

Introduction



The Midrash (*Lam. Rabbah* 2:4) records that Rabbi Yohanan used to interpret a particular verse in *Eikhah* (2:2) sixty different ways while Rebbe offered only twenty-four interpretations. Do not think, it continues, that Rabbi Yohanan was more knowledgeable than Rebbe. On the contrary, Rebbe lived before Rabbi Yohanan and since he was chronologically closer to the time of the destruction of the Temple (*hurban*) he was presumably more knowledgeable and therefore in a better position to be exegetically creative about it. Rather, concludes the Midrash, precisely because Rebbe lived closer to the *hurban* he was more emotionally distraught by it and, as a result, was simply unable to interpret it in more than twenty-four ways. "He used to remember and interpret and then weep and be consoled." His closer proximity to the *hurban* so overwhelmed him that he was unable to proceed. Future generations, by contrast, were more removed from that calamitous event and, therefore, did not experience emotions as intense and consuming.

What then should we say for us who live many dozens of generations after the *hurban*? How hard it is for us to feel the sense of mourning (*avelut*) that we are bidden to experience on Tish'ah be-Av. Yes, Tish'ah be-Av is a *yom avelut* as the Rav,

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zt"l*, often pointed out, and the entire Jewish people are *avelim*, mourning for the *hurban* of the Temple, the *Beit ha-Mikdash*. But, he added, there is a major difference between an individual mourner faced with the immediate death of a close relative and the Jewish people mourning for an event that took place almost nineteen hundred and fifty years ago. The former is in the category of *avelut de-yahid* or *avelut hadashah*, a newly acquired feeling of mourning for a particular individual. The experience is very real; it just happened. The latter is called *avelut de-rabbim* or *avelut yeshanah* (*Yevamot* 43b), an "old *avelut*" experienced already for many years by the entire community of Israel and one that continues to grow older with the passage of time. Whereas in the first case, the mourning is real, spontaneous and instinctive, in the second case it is removed, remote and distant; there is no immediate sense of pain, grief and loss.

Already the prophet Jeremiah hinted at the special assistance we require to help instill in us a sense of *avelut yeshanah* when he wrote in the passage chosen for the *Haftarah* of Tish'ah be-Av, "Consider and call for the professional mourners and let them come" (*Jer.* 9:16). *Avelut yeshanah* requires "professional mourners" (*mekonenot*) to help us feel an appropriate sense of grief and mourning. "Let them raise up a lament for us; let our eyes run with tears" (9:17). It is *our* eyes that must run with tears, *our* pupils that must flow with water. One experiencing *avelut hadashah* need not be instructed as to how to weep. An individual, personal mourner need not be taught how to cry nor be inspired to mourn; such a reaction is natural and instinctive. It is only because we are removed and distant that we need instruction in how to mourn and feel the loss.

And feel we must. This instruction is crucial, said the Rav. It is not enough for us simply to say the words, go through the motions and recite the formulae. *Kinot* recitation, said the Rav, is like prayer (*tefillah*) and like *avelut* in general; it is an *avodah she-be-lev*, a "service of the heart" that requires an emo-

tional, personal and experiential feeling. The recitation of words and the articulation of formulae need to effect an inner feeling, sensibility and sensitivity. Mere recital of prescribed words falls far short of the prescribed requirement.

It is precisely this that marks the contribution of the Rav to our understanding and appreciation of the significance of Tish'ah be-Av. Through his careful analysis of the general themes of the day as well as by elucidating the meaning of specific words and phrases in the text of the *Kinot*, the Rav provided us with the intellectual understanding as well as the emotional sensitivity necessary to appreciate the significance of this day in contemporary times. For many centuries, the overarching themes of Tish'ah be-Av posed no challenge to Jews. For them, its basic themes and message reflected not only the distant past but also the reality of exile, destruction, suffering, victimization and discrimination in which they lived. For them, the experiential gap between their own immediate *avelut hadashah* and the more distant *avelut yeshanah* was not a significant one. But the founding of the State of Israel in 1948 and, more especially, the Six Day War in 1967 ("*Har ha-Bayit be-yadeinu, the Temple Mount is in our hands!*") led many to question the contemporary relevance of a day devoted solely to sadness and mourning for the destruction of Jerusalem. References to Jerusalem as "in ruins, despised and desolate...desolate by having no inhabitants" rang hollow in a reality that boasted a bustling, dynamic, vibrant and now reunited city, and many called for a reexamination of the traditional role Tish'ah be-Av played in the annual cycle of Jewish practice and belief. The Rav squarely addressed this issue and made the case—eloquently, passionately and repeatedly, sometimes explicitly and often implicitly—that all that Tish'ah be-Av represented was as important, current and relevant at the end of the twentieth century as it ever was in previous times in Jewish history. This issue animated virtually all of his teaching on this day.

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The Rav's analysis of the *Kinot* led him to discuss a number of important contemporary issues in a direct, clear and forthright manner. For example, the reader will find a number of statements highly supportive of the State of Israel as well as those deeply critical of the Catholic Church. Both will need to be incorporated into analyses of the Rav's positions on these very important matters together with his other pronouncements on these subjects.

In addition, the reader will undoubtedly be struck by the Rav's significantly broad definition of the type of Torah study permissible on Tish'ah be-Av. The Talmud (*Ta'anit* 30a) and *Shulhan Arukh* (*Orah Hayyim* 554:1–2) place a significant limit on what may be studied on that day and, according to the *Magen Avraham* (*Orah Hayyim* 554:5, 2), even permissible passages can be studied only superficially (no intensive analysis) and only personally (no teaching others).

In light of these restrictions, it is remarkable how wide-ranging and unlimited was the Rav's teaching on Tish'ah be-Av; virtually no Jewish text or theme lay beyond the purview of his analysis. True, he noted (see *Mesorah* 6 [1991]:30–31) that his grandfather, Rabbi Hayyim Soloveitchik, disagreed with the *Magen Avraham* and permitted intensive study as well, but this permission was limited only to the study of those texts relating to Jewish personal and national tragedy permissible to be studied on that day. Yet, even the superficial reader will note how the Rav's interests on Tish'ah be-Av extended into many issues that were far removed from them and ranged throughout the corpus of Torah in its broadest sense.

For many years, the *Sefer ha-Kinot* was essentially a closed book, defying simple and easy understanding. Although a few English translations may have been available, its multifaceted nature presented the reader with a formidable challenge. In order to understand it properly, it was necessary to be a master of the Bible and have a wide-ranging knowledge of rabbinic lit-

erature (Talmud and Midrash), medieval Hebrew poetry, and Jewish history. The Rav was intimately familiar with all this material and he used his prodigious knowledge in all these areas to unlock that which had previously been closed for generations. He opened up the Book of *Kinot* for us and revolutionized our thinking about Tish'ah be-Av, the *hurban* and Jewish national tragedy in general. For this reason, as well as for so many others, our generation owes him a tremendous debt of gratitude.

From the late 1960s until the mid-1980s, the Rav would spend all or much of the day of Tish'ah be-Av involved in the recitation and study of the *Kinot*. *Shaharit* would begin at 8:00 am in the Maimonides School, the yeshiva day school founded by the Rav and his wife in Boston. At about 9:00 am, the Rav would deliver a *shi'ur* on issues relevant to Tish'ah be-Av for about an hour and, after about a five-minute break, would begin the recital of the *Kinot*. After reading a few words or phrases, he would stop and comment, sometimes for a moment or two and sometimes for more extended periods of time. Those assembled would regularly interrupt with questions and insights and the Rav would stop and address their points. This mixture of reciting and learning, the traditional recitation of the *Kinot* and the robust sounds of Torah teaching, the analysis of the words of Rabbi El'azar ha-Kalir and the concepts of the Rambam (Maimonides), would continue for many hours. Very often this mixture of a spiritual and intellectual experience would last most of the afternoon.

Each year, the Rav opened the *Kinot* book and studied it as if he were doing so for the first time, and the results were never predictable. Sometimes he repeated the basic interpretations he had suggested in previous years or presented them in a slightly different way, sometimes he suggested new interpretations, and sometimes he explicitly took issue with interpretations he had given in years past.

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This book contains edited transcripts of tapes of both the Rav's introductory *shiurim* and his line-by-line commentary from the years 1970, 1973-1980, and 1982-1984. Unfortunately, the search for tapes of the Rav's presentations in 1971-1972 and 1981 yielded no results. In addition, even when tapes were available, they were not professionally prepared and were, often, unclear. Almost all of them also have gaps: sometimes the person taping came late and missed the beginning, even the entire introductory *shiur*; sometimes the person left the room for some time in the middle of the presentation and sometimes the person left for the day before the learning was concluded. Listening to all the tapes, many times, over and over again, I tried as hard as I could to reproduce as faithfully and accurately as I could the exact words spoken by the Rav.

I then edited all the material, year by year, to create one series of reflections on the most prominent themes with which the Rav dealt in his introductory *shi'urim* as well as the careful line-by-line analysis of the *Kinot* that followed. I divided the material into two parts, themes of Tish'ah be-Av and themes of the *Kinot*, although much *Kinot* material is included in the first part as well. I also made every effort to check for accuracy the material the Rav quoted from memory. I often referenced the source or sources in parentheses in the body of the work, sometimes providing the exact source and sometimes a source that was as close as I could find to what the Rav was saying. When there were a number of sources for a particular statement, I cited only one or two of them. The Rav approached the themes and text of the *Kinot* afresh each year and therefore his analyses of particular ideas or passages may have on occasion varied. I included these differing approaches and, in addition, preserved several comments the Rav made which are arguably less applicable today than when he made them some two to three-and-a-half decades ago (for example, the place of Shiloh in current Israel). Furthermore, I included certain historical observations made by the Rav (such as those pertaining to the numbers

of Jews killed during the Crusades and Chmielnicki massacres) even though recent research has revised historians' thinking about the topics he addressed. These details, however, do not in any way affect the power and relevance of his remarks to the present day reader.

Finally, I have tried to be faithful to the Rav's extemporaneous "voice" as much as possible. The style of the work, including some of its repetitive nature, reflects the original oral character of the Rav's presentation. In the absence of any written material prepared by the Rav, his "voice" was the only authentic element I had, and I felt that it was important to maintain it to the extent to which I could. All in all, I tried very hard to create one coherent flowing text from many years of oral presentations and may have been more successful in some cases than others. In the words of King David (Ps. 19:13), "*Shegi'ot mi yavin, Who can discern mistakes?*"

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The Rambam rules (*Hilkhos Ta'anuyot* 5:19) that the fast of Tish'ah be-Av will become obsolete in messianic times and, in fact, is destined to become a holiday. Indeed, in keeping with the traditional belief in the imminence of the messianic arrival, Jews always believed and hoped that the Tish'ah be-Av they were observing any given year would be the last. In the *kinah* beginning "*A'addeh ad hug shamayim*," the author states that "Each year she (i.e., the Jewish people) says, 'This is the year, *hi ha-shanah ha-zot*.'" And, when reading this phrase, the Rav would often reminisce about how the Jews in Warsaw would throw away their *Kinot* books after Tish'ah be-Av, out of a belief that it would never again be necessary to use them.

I therefore feel some measure of ambivalence for having put so much effort into a book that I hope will soon become obsolete. And yet, with all the belief in the imminent arrival of the messiah, this work still has value. First, we must be prepared in case, God forbid, the messiah delays his appearance. There is, for example, an obligation to fulfill the *mitzvah* of training small children in the laws of Tish'ah be-Av even though we hope that by the time they reach bar and bat mitzvah age those practices will no longer be relevant (see *Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim*

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551:14 and *Magen Avraham* 551:38). Also, at the very least, after the messiah arrives we will need to know why Tish'ah be-Av was designated as such a special and unique day.

It is my hope that the teachings of the Rav presented here will elucidate the *Kinot* as well as many of the themes central to Tish'ah be-Av as a whole. May this book be a worthy and appropriate memorial tribute for the Rav *zt"l* and may we all merit to see *nehamat Tziyyon u-vinyan Yerushalayim bi-meherah be-yamenu*.

Jacob J. Schacter

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