Mourning and Consolation: Thoughts for Shabbat Nahamu

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Angel for Shabbat Nahamu

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

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On a Tisha B'Av day some years ago, I was leaving my apartment to go to synagogue. I was dressed in a suit but wearing sneakers. One of my neighbors noticed the anomaly of my attire and asked if it was some sort of Jewish holiday. I told her it was a fast day and that's why I was wearing sneakers, since we don't wear leather shoes as a sign of mourning. She asked: what is the fast day about? I replied: we are fasting because our First Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE and our Second Temple in Jerusalem was razed by the Romans in 70 CE. She raised her eyebrows: you're fasting for things that happened thousands of years ago? I replied: yes, we Jews have long memories.

She was amazed that we fasted for things that happened so long ago…but so am I! It is truly incredible that we have continued to fast and mourn over events that would otherwise be swallowed in the shadows of history. What is it about our national memory that keeps these ancient tragedies so current and so personal?

We of course cry for the many thousands of Jews who were murdered in those years. We weep for the destruction of our national spiritual homes—the Temples in Jerusalem. We mourn the loss of sovereignty over our land and the long exile that ensued.

But we don't view these things as distant happenings that happened to others. We take these tragedies personally. We see ourselves as inextricably linked to all the Jewish generations that have preceded us, and all the generations that will follow us. We don't fast on Tisha B'Av as though it's a historic commemoration; rather it is an expression of our identification with all that transpired to our people in those days. We actually feel pain. These tragedies befell "us."

Symbolically, the Jewish people are viewed as a united, eternal community—Kenesset Israel. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, in his "On Repentance," offers a poignant passage:

"The Jew who believes in Kenesset Israel is the Jew who lives with Kenesset Israel where she may be and is prepared to die for her, who hurts with her pain and rejoices in her joy, who fights her wars,

suffers in her defeats, and celebrates her victories. The Jew who believes in Kenesset Israel is the Jew who joins himself as an indestructible link not only to the Jewish people of this generation but to Kenesset Israel of all generations. How? Through Torah, which is and creates the continuity of all the generations of Israel for all time."

This Shabbat is known as Shabbat Nahamu, the Sabbath of Consolation. We read the beautiful prophecies of Isaiah pronouncing God's love for the people of Israel. Consolation does not erase the tragedies of the past; it doesn't bring back any of those who were murdered. But it teaches us to re-focus, not to dwell on crying but to cling to hope for better times.

Yes, we mourn on Tisha B'Av for the destructions of our ancient Temples in Jerusalem. But we then take off our sneakers, dress in our Shabbat clothes, and celebrate God's consolation for the future peace, security and happiness of Israel…and all humankind.