Beyond Tears: As We Approach Tisha B'Av

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Rabbi Marc D. Angel is Founder and Director of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, and Senior Editor of the Institute's journal, Conversations.

Our ancient Temples in Jerusalem were destroyed in 586 BCE and 70 CE…and we are still fasting and crying! If this made sense during our many centuries of exile, does it still make sense today? After all, we now have a vibrant and strong Jewish State of Israel. With all our problems, shouldn't we be enjoying our sovereignty and the first flowerings of redemption? Isn't it time to stop fasting and crying for an exile that has functionally come to an end?

Rabbi Haim David Halevy, late Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, addressed this issue in his volume of responsa, "Asei Lekha Rav", 1:13, which was published in Tel Aviv in 1976. He wisely observed: "If a nation knows how to remember the days of its destructions and tragedies and fixes days for fasting and prayer, then it may be presumed that it will merit redemption. Fasting is a matter for the nation, not for God."

Tisha B'Av is commemorated to arouse our national memories and our national aspirations. Even with the establishment of the State of Israel, we have a long way to go before all is well with the Jewish people. While our observance of Tisha B'Av is not as bleak and somber as that of our ancestors in pre-State days, we still derive value by devoting the day to fasting and prayer, to memory of tragedies past, to dreams of redemptions yet to come.

It is a day for spiritual and national reflection.

The Talmud (Yoma 9b) suggests that the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed due to the sin of sinat hinam, baseless hatred. Yet, "baseless" hatred seems to be rare, if not impossible. Whenever people hate, they don't think their hatred is baseless. They hate others because of their race or religion, because they fear them or were hurt by them. The reasons for their hatred may be entirely false and unfounded—yet, in their minds it is not baseless. Indeed, it would be quite amazing to come across someone who states that he/she hates you for absolutely no reason…just for the sake of hatred!

I believe the phrase "sinat hinam" should be interpreted differently. It does not mean baseless hatred. Rather, the word "hinam" derives from the word "hen"—graciousness, loveable-ness. The Temple was destroyed because people hated to see the "hen" in others. They dehumanized their opponents, treating them as though they lacked human charm and worth.

At the time preceding the destruction of the Second Temple, Jews were divided into hostile factions. There were zealots and pacifists, war-mongers and peaceniks, religious extremists

and moderates. The groups were so antagonistic to each other, that they could not see the “hen” in their opponents. They stereotyped and demonized each other. This led to the fragmentation of society and to the inability to work together in a unified fashion.

When we look into each other’s eyes and see a fellow human being, it is quite difficult to hate. We realize that all of us—regardless of nationality and ideology—are human beings. We love, we fear, we care for our families, we can be kind and compassionate. When we see the “hen” in others, our emotions steer away from hatred and toward sympathy.

Too often, people do not seriously look for the “hen” in others who are not part of their own inner circle. They dehumanize, create stereotypes…and hate to see the “hen” in those who differ from them. They do not see the individual human being with a heart and soul and feelings; instead, they see Settlers and Peace Now; ultra-Orthodox and secular; Jews and Arabs; Sephardim and Ashkenazim. Instead of talking to each other as fellow human beings, we tend to shout at each other as enemies. It is easy to hate a stereotype; it is difficult to hate a fellow human being who has “hen.”

Don’t we deeply lament the fact that our enemies constantly engage in dehumanizing us, in presenting us as hateful objects rather than as fellow human beings? Don’t we profoundly wish that our enemies would take the time to look into our eyes and see our “hen,” realizing that we all are created by the same God and all are endowed with grace and loving-kindness? And if we are profoundly disappointed by the hatred aimed against us, shouldn’t we strive our mightiest to avoid falling into that same vicious trap of hating others? Shouldn’t we try to elevate our own humanity by seeing the “hen” in our fellow Jews and in all our fellow human beings?

Tisha B’Av certainly has meaning for us today. It is a day for fasting, prayer and introspection. It is a prod to national memory. It is a reminder of past failures. It is a clarion call for a wiser, more humane and happier future. It is a challenge to overcome the pernicious sin of sinat hinam, hating to see the “hen” in our fellow human beings.

It is a time for tears - and a time to move beyond tears.