

Why do we mourn on Tisha b'Av?

9 Av 5771 – 9 August 2011

Our tradition stipulates that we are not supposed to enjoy our learning today.

The rabbis decreed that conventional learning is prohibited on Tisha be-Av, it is only permissible to study sad texts.

And what if you enjoy reading sad texts? Difficult.

Why do we mourn today?

Reading the Mishna one gets a uniform picture: We mourn the calamities of Jewish history, the destruction of the Temple, and the also fall of Beitar in 135 CE and it all happened on this day, on the Ninth of Av.

Mishna – Ta'anit 5:6

On the Tisha be-Av it was decreed on our ancestors that they would not enter the Land of Eretz Israel, the Temple was destroyed, both the first time and the second time, Betar was captured, and Jerusalem was plowed over.

משנה - תענית ד.ו.
בתשעה באב נגזר על אבותינו שלא
יכנסו לארץ וחרב הבית בראשונה
ובשניה ונלכדה ביתר ונחרשה העיר.

The Bavli states, there was destruction, there was devastation, there was exile. So we mourn.

Yet if we move closer, and look at the tradition of commemoration inside Israel as recorded in the Talmud Yerushalmi, a more complex - and more disturbing - picture emerges.

Less a comedy of errors, this is a tragedy of errors. Let us introduce the cast of characters.

And it all starts not with a good but with a *bad* samaritan. A diplomat provocateur, he remains nameless.

We meet Bar Kokhba, or as he is referred to in the text, Bar Kozba, not the 'son of the star' but the 'deceiver'.

And we meet Rabbi Eleazar Hamoda'i, the elderly statesman, the rabbi-disciple of Yochanan ben Zakkai, who had survived the destruction of the Temple 65 years earlier.

The fearless, powerful, uncompromising military leader Bar Kokhba is introduced as Akiva's hero. Akiva, the towering figure of the early Talmud period, seemed to mix politics and religion with grave consequences. And the Yerushalmi makes a point early on that, despite his astuteness as a rabbinic leader, not everyone agreed and Rabbi Akiva's political clout was at least open to question.

Let us read the story together.

Talmud Yerushalmi – Ta'anit 4:5

When Rabbi Akiva would see Bar Kozba, he would say, "This is the King Messiah!" Rabbi Yohanan ben Torta said to him, "Akiva! Grass will grow on your cheeks and still the Messiah will still not have come."

Rabbi Yohanan said, at Hadrian's command, they killed 800,000 in Betar... Hadrian besieged the city of Betar for three and a half years. Rabbi Eleazar Hamoda'i used to sit on sackcloth and ashes and pray every day, saying, "Master of the Universe! Do not sit in judgment today, do not sit in judgment today."

Hadrian wanted to go to him. One Samaritan said to him, "Do not go, for I will go and see what can be done to deliver the city to you." The Samaritan went through the city's drain pipe. He went and found Rabbi Eleazar Hamoda'i standing and praying. He pretended to whisper in his ear.

The people of the city saw him and brought him to Ben Kozba. They said to Bar Kozba, "We saw this old man conversing with your uncle." Bar Kozba said to the Samaritan, "What did you say to him, and what did Rabbi Eleazar Hamoda'i say to you?" The Samaritan said to Bar Kozba, "If I tell you, the king will kill me, and if I do not tell you, you will kill me. I prefer that the king should kill me, and not you." The Samaritan continued and said to him, "Rabbi Eleazar Hamoda'i said to me, 'I will surrender the city.'"

Bar Kozba went to Rabbi Eleazar Hamoda'i, and said to him, "What did that Samaritan tell you?" Rabbi Eleazar said to him, "Nothing at all." Bar Kozba said, "What did you say to him?" Rabbi Eleazar said to him, "Nothing at all." And with a kick of his foot Bar Kozba killed Rabbi Eleazar.

Immediately, a heavenly voice went forth saying: "'Woe to the worthless shepherd who abandons his flock! Let a sword descend upon his arm and his right eye. His arm will wither and his right eye will be blinded' (*Zechariah 11:17*). You have killed Rabbi Eleazar Hamoda'i, the arm of all Israel and their right eye. Thus, your arm will wither, and your right eye will be blinded."

And so it was that Betar was captured and Bar Kozba was killed.

ירושלמי - תענית ד.ה

רבי עקיבה כד הוה חמי בר כוזבה, הוה אמר, דין הוא מלכא משיחא! א"ל רבי יוחנן בן תורתא, עקיבה! יעלו עשבים בלחיך ועדיין בן דוד לא יבא.

א"ר יוחנן, קול אדריינוס קיסר הורג בביתר שמונים אלף ריבוא... שלש שנים ומחצה עשה אדריינוס מקיף על ביתר. והוה רבי אלעזר המודעי יושב על השק ועל האפר ומתפלל בכל יום ואומר, רבון העולמים! אל תשב בדין היום, אל תשב בדין היום.

בעא אדריינוס מיזל ליה. אמר ליה חד כותיי, לא תיזיל לך, דאנא חמי מה מייעבד ומשלים לך מדינתא. עאל ליה מן ביבא דמתינתא. עאל ואשכח רבי אלעזר המודעי, קאים מצלי. עבד נפשיה לחיש ליה בגו אודניה.

חמוניה בני מדינתא ואייתוניה גבי בן כוזבא. אמרון ליה, חמינן ההן סבא משתעי לחביבך. אמר ליה, מה אמרת ליה ומה אמר לך? אמר ליה אנא אמר לך מלכא קטל לי, ואי לא אנא אמר לך את קטל יתי טב לי, מלכא קטל יתי ולא את. אמר ליה אמר לי, דאננא משלים מדינתא.

אתא גבי רבי אלעזר המודעי אמר ליה, מה אמר לך הדין כותיאי? אמר ליה, לא כלום. מה אמרת ליה? א"ל, לא כלום. יהיב ליה חד בעוט וקטליה.

מיד יצאת בת קול ואמרה, הוי רעי האליל עזבי הצאן; חרב על זרועו ועל עין ימינו זרועו יבוש תיבש ועין ימינו כהה (זכריה יא). תכהה הרגת את רבי אלעזר המודעי, זרוען של כל ישראל ועין ימינם. לפיכך, זרועו של אותו האיש יבש תיבש ועין ימינו כהה תכהה.

מיד נלכדה ביתר ונהרג בן כוזבה.

So why do we mourn on Tisha b'Av?

The Rambam (Hilchot Taanit 5:3), makes a big deal out of Beitar, suggesting that the sin of Bar Kokhba (and Rabbi Akiva) is the major cause for mourning on Tisha be-Av. He seems to be saying that one of the things we mourn for is the foolishness of militant messianic patriotism.

Dio Cassius, the Roman historian, writes a single paragraph on the destruction that followed the fall of Beitar. The Romans demolished 400 synagogues in Beitar, killed 580,000 people in addition to those who died of hunger, disease, and fire. The Jewish population was largely exterminated. Jewish slaves were sold in such vast numbers that the prices in the Roman slave markets fell. It caused the devastation of the remaining Jewish community in Eretz Israel, the burning of over 500 synagogues, the killing of over half a million Jewish people, the start of the the exile proper, which lasted 19 centuries.

All of that because, as the Yerushalmi is at pains to point out, Jews turned on each other. Because a Jewish rabbi, a disciple of the peace-seeking Yochanan ben Zakkai, was falsely accused of wanting to give away the land of Israel.

The Jewish people failed to have empathy towards each other. They were filled with an inexplicable hubris, declaring a military hero, a nationalistic warrior, to be the Messiah.

It was not only the exile that was caused by Bar Kokhba.

The Romans were so fed up by the Jews, that they decided to invent a new name for Judea. After the destruction of the Temple in the year 70 CE, the Romans minted coins that read: Judea Capta! Well, that at least showed they called the area Judea still.

But now, after the third Jewish revolt, the Romans decided to wipe out even the memory of Jewish military defeat. And so they took a name from the Hebrew Bible, a name of one of Israel's enemies at the time, the Plishtim, and called the area Syria Palaestina. It really does takes your breath away.

And so there we are: the failure of Jews to get along. To create a sober, sane, foreign policy. To look for solutions. To be politically creative.

And what about Rabbi Eleazar Hamoda'i? Did he too fail? What did he do? He prayed. But didn't reach out to his fellow Jews to try to persuade them to change course. Like in 70 CE, Israel was lost through the timidity of the moderates (Gittin 56b)

Not only killed a Jewish peace-maker, a hero of the tradition of Yochanan ben Zakkai, the one who really saved the Jewish People from the catastrophe of the destruction of the Temple. It caused the devastation of Jewish life in its ancestral land, the exile which lasted almost two millenia and the creation of a non-Jewish state, essentially called Palestine.

They say that those who don't learn from history are bound to repeat it. This was not the first and not the last time the People of Israel came under the spell of messianic fervour, with disastrous results.

In telling this story, the rabbis seem to say: we mourn our role as victims of history, but we also mourn and repent our mistakes as actors of history. This is a very sophisticated understanding of history that the rabbis undertake. They say, messianic fervour disconnected from reality was part of the problem, it was not all the fault of the Romans.

So going back to the five reasons why we mourn on Tisha be-Av, each one of them can be construed both as a national tragedy and as a national failure. Of nerve. Of truthfulness. Of unity. The rabbinic treatment of Tisha be-Av is far more sophisticated, far more critical, far more honest.

ADDITIONAL POINTS

1. The Rambam (Hilchot Taanit 5:3), makes a big deal out of Beitar, suggesting that the sin of Bar Kokhba (and Rabbi Akiva) is the major cause for mourning on Tisha be-Av. He seems to be saying that one of the things we mourn for is the foolishness of militant messianic patriotism.
2. Contrast the story of Bar Kokhba as told by the rabbis as part of the Tisha be-Av commemoration to how an uncritical and heroic telling of the Bar Kokhba story has become a central part of the Lag ba-Omer celebrations. Maybe it is time for a sober re-evaluation of Bar Kokhba, to commemorate both his fortitude as well as his folly?
3. Dio Cassius, the Roman historian, writes a single paragraph on the destruction that followed the fall of Beitar. The Romans demolished 400 synagogues in Beitar, killed 580,000 people in addition to those who died of hunger, disease, and fire. The Jewish population was largely exterminated.
4. Jewish slaves were sold in such vast numbers that the prices in the Roman slave markets fell.
5. At the time, a considerable portion of the Jewish people lived in Babylon and in non-Jewish communities across the Levant. The Talmud relates how Rabbi Akiva travelled the Jewish world to collect money for the cause of the embattled Jews in Beitar. Jewish refugees from the destruction in 70 CE donated money to save the remnant of Jewish life in its ancestral land.
6. Bar Kokhba and the fall of Beitar marked the final separation of Judaism and Christianity. Christian missionaries flourished as the practice of Judaism became prohibited under strict Roman rule.
7. There is no doubt that many settlers today see themselves as *atkhalta de-galuta*, the forbearers of redemption.
8. Bar Kokhba, in confronting Rabbi Eleazar Hamoda'i also didn't engage in dialogue. He didn't argue with Rabbi Eleazar Hamoda'i, but killed him with a kick of his foot. Bar Kokhba only understood the politics of force.
9. The failure of Rabbi Eleazar Hamoda'i: He only prayed. He didn't reach out to his fellow Jews to try to persuade them to change course. Like in 70 CE, Israel was lost through the timidity of the moderates (Gittin 56b)
10. So going back to the five reasons why we mourn on Tisha be-Av, each one of them can be construed both as a national tragedy and as a national failure. Of nerve. Of truthfulness. Of unity. The rabbinic treatment of Tisha be-Av is far more sophisticated, far more critical, far more honest. What other people in the world set aside a day for meditation on our national failures? *Mi ke-amcha Israel*.