What Unifies the Jewish People? Thoughts for Tisha B'Av

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By
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Elias Canetti, a Sephardic Jew who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1981, offers some interesting observations about Jews in his book, “Crowds and Power”: “Fools may tell stories of their sameness everywhere, but anyone who knows them well will be inclined to think that there are more varied types among them than among any other people...Jews are different from other people, but, in reality, they are most different from each other.”

Given the tremendous diversity among Jews, what is the unifying factor that makes us consider ourselves to be one people? Canetti writes: “One is driven to ask in what respect these people remain Jews; what makes them into Jews; what is the ultimate nature of the bond they feel when they say "I am a Jew"....This bond...is the Exodus from Egypt.” Canetti suggests that the Israelites’ formative experience as a vast crowd leaving Egypt is the key to understanding the nature of Jewish peoplehood. As long as Jews—however different they are from each other—share historical memories of the Exodus from Egypt, they continue to identify as members of one people. We are bound together by the shared experience of redemption.

While Canetti touches on a vital point in Jewish identity, his explanation is incomplete.

In his magnificent Haggadah, the artist David Moss has provided another vital ingredient in the mystery of Jewish peoplehood. The Passover seder is, of course, the classic recounting of the Exodus experience. Yet, early in his Haggadah, Moss incorporates a dirge chanted on Tisha B’Av, the quintessential day of Exile and

tragedy for the Jewish people. The dirge contrasts the feelings of elation at the Exodus with the sense of despair at the Exile. (On a related note, the evening service of Tisha B'Av at Congregation Shearith Israel in New York features a poignant elegy—"Mah Nishtanah"—which highlights the contrasts between Passover and Tisha B'Av.)

Thus, the Jewish people are unified by two great national experiences: Redemption and Exile.

These experiences are not merely singular historical events, but are prototypes that imbue the entire span of Jewish history—past, present and future. We are supposed to experience the Passover seder as though we ourselves were redeemed from Egypt. We are supposed to experience Tisha B'Av as though we ourselves witnessed the razing of our Temples in Jerusalem and were forced into a long and distressing Exile. Our thousands of years of history are marked by periods of elation and mourning, redemptions and exiles. It is the personal connection with both of these themes that serves to unite us as one people. If one ceases to feel connected to the shared experiences and ramifications of Exodus and Exile, he/she ceases to identify as a Jew.

Just as we recall Tisha B'Av on Passover, so we remember Passover on Tisha B'Av. Even as we mourn the sufferings of Exile, we maintain perfect faith in our ultimate Redemption.

If Exodus and Exile are unifying factors in defining our Jewishness, the Torah itself is the ultimate source of our peoplehood.

In Parashat Devarim, read on the Shabbat before Tisha B'Av, we are told that Moses took it upon himself to expound the Torah to the Israelites (Devarim 1:5). A Midrash suggests that Moses explained the Torah to them in seventy languages. But why would Moses need to explain the Torah in seventy languages, since the Israelites could not possibly have known all these tongues?

The Midrash is obviously alluding to something of deeper significance. Perhaps it is suggesting that the Israelites would ultimately find themselves scattered throughout the world, and would learn many new languages. The scattered communities would become very different from each other, unable even to communicate clearly with each other. Moses explained the Torah in seventy languages so that the Israelites would know that they had a unifying foundation in the Torah. No matter what language they would speak, the Torah would be accessible to them in that language. No matter how separate they seemed to be from other communities of Jews, the Torah bound them together as one people.

As we prepare for the observance of Tisha B'Av, let us take time to ponder the mystery and the wonder of Jewish peoplehood. The Exodus was the formative experience that propelled our people into history, with the principles of freedom and human dignity. The Exile was the experience that underscored our national courage, resilience, compassion and determination. The Torah was—and is—the foundation of our spiritual teachings, our ideas and our ideals.

Those who shed the mournful tears of Exile will ultimately shed the joyful tears of Redemption. And the Torah is, and will be, our light.

Angel for Shabbat