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Geulas Yisrael: Don't Forget to Smile on Tisha B'Av

In the late 19th century the question of adapting Tisha B'Av prayer to the dramatic changes in the modern Jewish world was first raised. In light of the renaissance of our people, the return to Israel, and the rehabilitation of Yerushalayim, how can our tefillot on Tisha B'Av describe a city which “lies in mourning, empty and desolate”? Prayer mustn't be dishonest and must be presented to God in a truthful and accurate fashion. This description isn't a completely accurate reflection of our current condition.

Overwhelmingly, most authorities disagree with the prospect of modifying prayer. Our timeless liturgy - first institutionalized during the early part of the Second Temple- imbues prayer with historical resonance. Alteration of this text may undermine the sanctity of the prayer experience. Additionally, liturgical alterations can create slippery slopes in other areas of Halachik fidelity.


However, even if the syntax of our Tisha B'Av prayers are inalterable, the core

concern is, and should be, a compelling one: How to refresh our Tisha B'Av mourning to reflect the incredible Divine miracles we have witnessed. Mourning is an intensely personal and emotional experience and failure to assimilate our Tisha B'Av sadness into the modern reality can yield a lifeless experience. If we detach our Tisha B'Av experience from our year-round joy of living in Israel, our mourning will become compartmentalized and “isolated”. We risk religious bifurcation: we can take a “day off” and mourn our losses, but the next day life around us will resume in our modern miracle of a State. How can a Jew, living in our vastly altered modern world, experience Tisha B'Av mourning during a period in which history has once again smiled upon us?

We can take cues from a celebrated visionary- Rebbe Akiva! He lived during one of the darkest nights of Jewish history- the Roman destruction of Yerushalayim and the crushing suppression of Jewish life 60 years afterwards. He himself was martyred for defying Roman verdicts banning Torah study. Walking with his colleagues and witnessing the disrepair of the Mikdash site, he smiled at their tragic “fate”. Questioned about his insensitivity in light of this horror, his reply was panoramic: Indeed, at that particular moment our people endured disproportionate suffering,


but this merely reflected the asymmetry of Jewish history. The Romans were so brutal and merciless toward the Jews precisely because they recognized us as God's people. Anti-Semitism isn't random or arbitrary but based on our status as proxies of God. Hatred of the Jews flares in response to our great mission- to challenge this world to higher ground. Rebbe Akiva understood that the brutality and the horror they faced were part of a larger "algorithm" of Jewish history. Our eventual historical triumph would be just as meteoric as the rapid and precipitous decline they were enduring. Rebbe Akiva sensed the integrated nature of Jewish history- our extreme suffering and our phenomenal successes are each based upon the same core truth- we are chosen for a mission and we operate on a supernatural plane. In the depths of national despair, Rebbe Akiva envisioned a national triumph which would also be disproportionate – driven by the same historical forces which had yielded such immense suffering. Perceiving this algorithm, he was able to forecast a brighter day of redemption upon that very same Temple Mount. He laughed at the irrationality of Jewish history.

Rebbe Akiva lived in a dark world of "endless Tisha B'Av" and yet he smiled. By contrast, we inhabit a radiant world of renewed Jewish opportunity and we should certainly smile. If History has smiled down upon us we must smile back – even in the throes of Tisha B'Av mourning. Our generation has been resettled in our Homeland- a reinstatement enabled by thousands of years of Jewish



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heroism, defiance and great suffering. Jewish oppression was never indiscriminate; we were disliked precisely because of our national historical agenda. Even at great distance from our land, we stood bold in the face of our historical struggle as the Divinely-chosen people. Despite facing a world of hostility, we persevered in our mission and taught the world about our God and His moral will. Though we twice forfeited our Homeland, we confidently yearned for the restoration of peoplehood and sovereignty. Had we not preserved that dream, our license to return would have expired. During Tisha B'Av don't forget to lament our winding and torturous road home and our sad history of lost opportunities. Also, don't forget that if Hashem has smiled at us we must smile back. ■