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Beyond the Ruins: Finding God Where We Least Expected Him

Every year, as Tisha b'Av approaches, we prepare ourselves to mourn absence.

We mourn a destroyed Beit HaMikdash, a lost Jerusalem, exile, persecution, and centuries of tears. We sit on the floor and read *Eicha*. We recite *Kinot*, recalling tragedies that span generations. Tisha b'Av is the day that seems to embody distance—distance from our land, our Temple, and perhaps, most painfully, from the revealed Presence of God.

Yet beneath the mourning lies one of Judaism's deepest paradoxes.

The very day that commemorates our greatest sense of distance from God also offers the possibility of our deepest closeness to Him.

Anyone who has walked through profound personal loss knows that grief can uncover something unexpected. There are moments when suffering strips away every illusion of control, every carefully constructed certainty, every distraction that ordinarily fills our lives. We are left with almost nothing.

And somehow, in that terrifying emptiness,

there is Someone.

Not answers.

Not explanations.

Not even relief.

A Presence.

There is an intimacy with God that none of us would ever choose to learn.

It cannot be acquired through scholarship alone or manufactured through eloquent prayer. It is born in places no one willingly enters. When everything superficial falls away and we finally acknowledge how little is within our control, we find ourselves standing before the Ribbono Shel Olam with nothing but honesty.

In *Tehillim* we read, מן המצר קראתי יְיָ — “From the narrow place I called to God.” Perhaps the emphasis is not only on the calling, but on the narrow place itself. Certain encounters with God become possible only after life has narrowed, when everything nonessential has fallen away.

Judaism never glorifies suffering. We pray for healing, not hardship. We ask God to



remove pain, not increase it. Yet when suffering comes despite our prayers, it can reveal a relationship with God unlike any we have previously known.

Perhaps this is one of the deepest messages of Tisha b'Av.

Our relationship with God was never destroyed.

Chazal teach that when Israel went into exile, the Shechinah went with them — **גלו ושכינה עמם**. God did not remain behind in the ruins of the Beit HaMikdash waiting for His children to return. He entered exile alongside them. The destruction was real. The loss was immeasurable. But Divine companionship was never withdrawn.

For years, I understood *tza'ar haShechinah* as God's pain over the destruction of His Temple and the suffering of His people. Then, on the drive to my son Yehudah's wedding, I began to understand it differently.

We were on our way to celebrate one of the happiest days of our family's life. Yet one chair would remain empty. My son, Binyamin, who had been killed months earlier defending Am Yisrael, would not be there to dance with his brother beneath the chuppah.

I found myself thinking that while I believe with all my heart that Binyamin's soul rests close to the Kisei HaKavod, surrounded by the radiance of the Divine Presence, perhaps there was still something he longed for—not because Heaven is lacking, but because love longs for presence.

He would have wanted to dance with us.

To embrace his siblings.

To celebrate as a family.

And in that moment I wondered whether this is, in some small way, what Chazal mean by *tza'ar haShechinah*.

God is perfect. He lacks nothing.

Yet He commands, **ועשו לי מקדש ושכנתי בתוכם** —“Make for Me a Sanctuary, and I will dwell among them.”

Not because He needs a home.

Because He desires a relationship.

Because love longs to dwell with the beloved.

The destruction of the Beit HaMikdash was not merely the loss of a building.

It was the loss of an encounter.

Perhaps Tisha b'Av is not only the day we realize how much we miss God.

It is also the day we begin to glimpse how deeply God desires to dwell among us once again.

If this is true, then the work of Av is not merely to mourn the past. It is to prepare ourselves for that encounter by becoming vessels capable of receiving His Presence. Sometimes the deepest closeness is found simply by remaining present—by saying, “Ribbono Shel Olam, I do not understand, but I know You are here. And I am with You.”

This insight casts new light on the Jewish calendar. There are two remarkable journeys of twenty-one days.

The first begins on the Seventeenth of Tammuz, when Jerusalem's walls were breached, and culminates in Tisha b'Av with the destruction of the Beit HaMikdash. Even after the fast

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ends, the fire continues to rage. Chazal teach that most of the Temple burned on the Tenth of Av, when it seemed that nothing remained.

The second begins on Rosh Hashanah and continues through the Aseret Yemei Teshuvah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, and Hoshana Rabbah. These are twenty-one days of purification, return, and growing closeness to God—אני והוא.

Then comes the day after.

Shemini Atzeret.

After weeks of spiritual ascent, God says, **קשה עלי מירדתכם** —“Your departure is difficult for Me.”

Stay one more day.

Not because He needs us.

Because He loves us.

Because He desires one more moment of intimacy with His people.

How remarkable that the day following the twenty-one days of Tishrei is defined by God's longing to remain with His people, while the day following the twenty-one days of mourning is the day when the fires of destruction reach their fiercest intensity.

These are not opposing journeys.

They are mirror images.

One reveals God's Presence **באתגליא** — openly.

The other reveals it **בהעלם גדול** — through profound concealment.

One is the intimacy of embrace.

The other is the intimacy discovered after everything else has been stripped away.

Both lead to the same destination: a relationship that transcends circumstance.

Perhaps that is the invitation of the month of Av.

Not simply to remember what was destroyed, but to recognize that even when the Temple fell, the covenant did not. The walls collapsed, but the Shechinah never

abandoned His people. Sometimes God is found in the grandeur of the Mikdash. Sometimes He is found sitting beside us among the ruins.

May we merit the day when these two journeys become one—when the hidden closeness of exile is transformed into the revealed closeness of redemption; when the One who walked beside us through every sorrow will once again dwell openly among His people; when the fast of Tisha b'Av becomes a day of joy and gladness; and when Jerusalem is rebuilt with the Divine Presence revealed in all its splendor. ■

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