

THOUGHTS FOR *BEIN HA'MITZARIM* THE THREE WEEKS



Suffering humanizes us. Ignoring suffering dehumanizes us... Attunement to suffering makes us more compassionate. It also helps us appreciate where we come from and all that it took to get us to where we are.

We have to remind ourselves that we don't diminish our happiness when we spend a day or a few weeks meditating on the tragedies of history from which we emerged. We become more grateful, holding tightly to our blessed life because we can.²

¹ A remarkable leaf in Ithaca, NY - photo credit: Michoel from oneinfocus.org

² Erica Brown, *In The Narrow Places - Daily Inspiration For The Three Weeks*, from the introduction



Day 1 - Tammuz 17

Let the wicked give up his ways, the sinful man his plans. Let him turn back to the Lord, and he will pardon him to our God, for He freely forgives. For My plans are not your plans, nor are My ways your ways - declares the Lord. But as the heavens are high above the earth, so are My ways high above your ways and My plans above your plans. (Isaiah 55:7-9)

God is not like human beings - "My plans are not your plans" - in that God grants true forgiveness. If we genuinely make room for God, God will make room for us.

Human relationships do not always offer that degree of reciprocity...Our own willingness to start afresh, to forgive, to seek forgiveness, may or may not be matched in the mind and heart of someone else. God, on the other hand, is poised and waiting for us when - and only when - we finally make room for God in our lives...

Erica Brown, *IN THE NARROW PLACES - Daily Inspiration For The Three Weeks*, pg. 28-29



Day 2 - Tammuz 18

Our need to interpret experiences can also lead us to a more potentially problematic arena - the place of Eliphaz³ [one of Job's advisors], interpreting pain and difficulty of others.

This transgresses the biblical prohibition of *ona'at devarim*, oppressing someone with words. In Leviticus we read "Do not wrong one another, but fear your Lord, for I am God your Lord" (25:17)...When we fabricate reasons for someone else's suffering, we not only take an arrogant and smug stance about another's experience, we also deem that person culpable in some way.

Nothing could be more oppressive than heaping guilt or blame on top of a victim's pain.

Ibid, pg. 36

³ see Job 4:7-9



Day 3 - Tammuz 19

God hates six things; seven things are an abomination to Him.
A haughty bearing
A lying tongue
Hands that shed innocent blood
A mind that hatches evil plots
Feet quick to run to evil
A false witness testifying lies
And one who incites brothers to quarrel. (Proverbs 6:16-19)

...[But] the book of Proverbs does not leave us with the ugly aspects of humanity without offering a way to ameliorate the problems identified:

...keep your father's commandments.
Do not forsake your mother's teaching.
Tie them over your heart always.
Bind them around your throat.
When you walk it will lead you.
When you lie down it will watch over you;
and when you are awake, it will talk with you.
For the commandment is a lamp,
the teaching is a light. (Proverbs 6:20-23)

This advice suggests ways to remind ourselves of the disciplines that guide and anchor us...the book of Proverbs connects us to ways and means that these principles can impact upon us. They must be with us constantly as reminders, sources of light, and holy teachings.

Ibid, pg. 41-42



Day 4 - Tammuz 20

As we read the words of Isaiah and Jeremiah, we see a picture of a family in turmoil. A father and his estranged adolescent son are arguing. The child wants more independence; he tries to break away and assert himself. The father feels scorned and used. Others have replaced him

as the center of the child's universe; friends and acquaintances all seem more important than the very parent who gave him life.

In the height of accusation and dissent, there is suddenly the meek voice of need: "Father!" The father turns in surprise. Did you call me "father"? Suddenly the father is taken back to another time and place, to the days when his young, innocent son held his hand and walked with him in the park. He remembers that he was once the "companion of [his child's] youth, "his son's best friend and hero. All of this because of one word of love: father.

Only when we place ourselves squarely within the "conversation" of this verse do we feel it's emotional expansiveness. "Just now you called to Me, 'Father!...' " We feel the vulnerability and fragility of the father who is wishing away the distance separating him from his son, and the son who sometimes needs, even in independence, especially in times of rebellion, the strong and protective embrace and praise of his father. But this is not the story of one family; it is a metaphor of a nation, as it states in Malachi 2:10, "Have we not all one Father?"⁴

Ibid, pg. 45-46



Day 5 - Tammuz 21

The way that we give and receive criticism is often shaped by culture, community expectations and societal norms. When we are defensive, we lose a whole avenue to introspection that can help us develop and grow in our sensitivity and thoughtfulness to others...Every day we receive messages about ourselves. Every once in a while, someone cares enough to tell us what they see. Correct the wise person and he will love you...⁵

Ibid, pg. 50-51



Day 6 - Tammuz 22

⁴ see Isaiah 1:1-27, Jeremiah 2:4-28, 3:4)

⁵ Proverbs 9:8

A vine is generally a fast-growing plant that can spread its beauty far and wide. But it can also choke other life around it and become the base, alien plant that Jeremiah⁶ describes. We are challenged to plant with care and to watch over that which we plant so that our vines provide comfort and shade but avoid being destructive, insinuating themselves into every crevice and choking other life.

Ibid, pg. 56



Day 7 Tammuz 23

A tale is told among Hasidim about a young man who had suffered many great personal losses, and traveled far to see his rebbe [teacher, rabbi], seeking clarity and renewed faith at a time that sorely tried him. He arrived at the rebbe's court and blurted out his catalogue of misfortunes. The rebbe sat in silence and listened. Even when this disciple had finished, the rebbe sat in a prolonged and pregnant silence. The young man trembled. Finally, the rebbe got up and stood right next to his disciple and said in a hushed tones, "I cannot explain why any of these terrible things have befallen you. But I can stand beside you in anger." That is consolation.

Ibid, pg. 57-58



Day 8 Tammuz 24

We can only imagine the horror of watching Jerusalem torn apart by its enemies, its buildings burning and its citizens ravaged. Witnesses to events see themselves as the eyes of history. They want future generations to feel the pain even without having seen the tragedy. It is a paradoxical challenge for us to mourn a past that we have never experienced. But, as creatures of history, the Jewish calendar calls upon us to relive such moments repeatedly.

Ibid, pg. 61

⁶ Jeremiah 2:4-28, 3:4



Day 9 Tammuz 25

When we think of Zion, we think of a place flourishing with an ideology, its inhabitants driven by a mission. That homeland, the prophet says, should never be abandoned and desolate. It is our job to protect it...

We cannot abandon Zion at this time. It cannot stand alone in the world of nations but must be protected, embraced and supported in every way. Martin Buber once wrote powerfully of the ancient vision of our prophets:

The renewal of the world and the renewal of Zion are one and the same thing, for Zion is the heart of the renewed world...The people of Israel is called upon to be the herald and pioneer of the redeemed world, the land of Israel to be its center and the throne of it's King.⁷

Ibid, pg. 67-68



Day 10 Tammuz 26

Rabbi Sacks, writing about relationships and the notion of covenant observes that,

The great covenantal relationship - between God and mankind, between man and woman in marriage, between members of a community or citizens of a society - exist because both parties recognize that "it is not good for man to be alone..."⁸

In true love, not only are we willing to risk all for an uncertain future, we are willing to forego our own emotional protection to take back that which is temporarily lost. In that rawness of vulnerability, we test the limits of compassion. As Does God.

Ibid, pg. 72

⁷ Martin Buber, *On Zion*, pg. 35

⁸ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*, pg. 203



Day 11 - Tammuz 27

The request to be answered may, in some ways, be more powerful than the questions we often ask in the face of tragedy, precisely because “why” can be asked as a rhetorical question of mystery, without expectation of an answer. In *Aneinu*⁹ we put God on the spot:

Answer us, Lord, answer us on our Fast Day, for we are in great distress. Look not at our wickedness. Do not hide Your face from us and do not ignore our plea. Be near to our cry; please let Your loving-kindness comfort us. Even before we call to You, answer us...

...It is always more of a consolation if people understand our pain and reach out to us before we have to articulate our distress. We feel more loved when others can anticipate our feelings rather than when we have to spell them out. It makes us feel like we are the objects of their genuine concern. They have been thinking about us before we even told them of our distress... In *Aneinu* we ask God for kindness as a form of consolation...to reach out to us before we express pain.

Ibid, pg. 74-76



Day 12 - Tammuz 28

“Ours is an age which has forgotten how to cry.” Rabbi Norman Lamm, chancellor of Yeshiva University, offered this observation in a sermon he gave on Rosh HaShana called “Three Who Cried”¹⁰...Rabbi Lamm speaks of three types of tears: the tears that come when our myths of absolute security and certainty are shattered; the tears of those who resign themselves to hopelessness; and the tears of those who cry over reality, not from frustration or resignation, but from a determination to change and renew that reality. Jewish crying fits the last of these categories: the act of crying, according to Rabbi Lamm, is the beginning of transformation - the tears are those of protest and resolute purpose.

Ibid, pg. 77

⁹ A prayer recited on fast days.

¹⁰ Norman Lamm, “*Three Who Cried*,” speech given at the Jewish Center (New York City) on the first day of Rosh HaShana, September 29, 1962



Day 13 - Tammuz 29

Jeremiah¹¹ creates for us a rich visual picture of the streets of Zion; the beggars and castoffs who are our ancestors and the crying, the endless crying that is the only real response when words fail us. Jeremiah is not only referencing a city. He is mourning the state of exile and the dislocation of those who are hated by the world. He takes us to a time when Jews were reviled and violently mistreated. Sadly, we do not have to go back as far as Jeremiah's days to understand his heavy-hearted sentiment.

...Jeremiah offers us the voice and melody of suffering...to hear the echoes of a lamentable past and help it find a haunting place within us.

Ibid, pg. 83



Day 14 - Av 1

Every day presents an opportunity to make our lives more whole, less fragmented, more honest and less compartmentalized. We are all hypocrites in one way or another. We strive to be good but stumble. We aim for consistency but miss the mark. So instead of trying to change the whole world at once, perhaps we can make minute but meaningful steps to promote justice.

Ibid, pg. 87



Day 15 - Av 2

The bows of the mighty are broken,
And the faltering are girded with strength.

¹¹ see Lamentations 5

Men once sated must hire out for bread;
Men once hungry hunger no more.
While the barren woman bears seven,
The mother of many is forlorn...
The Lord makes poor and makes rich;
He casts down, he also lifts high... (1 Samuel 2:4-7)

From a theological point of view, Hannah's observations about life may be more powerful than gratitude. She declares that life as we know it can change in an instant, as did hers. This provides more than thanks - it offers hope. It also forces humility on those who have been given much. It can all be taken away *keheret ayin*, in the blink of an eye.

Ibid, pg. 89-90



Day 16 - Av 3

Where words fail us, images sometimes help create the picture of loss. A destroyed Jerusalem as a mourning mother¹² is an image we may all sadly recognize. We will never see a howling sun which refuses to shine¹³, and yet the imaginative powers are drawn to highlight the absurdity of it. Destruction, too, has both these faces: the pitiful and the absurd. On these days when our national history speaks to us in its most melancholy voice, it asks us to stretch the imagination and make what is animate, still, and what is not living, weep.

Ibid, pg. 94



Day 17 - Av 4

In the aggregate, these laws (*Shulhan Arukh*¹⁴) point to an absence which is a presence. We create a physical and emotional void to mimic a void that we do not know. It is more honest than

¹² see Lamentations 1

¹³ from the *kina* (a poem reciting sorrow read at this season) - "*A'adeh Ad Hug Shamayim*"

¹⁴ Code of Jewish Law - referring in this content to the list of grieving measures during The Three Weeks.

filling in that void with memories we never experienced. Loss is not always about the fullness of the memory but about its vast silences. We inherited the void, and sometimes we must occupy it by creating small reminders of loss through sensual absences - the visual reminder of a wall unplastered or a forehead marked, the tactile reminder of a ring not worn, or the auditory reminder of music not played. These losses are no great sacrifice, just small irritations of a grief not imagined.

Ibid, pg. 99-100



Day 18 - Av 5

Ascend a lofty mountain
O herald of joy to Zion
Raise your voice with power
O Herald of joy to Jerusalem. (Isaiah 40:9)

What consolation does the prophet muster that could stir hope in the shattered lives of those who lived through calamities? Isaiah does not promise instant improvement. One of the underlying motifs of the chapter is man's mortality - hardly a comforting theme. "All flesh is grass, all its goodness like flowers of the field. Grass withers, flowers fade..." (Isaiah 40:6-7). How can man's mortality become a source of renewed strength?

Isaiah compares that which is fleeting with that which last forever: "Grass withers, flowers fade - but the word of our God is always fulfilled" (Isaiah 40:7-8). The prophet asks mortal individuals to attach themselves to that which is enduring. Consolation begins when we start to value that which ultimately matters.

The first step of consolation is not a tangible solution. It is hope.

Ibid, pg. 102



Day 19 - Av 6

One of the most beautiful expressions in *Eikha*¹⁵ is: “Let us lift up our hearts with our hands to God in the heavens.” (Lamentations 3:41). When we visualize this verse, we can imagine pieces of a broken heart held high in our hands, a gift to God of our innermost feelings. “Look, God, see our pain. See these fragments, these emotional shards, pieces of our heart. We show them to You. Have pity and compassion upon us.”

Ibid, pg. 105



Day 20 - Av 7

Jeremiah 2 is filled with rhetorical questions of rebuke directed to the children of Israel, opening with God’s pained “What wrong did your fathers find in Me that they abandoned Me and went after delusions and were deluded?” (2:5). ...The interrogation forces the Israelites into a mental corner from which they have no choice but to examine themselves.

...Continual questioning forces us to look inside. ...[This] is a time to review Jewish history and our enduring spiritual bonds to God. It is a time to question ourselves.

Ibid, 109-111



Day 21 - Av 8

Nicolas Donin...left Judaism...and was later baptized as a Roman Catholic with the Franciscan order. In 1238, Donin wrote to Pope Gregory 1X in Rome, condemning the Talmud on thirty-five counts. Subsequently, in 1240 the Pope ordered that the Talmud itself be put on trail...

The trail lasted two years, after which the Talmud was found guilty. Twenty-four cartloads of Talmud volumes were burned, decimating Jewish scholarship in France. In those days, before the advent of the printing press, all books were hand-copied - an arduous task, which helps us understand the momentousness of this act of destruction. Every word lovingly written went up in smoke, effectively killing the act of study for thousands of teachers and students...

¹⁵ Book of Lamentations

The trail has a ripple effect, and throughout the centuries after the first, devastating pyre was lit, the Talmud was similarly condemned in other countries throughout Europe....

It may be hard for us to understand just what a travesty book burnings were because it is so easy for us to replace books today. But it is not only practical concerns that create anguish. Clearly there is a philosophical animus behind book burning which lead German literary critic Heinrich Heine (1797-1856) to conclude, "Where they *burn books*, they will ultimately *burn people*."¹⁶

Ibid, pg. 113-115



Tisha B'Av

As Tisha B'Av closes, we find ourselves worn down by the litany of sadness. We have spent a day reciting thousands of words that perhaps can best be summed up with a sigh and a cry and a pounding on the door, all the non-verbal acts that ask "why" more loudly than words. And then, if we are honest, we retreat into the silence, the collapse of the soul when the words have spent their course. In that silence we stand as if to hear the silence of embers floating in a Jerusalem morning the day after the Temple was reduced to ash, and we look again for God.

Ibid, pg. 121



Heinrich Heine, "Almanson," in *The Complete Poems of Heinrich Heine*, pg. 187