

Why fast?

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

We have just ended a period in the Jewish tradition called [“The Three Weeks”](#) of mourning for our own disastrous ethical and political mistakes of the past. For thinking we can arrogantly control every aspect of our own destiny with no regard to external pressure or objective standards. At least we do not blame others for our misfortunes.

There are many people who argue that the fast of [Tisha B'Av is redundant and should be cancelled](#). It is true that it commemorates two massive destructions of Jerusalem, the Temple, and our sovereign states. But those are historical events, not timeless spiritual ones of self-fulfillment, atonement, and forgiveness. Times change. Jerusalem today is, if anything, overbuilt and certainly not desolate. The Temple is indeed still destroyed, and true, we are so divided amongst ourselves that we cannot even agree on whether we actually want one, how to build it, who will run it, or whether we actually could, if we did, or whether we must wait for God to do it. But we have sovereignty over our own land. And even if we have no King David, I'm not at all convinced that monarchy is the answer to Israel's governmental problems anyway.

So why fast on Tisha B'Av, or on any of the other, minor fasts that are still in the calendar? As [Zecharia 8:19](#) says, “Thus says the Lord of hosts: The fast of the fourth month, and the fast of the fifth, and the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth shall become times of joy and gladness, and cheerful feasts to the house of Judah; therefore love truth and peace.”

Ah, you see, there's the answer in the codicil—truth and peace. And as yet we have neither.

Here is a quote from the Talmud, Sotah 49b:

“In the lead up to the Messiah, arrogance will spread and honor decrease...amongst scholars there will be immorality and no one will dare to rebuke them. Wisdom will degenerate and good men despised. Truth will be rare...the face of the generation will be like that of a dog.”

Yes, like a dog. That's how I feel when I see rabbis carted off in handcuffs. Outwardly religious or simply overtly Jewish men arraigned for corruption, money laundering, and dishonesty. And it keeps on happening year after year, sect after sect, community after community, country after country, and there is no let up. It is embarrassing when [men who should know better behave like dogs](#).

I only hope the Mishna will be right that this is indeed a sign that God will intervene, because frankly none of our religious leaders seems capable of

stopping it. Oh yes, they will excoriate us for eating the wrong food, for wearing short sleeves, for using teabags on the Sabbath, or making the wrong blessing. They will ban the use of computers, cell phones, and television, but remain silent on corruption and deceit. Some will even argue that Laws of the Land are not sacrosanct, and they will praise and honor the criminals who subsequently pass on chunks of their illegal booty to religious institutions.

That is why I fast on the Ninth of Av. Because when I read the first chapter of Isaiah that is the haftarah on the Shabbat beforehand, and I read the words he used of his generation, I realize we have not changed in nearly 3,000 years. His words still accurately and correctly apply to swathes of Jewish life today. Last week, [corruption once again](#), in New Jersey in the USA. [Rabbis involved](#). It makes no difference if corrupt politicians outnumbered them. It is irrelevant if others are more corrupt than we are. Should we judge ourselves by scum or pure water? I fast for my inability to make our own world a better place. I fast for the desecration of God's name WE are guilty of. I fast because we have not learnt. Because we make money our god, and because not one of the so-called Great Rabbis of our generation comes out publicly and condemns corruption the way they do any petty minor infringement of their own political and social standards.

Think of Sodom and Gomorrah. Indeed, Isaiah makes the comparison. The Torah in [Genesis \(13:13\)](#) says, "And the men of Sodom were evil sinners to God exceedingly." But if you look carefully at the traditional punctuation, there is a comma between "sinners" and "to God exceedingly". I wish I knew who first made the point that the verse, if read according to its punctuation, really says, "And the men of Sodom were evil sinners," take a deep breath, "[But with regard] to God [they were] exceedingly [pious]!" That is how it is nowadays. All outwardly holy and pious, but inwardly rotten to the core.

There's another crucial line in the first chapter of Isaiah. ["Had it not been for a tiny minority, we would be no better than Sodom and comparable to Gomorrah."](#) Thank goodness for the tiny minority. But sadly, it is all but silent. And for as long as this is the situation, Tisha B'Av remains as relevant as ever. Because we are in danger of destroying ourselves once again, if not physically then certainly morally.