



MIDEI CHODESH

B'CHODSHO

BY RABBI SHMUEL GOLDIN

Faculty, OU Israel

Rabbi Emeritus, Congregation Ahavath Torah, Englewood NJ

Interpreting a Journey

The Shiva D'Nechemta, Seven Weeks of Consolation, connect two seemingly disparate calendar periods: the sorrowful days surrounding Tisha B'Av and the majestic Yamim Noraim, Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur.

What lessons emerge from the calendar's linkage of the three weeks of Mourning to the Yamim Noraim? What connections can be drawn between these two, very different, periods of the year?

Perhaps the two major signposts for this journey- the fasts of Tisha B'Av and Yom Kippur- offer the connections we seek. These occasions, after all, share two critical, unique features.

Tisha B'Av and Yom Kippur are the only full fast days on the Jewish calendar. In addition, they are the only fasts that include the five halachic *inuyim* (afflictions): the prohibitions on eating and drinking, washing,

anointing, marital relations and the wearing of leather shoes.

Yet as similar as these days are, they are also poles apart. Yom Kippur is a biblical fast day; Tisha B'Av is of rabbinic origin. Tisha B'Av remains immersed in sorrow; while Yom Kippur is cautiously, solemnly optimistic.

Tantalizingly similar, yet deeply disparate, are these days somehow connected?

An answer may well emerge from the mists of history...

Intriguingly, the rabbis draw yet another link between Yom Kippur and Tisha B'Av. Each of these occasions, they say, originates in a seminal sin committed at the dawn of our nation's story.

Yom Kippur is born as a result of the chet h'egel, the sin of the golden calf.

Tisha B'Av emerges as a consequence of the chet hameraglim, the sin of the spies.

Although the rabbis support their contentions through calendric computation, their intended message obviously strikes deeper. There are no coincidences on the Jewish calendar. *To the rabbinic mind, concrete philosophical bonds link these two fast days to tragic transgressions deep in our nation's past.* What are these connecting links and how can they help deepen our understanding of these two most important observances in Jewish tradition?

The sin of the golden calf reflects the Israelites' *desperate desire for distance from the*

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demands of an omnipotent God.

From the outset, the Israelites are unable and/or unwilling to face the new responsibilities thrust upon them at Sinai and they respond with immediate retreat: "And the entire people saw the thunder and lightning and the sound of the shofar and a smoking mountain and they trembled and stood from afar. And they said to Moshe, 'You speak with us and we will listen; and let not God speak with us, lest we die.'"

And when, forty days later, Moshe apparently fails to return from the summit of the mountain at the expected time- and the people face a reality where they will be required to interact with God directly, without the benefit of Moshe as their intermediary- their desperate desire for *distance from God* becomes an overwhelming fear. The Israelites create a golden calf to take Moshe's place, to stand between them and their Creator.

In the aftermath of the sin, after punishing those most directly involved, God moves to educate the nation to the ramifications of their crime. Threatening to distance Himself from the people, as per their expressed desire, He forces them to glimpse the emptiness that would result from such distance. The nation, in response, falls into mourning.

God thus reminds the Israelites of a fundamental truth that courses through all human relationships. *While safety can be found in emotional distance, the desire for such distance produces a life of emptiness.* Only those willing to risk the pain that can result from

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nearness to others will ultimately experience the potential beauty of close friendship and love.

God's message to the people in the aftermath of the *chet ha'egel* is powerful and clear: *If I am absent from your lives, you will be safe. Through distance, you avoid the vulnerability that would accompany My close connection with you.*

You will also miss out, however, on the grandeur that would have resulted from our closeness, as well.

We can now begin to understand why the rabbis perceive a fundamental connection between the sin of the golden calf and Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish year.

Yom Kippur is the day when, yearly, we move to repair the inevitable distance that has developed between us and our Creator. We mourn our loss of perspective, explore our missteps, and admit our failings. We atone for our consistent tendency to pull away from God through our practice of *comfortable* rather than *confrontational* Judaism. We pledge to move close again – close enough to allow divine law to challenge our lives and test our personal commitments.

The message of this holiest of days is clear. *The distance that develops between man and God can be repaired.* Just as God ultimately forgives the Jewish nation at Sinai and invites them, once again, fully into His presence; so, too, through the process of *tshuva* on Yom Kippur we can reconnect intimately with our Creator.

At the core of the *chet hameraglim*, on the other hand, lies a profoundly different failing, one that yields a profoundly different divine response.

Ultimately the spies and the nation are guilty of a *loss of faith in themselves*. Not only do they doubt God's ability to bring them into the land, but, even more importantly, *they lose trust in their own capacity for change*. They see themselves still as "grasshoppers," as the slaves who toiled under Egyptian rule. They negate the transformative impact of all that has occurred during and after the Exodus.

To this failing, God responds with harsher judgment. Intergenerationally, the nation is forgiven and will ultimately enter the land. The generation of the Exodus, however, remains irredeemable. *When man loses sight of his own majestic potential, he simply cannot achieve.*

The connection drawn by rabbinic thought between the sin of the spies and the mournful day of Tisha B'Av now becomes abundantly clear.

In stark contrast to the ultimately optimistic, reparative day of Yom Kippur, Tisha B'Av remains, each year, an occasion primarily rooted in mourning and sorrow. We bemoan our own replication of the sin of the spies, our loss of personal and national vision, our inability to rise above our pettiness and spite, our failure to glimpse the majestic potential in others and in ourselves.

Because of these continued failings, Tisha

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B'Av rings, over and over again, to the divine decree that, according to the rabbis, was delivered as the Jews wept over the report of the spies: *You have cried for naught, and I shall establish for you crying across the generations.*¹

We can now also understand the journey shaped by the Shiva D'Nechemta.

The calendar mandates: Before you can arrive at Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur, you must first course through Shiva Assar B'Tamuz and Tisha B'Av. Before you can repair your relationship with HaShem, you must first regain faith in yourselves. Meeting a challenge that is yours alone to meet, you must arrive at a vision of who you can truly be.

Our tradition thus reminds us of yet another truth fundamental to all human relationships.

Only individuals armed with a healthy self-image can hope to relate healthily to others.

Correspondingly, only those who are aware of their own self-worth; only those cognizant of their own majestic potential; can successfully approach God on the holiest of days.

The journey of the Sheva D'Nechemta challenges us to "rediscover ourselves" before we begin the task of repairing our relationship with God. ■

1 Talmud Bavli Ta'anit 29a.

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