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## Tisha B'Av 2010. Why Bother?

Tue, 07/13/2010 - 20:00

Adina Lewittes And Rachel Brodie  
Special To The Jewish Week

The margins have become the mainstream—and the vast majority of Jews today are not actively connected with a “temple” (a.k.a. synagogue). So it seems unlikely that a mid-summer day of mourning for the destruction of two ancient temples in Jerusalem could have much to recommend it. Throw in the prohibitions on eating, drinking, and shmoozing and the ruin of *Tisha B'Av* itself seems certain.

Yet, the irony of lamenting the irrelevance of a day like *Tisha B'Av* (this year, from sundown Monday evening through Tuesday evening) to most Jews today is striking. If *Tisha B'Av* brought the Biblical model of Judaism, centered as it was on the Temple cult to an end, it also marks the emergence, phoenix-like, of Rabbinic Judaism, a system that has sustained the Jewish people for almost 2000 years. In the 21st century, the de facto reality of a tiny minority of Jews who, even under the broadest definition, follow rabbinic law (halacha) and defer to rabbinic authority makes it clear that the paradigm has shifted once again. To be sure, contours are unclear and leadership is fragmented, but the next era, a post-Rabbinic one, is already underway.

For all the genuine grief, despair and fear this engenders among the adherents and/or proponents of Rabbinic Judaism, it's important for all Jews to consider that *Tisha B'Av* is just as relevant now as it ever was. Maybe even more so as we live through this time of transition.

Looking at the evolution of *Tisha B'Av*, it is relatively easy to make a case for its observance based on the value that continues to be placed on the commemoration of events that form part of our sacred history, such as the Exodus from Egypt and the victory of the Maccabees. Equally relevant is *Tisha B'Av* as an opportunity for reflection on the perpetuation of immoral and unethical behaviors that were said to have caused the destruction (baseless hatred, for example). Even so, *Tisha B'Av* is more than a Memorial Day and quite different from Yom Kippur.

The assault, both physical and metaphysical, that has characterized *Tisha B'Av*, is meant to be intense. Beginning with dirges chanted in darkness, fortified through deliberate dehydration, and concluding with a redemptive lightheadedness, those Jews who submit to its strict observance are led to feel more than just hot and bothered on that day.

While critics might be quick to dismiss the following approach as coddling the narcissism of contemporary Jews, in our experience as traditionally observant, highly



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educated, passionately committed liberal Jews, teaching and reaching “unaffiliated” or “disaffected” Jews on opposite coasts, a radical acceptance of today’s reality has led us to a new paradigm for revitalizing and re-imagining a vibrant Jewish future. This paradigm is the successor to the rabbinic paradigm of “*asur*” (prohibited) and “*mutar*” (permitted), which itself was the successor to the Biblical paradigm of “*tamay*” (impure) and “*tahor*” (pure). Based on our work – our successes and our struggles – and our experiences with those who are seeking, we propose a new paradigm, that of *keva* (established) and *kavannah* (intentional).

The new paradigm of *keva* and *kavannah* reflects the tension between tradition and innovation, objectivity and subjectivity, and between the communal and the individual. These dualities serve as shorthand for a value system that determines the behavior of individuals and groups of Jews. For example, the annual observance of *Tisha B’Av* among rabbinic Jews is made meaningful within the larger context of a commitment to a legal system (*halacha*) that has established certain rules. For the majority of contemporary Jews, however, unless it can be made personally meaningful in some way, *Tisha B’Av* won’t matter. Whereas a rabbinic Jew would need to know what was permitted and what was prohibited in the observance of *Tisha B’Av*, a post-rabbinic Jew asks “what was the intention of those who shaped *Tisha B’Av*?” and “Is there any way to make their intentions more meaningful to us by reimagining the rituals of *Tisha B’Av* rather than observing them just because it was always done this way?”

Today we hear a call for *all* our Jewish endeavors to be suffused with *kavannah*, in the sense of engaging people through Jewish experiences that are personally meaningful. Researchers, including sociologist Steven Cohen, tell us that Jews today are seeking spiritual direction from Judaism. The research indicates there is a deep hunger, but too many are not finding sustenance in the traditional spaces, literal and figurative, of our faith.

They seek not so much to abandon Judaism, we are told, but to refashion it to reflect their own personal narratives. As part of a transitional generation of rabbinic Jews, we see ourselves as translators, bringing insight into the *keva* and *kavannah* of Rabbinic Judaism to contemporary Jews and bringing their experiences, challenges and needs to the discussion of our collective future.

In this spirit, we ask the painful questions about what is being destroyed and bring curiosity to all that is emerging. And this *Tisha B’Av*, we are asking our communities to do the same.

*Rabbi Adina Lewittes is founder of Sha’ar Communities; Rachel Brodie is founder of Jewish Milestones. They are collaborating on a book about the issues raised in this piece, tentatively titled, “Intentional Judaism.”*

Adina Lewittes, Judaism, Rachel Brodie, Tisha B’Av

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