

Season of Fasts

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

We are now in the season of fasts. What actually happened on the fasts of the 17th day of Tammuz and the 9th of Av? Well, my dears, it depends whom you ask.

According to the Mishna (Taanit 4:6) five things happened on the 17th of Tammuz. It is the anniversary of when Moses smashed the first set of stone tablets on Sinai. It is the date that the daily sacrifices in the Temple ended, because the siege meant no animals were available, the defenses of the city of Jerusalem were breached, Apostomus burnt a scroll of the Torah, and an idol was placed in the Temple.

On the 9th of Av the generation of the desert were told they could not enter the Land of Israel. The First and the Second Temples were destroyed. Betar was conquered, and the city of Jerusalem was plowed up. (Which is why) When the month of Av begins (which it does this year on Friday), we reduce happy occasions.

There are problems with this. Aren't there always? We are an argumentative lot. The Talmud (Taanit 28b) reminds us that the prophet Jeremiah says that on the 9th of the fourth month (after Nissan) the walls of the city were breached and all the fighting men fled (52:7). And explains that the Mishna was referring to the Second Temple being destroyed by the Romans.

The Talmud also says that it was Apostomus who both burned the scroll and put up an idol in the temple. But elsewhere says it was King Menashe who was responsible for the idol. The commentators cannot agree about who Apostomus was, either. Some identified him with Ptolemy. Josephus thought he was a Roman soldier of around 50 CE. Some think he was Antiochus. Others that he was Syrian procurator. In other words, someone who not only hated Jews, but delighted in humiliating them. Another opinion is that "Apostomus" is the Hebrew transcription for the Latin "Faustinus," and that the name of Julius Severus, who was sent by Hadrian to put down the Bar Cochba rebellion, in which case the setting up of an idol in the sanctuary would have to be referred to the dedication of a temple of Zeus upon the consecrated ground of the Temple.

The Jerusalem Talmud (Taanit 4:5) says that both under the Babylonians and the Romans the breaches in the walls took place on 17th of Tammuz and Jeremiah got slightly mixed up over the dates under the pressure of the war. Similarly, there are different opinions amongst the rabbis about what day both Temples were destroyed. What is clear is the rabbis felt no compunction about rolling them into one. "We try to combine bad news." (Erchin 11b)

The one thing we can all agree on, and that deserves emphasis, is that for 2,500 years we have been mourning the destruction of Jerusalem and the First Temple that the Babylonians destroyed. And for over 2,000 years, the rebuilt

Jerusalem and the Second Temple, which the Romans did. Is there any other religion or people that does that? No, of course not. So, when fools (intentionally or not), claim that the Jewish presence in Jerusalem is a 20th century act of imperialism, I would argue that the Roman conquest and then the Muslim conquests of the Land of Israel were acts of earlier imperialism too. Indeed, the Israelite invasion of Canaan was an act of imperialism, except that they believed they were returning home too. One could go further back still to Homo sapiens dispossessing the Neanderthals. But it seems to me that continuity of devotion, of cultural religious connection, and continued celebration of its victories, and equally mourning over its tragedies for millennia ought to be a relevant factor. But then, as with antisemitism, some people are so infected with the virus they cannot see or entertain another point of view. This is one good reason why we should indeed remember, record, and keep the ancient practices of fasting over our losses.

It seems to me that there are some other issues here, too. We recall the fact that on both occasions we were divided amongst ourselves, religiously and politically. On both occasions there were similarities to the present state of the Jewish people.

There is a lot of talk about a decline in Jewish identity. A rift between American Jewry, predominantly Reform and Conservative, and Israeli Jewry, much more traditional. American Jewry mainly Ashkenazi. Israeli Jewry significantly Sephardi. And in both there are large numbers of anti-religious, non-religious, and secular Jews.

We have always had sectarian and geographic divides and conflicts. Once it was Babylonia versus Israel. Sadducees against Pharisees or Rabbanites against Karaites. Then Zionists against anti-Zionists. Secular Zionists against religious Zionists. Mensheviks against Bolsheviks. In America there were secular left-wing Yiddish speakers against the Orthodox. Now it is Jews for Democrats versus Jews for Trump. Jews for Israel against those who support BDS. This is the challenge of open societies. So be it. Nothing new.

Reminds me of the secular, Marxist anti-religious Zionists I used to encounter in Israel 50 years ago. The sort who made fun of anyone religious and actively tried to interfere with them and prevent their involvement in civic affairs. In my opinion, the modern Jews who don't care for Israel's survival are the heirs of the Jews under Greek rule who tried to reverse their circumcisions and preferred Greek values. Or those Jews who felt closer to Roman or Christian societies than Jewish. There have always been some Jews who would rather see us disappear. Naturally, as someone who wants Judaism, any brand of Jewish identity, to survive, this is disturbing and merits recognition, even if I have no doubt that the committed will survive and thrive.

This sad loss of assimilation (which I disapprove of, as opposed to integration which I applaud) and the loss of so many Jews to our tradition and our people is all the more justification for mourning self-destruction, as the 9th of Av also does.

But I also recall that much of our religious leadership (not all, of course)

failed then too, and the Talmud has no problem saying it. I mourn the constant flow of intolerance and insensitivity, not to say corruption, that I see too much of and causes so much negative press.

This is our tragedy now, as it was twice before. We survived it then and we will survive it now. But at what cost?

That is why I fast! We have always been our own worst enemies. What has saved us is that our enemies are so busy fighting each other that they always shoot themselves in the foot. And for the believers history and the Divine intervening in world affairs.