however small, towards a just world. In each case, there are things to mourn and to struggle against in the results. And in each case, there are too many dead to grieve for: both those who died fighting these monarchies and those whose freedom these revolutions refused to seek.

¹ I use BC and AD throughout because a dating system that uses the mythical birthyear of Jesus as its zero is a Christian system, and changing the letters to disguise that just makes it a hypocritical Christian system.

But in every case, the downfall of a ruling class determined by birth, and the weakening of a hereditary caste system is a cause for joy. We are complicated and subtle enough to rejoice in the end of blood aristocracy, and simultaneously to let its defeat inspire us to do what these revolutions did not. We do not always celebrate on these dates; indigenous and black folks on this continent have observed at least one of them as a day of solemn critique and dissent for generations.

We could choose July 4 to fast in remembrance of the North American majority who 1776 did not make independent, much less free.

We could select July 14 to sit on the floor and recall the bloodbaths of the French colonization drive that followed 1789.

We could designate July 19 as a day of worn-out clothes and unwashed bodies to remind us that Indigenous and African-descended Nicaraguans were still marginalized after 1979.

These would be just and righteous commemorations of these dates.

But they are the opposite of the fast of Tisha b'Av, which mourns the fall of hereditary priestly rule.

This fast is not for the lives of those who the bney Amram declared of inferior bloodlines. It is not for those punished by the remnants of caste system the temple enshrined - the use of "yikhes", blood lineage, to determine the value of a person's life (most visibly on the matrimonial markets of observant communities, but much more widespread in subtler forms).

Is this the fast that we desire?

Tisha b'Av is, after all, a holiday defined by What Happened That Day. Unlike Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashana, or Shavues, it is not primarily a religious observance. Along with Pesakh, Purim, and Hanuka, it is a historical commemoration of a particular event. Like them, it has accumulated other historical events onto its date to reinforce its message, making the timing work by using careful selection, calendrical manipulation before and after the fact, and occasional numerological adjustments. So in thinking about it, we must take seriously the meaning of the history it marks.

The conquest of the city of Jerusalem was awful and bloody in 70 AD, and every other time the city was conquered, before, after and inbetween, on down to the genocidal conquest of 1967. Those deaths are as worth commemorating as any other massacre in a site of many massacres, from Troy to Tlatelolco to Tulsa.

But alongside the fall of the city came the end of the hereditary rule of the high priests; the end of the blood aristocracy of the bney Amram.

This is a good thing.

In fact, for anyone who believes in justice or freedom, a very good thing.

I'm inclined to think that anyone who's inclined to disagree and defend the idea of a family-run theocracy isn't likely to be persuaded by any argument I can make, so perhaps I'll leave it at that.

Or, better, leave it with a question: how long should a community sit shiva for an unjust and exploitative system simply because it was once their own?

What do we think of a descendent of Russian serfs who mourns the fall of the Romanov tsars?

Two: Space

What does Tisha b'Av mourn?

It mourns the event which made possible any form of Jewishness we can recognize - the ones we hate as well as the ones we adore. It mourns the beginning of the single fact which has made the survival of Jewish cultures, Jewish identities, and Jewish people possible: diaspora.

Are these things to grieve over?

The existence of Jewish people in the world has depended, since centuries before the warriors of Rome had managed to sack more than an occasional pigsty, on geographical dispersal. From the myth of the wandering Aramaean to the Jewish majority who refused to 'return' from Babylon, this was sometimes the silver lining of a disaster, and sometimes a more active choice. It's a commonplace to point out that this dispersal is the main, if not the only, thing which makes Jewish history different from that of the many other small ethno/religious groups which wandered and then settled in the space between the irrigation-based empires of the Tigris & Euphrates and the Nile.

The fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD was not a major event in the history of Jewish geographical dispersion. Contrary to the myth popularized since the 19th century (mainly by Zionists), there was no mass expulsion by the Romans. Not only would such a policy have been recorded in their extensive and well-preserved bureaucratic records (it is not), but it would have gone very much against their standard practice of ruling conquered communities in their own homes through local proxies (as they did in the Eastern Mediterranean both before and after defeating the Judean revolt).

But it was not until the Roman capture of Jerusalem that the constellation of communities spread (at that time) from Basra to the upper Nile to Rome to the Crimea became a diaspora, and diaspora became the definition of Jewishness. Many autonomous Jewish cultures existed before 70 AD, in Egypt,

Babylonia, and elsewhere. But that date marks the point at which those urging centralization and uniformity lost the legitimacy and strength they had derived from the existence of the temple-centered hereditary priestly caste in Jerusalem. From then on, the urge to create a single defining standard of Jewishness or to exert control over Jewish life from a single point would be the property of ultra-conservative religious and political movements rejected by most Jews of their time - from the followers of Bar Koziba² in the 130s AD to those of the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe in the 1900s.

The strength of Jewish history and identity has been precisely its refusal to be unified. Beyond the large divisions of Jewish culture marked by distinctions of language, religious practice, folklore, and music, even the smallest community is likely to have its own specific traditions: a commemoration of a particular victory over anti-Jewish attacks; a unique repertoire and style of singing; its own word for sorrel soup. And what makes Jewish cultures remarkable is that their differences - a 'local Purim'; a minhag; a nusakh; a "loshnenu" different from the one spoken on the other side of the river - are understood as defining parts of their Jewishness not as deviations from some transcendent definition.

That strength is a result of diaspora. We're accustomed to using the word for three very different phenomena: one which is a periphery centered on a single anchoring 'home' population, like the Irish, Filipinx, or Vietnamese diasporas; one in which the dispersion IS the home population, like the Roma or Jewish ones; and the vast African diaspora created by abduction, enslavement, and colonialism, which entwines and exceeds both of the other models.

Centerless diasporas have their mythical homelands, but the communities which live in them are better understood as a particular part of the diaspora than as a 'core' or a source. In the Jewish case, this is particularly blatant, though the multiple layers of contemporary Jewish life in Palestine can make it hard to see through the clouds of Zionist mythologizing.

The centuries- or millennia-old Jewish communities of Jerusalem and Safat (to name just two) are part of the diasporic cultural webs of the Arab Jewish world that stretches from Baghdad to Marrakech to Sana'a, and of the post-expulsion Sephardi world of the Mediterranean basin (both now shredded by nationalisms). They are parallel, distinct from, and co-equal with the Jewish communities of the Caucasus, South Asia, the Horn of Africa, and beyond - not, as the colonial imagination would have it, "living fossils" or "ancestral remnants."

The Jewish immigrants to Palestine whose families arrived over the past hundred or so years who identify most with their particular location in place and time (as opposed to those whose relation to the land they live on is triangulated through past or future 'Temple Times') often have an ambiguous relationship to Jewishness. Few are as explicit as the Canaanite movement of the 1930s-50s, which explicitly opposed a newly-devised local 'Hebrew' identity to a

² Better known in recent (especially Zionist) writings by the praise-name his fundamentalist followers used, "Bar Kokhba" - 'son of a star' - and in the traditional literature by the critical pun "Bar Kozeba" - 'son of a lie'.

historically-rooted diasporic 'jewish' one, but I can attest to the many current phrasings of "I'm not jewish; I'm Israeli" among their younger generations.

Those who hold a messianic vision of their relationship to the land of Palestine - whether expressed through the mamluktiyyut/state-olatry of the "hilltop youth" (divine conquest through human hands) or the nominal non-zionism of some hasidic and litvish lineages (divine conquest without human action) - are grounded not in the histories of jewish life on that land, but in theologies with specific roots elsewhere. From Rav Kook's translation of German integral nationalism into Torah terminology to Neturei Karta's version of the Vilna Gaon's teachings, there is no central essence to be found: it's diasporic all the way down.

And, of course, the jewish Israelis whose identities and practices link them most strongly to other jewish communities are those who innovate within diasporic cultures. This takes many forms: traditional religious observance in the Persian, Polish, Kurdish, or Yemeni styles; evolving practices of dance and music in Moroccan, Halabi, or hasidic traditions; consciously jewish secular commitments in communist, feminist, or anarchist lineages.

Tisha b'Av is the day we mark as the beginning of the diaspora. If we value jewish culture – which is to say, jewish cultureS – it is not a day to mourn.

I should say: if we value jewish cultures in a real and grounded way. If we value them as the living, complex and ambiguous things they are, not as a matter of nostalgia, through a veil of hipsterhayt irony, or in a kitschy reduction. If we value their diversity and contradictions. If we value them enough to fight to change them, to defend the versions and aspects of them that we love and against what we hate in them. If we value them from within, with a commitment to their continued strength, and a refusal to allow them to be turned into the pseudo-diverse veneer on the past century's innovation of Blut und Boden nationalism with a jewish face.

Those who don't, who wish to reject and destroy two thousand years of jewish history and life, should find another name to call themselves. As the Yiddish proverb has it: a yid iz in golus – 'to be jewish is to be in diaspora'. Keyn golus, keyn yid – no diaspora, no jew.

No Tisha b'Av, no diaspora. There is nothing to mourn in that.