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By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Thoughts about Tisha B'Av

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On Saturday night, we begin the fast of Tisha B'Av. Throughout the world, Jews will be gathering to observe this mournful day in commemoration of the destructions of the First and Second Temples in ancient Jerusalem. We fast; we chant the book of Lamentations; we sing dirges bewailing our loss of the Temples, our long exile, our ongoing sufferings.

With the establishment of the State of Israel, though, we need to think through what Tisha B'Av should mean to us now. We are no longer in exile--we have our own Jewish State. Jerusalem is no longer abandoned and destroyed--it is filled with hundreds of thousands of people and is a thriving metropolis. Yes, we still have plenty of enemies; and yes, the Temple has not been rebuilt. Nevertheless, something dramatic has happened in Jewish history, and we need to acknowledge this new era.

Rabbi Haim David Halevy, late Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, wrote that we should chant fewer dirges than in the pre-Israel era. He recommended that we change the Nahem prayer to indicate that Jerusalem "was destroyed, humiliated and desolate, without her children"--it was, in the past tense; but it no longer is destroyed, humiliated and desolate.

Rabbi Halevy was criticized sharply for his suggestions. Some argued that it was not proper to change our traditional prayers, especially in light of the fact that we are not living in messianic times. Rabbi Halevy's answer was cogent and simple: Jews had prayed for nearly 2000 years that we be restored to our homeland in Israel. That prayer has been answered by the Almighty. Is it really appropriate to go on as though nothing at all has changed, as if the Almighty has not granted us a step in the direction of ultimate redemption? Isn't it a sign of ingratitude and moral turpitude to ignore all the good that has been bestowed upon us? Moreover, how can we utter words in our prayers about a destoyed and desolate Jerusalem, when we can see with our own eyes that Jerusalem is thriving and growing and full of vitality? Is it really appropriate for us not only to reflect no gratitude to the Almighty, but also to utter actual lies about the status of Jerusalem?

Rabbi Halevy explained that we should of course observe Tisha B'Av with fasting and with Lamentations and some dirges. After all, we have still not been granted full redemption. We have much to mourn over past destructions; and our exile has not come to an end. However, we should temper that fasting and mourning with a sense of gratitude to God that He has indeed granted us the Jewish State, and that we live in a generation privileged to witness the rebirth of Jewish sovereignty in the holy land.

Rabbi Halevy's insight in very important, and gives us an intelligent way to view our history--and our present. We always need to be deeply connected to our historical roots, and to feel as though we are an organic part of Jewish history. At the same time, though, we need always to be alert to new realities and to respond appropriately to the present challenges.

We pray that the day of Tisha B'Av will be turned into a day of rejoicing, with the full redemption of the people of Israel in messianic times. Meanwhile, though, we must be cognizant of the mournful message of this fast day--and also of the good and happy changes that have been ushered in during our own generations.

Angel for Shabbat