



ערב תשעה באב תשפ"ד

A Letter From Rabbi Joe For Tisha B'Av 5784

Dear Beloved Kehilla

Last year and this year. Last Tisha B'Av we were in the midst of what felt like an existential crisis about the future of the state of Israel. This year we confront Tisha B'Av with the same dread about our future but a different crisis. Not judicial reform but Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran.

I am reminded of the midrash about the spies who returned with an unfavourable report of the land. According to the midrash this took place on Tisha B'Av and Hashem responds: 'You cried for no reason. I will give you a reason to cry'

Last year we cried for no reason. Not that the issues didn't matter. But that it was a foolish argument upon which to tear the society apart. This year we have many real reasons to cry.

In what follows I want to try and help frame the meaning of this moment through the prism of Tisha B'Av. In what ways are the historical imprints of two thousands years of Tisha B'Av being felt especially this year and in what ways might this Tisha B'Av be different.

Part I - The Reality Of The Immense Pain and Loss Is Now

First of all let us state the deeply painfully obvious. In the Kinnot we read:

קומי ונשא נהי נבכה דמעות כים יקלו נהרות למן עיני לעיניך

Rise and let us cry, and shed a sea of tears, which will flow like rivers from my eyes to yours

Tisha B'Av is a day of tears. In most years of our very privileged lives it is a struggle for most of us to connect to the themes of the day. The devastation wreaked on the Temple and Jerusalem by the Romans or the devastation of the crusades which forms so much of the kinnot are so distant from our lives.. According to [Rav Soloveitchik](#) that is why we have three weeks of preparation in order to slowly get us into the mindset - because to simply go from our normal lives to the intensity of Tisha B'Av would be impossible.

This year the three weeks has felt almost unnecessary. We are living with Tisha B'Av daily - at any moment surrounded by the most terrible grief and horror. [Ematai](#) put out a poster last week with the above verse from the Kinnot alongside the names of all those Israelis who have lost their lives since October 7th. Even someone with perfect eyesight will need to squint hard to read the names because there are so many to fit in.

A while ago we made a [bar mitzva](#) for a sweet boy called Elchanan, evacuated with his family from Ofakim. His father told me that this was the first time he had smiled in months. That he is usually a simcha guy who always listens to music in the car. But that since October 7th he had not listened to music until his son's bar mitzvah. A minhag and halacha of the 3 weeks became his spontaneous practice the year round.

This year there is no challenge of connecting to Tisha B'Av

Part II Living Jewish History

Here is another element that appears to me unique and different this Tisha B'Av. There is a story that is often told on Tisha B'Av of Napoleon passing by a synagogue somewhere in Eastern Europe and hearing Jews crying inside. He asks what they are crying about and is told that it is Tisha B'Av and that they are mourning for their Temple that was destroyed 2,000 years ago. And Napoleon is supposedly very impressed by this, about the power of Jewish memory, and perhaps he even says 'if they still remember this then surely they will return to their land'

And it's a good story but at its heart is the claim that Jewish life has become divorced from Jewish history.

I have reflected many times since October 7th that we are a generation who feel like we came after. We weren't around at the start of the 20th century for the great debates about the direction that the Jewish people would take. We didn't experience the Shoah or the founding of the State of Israel. Not the Six Day War and not the battle for Soviet jewry. So what is left for us to do? What is left for us to fight for?

Well that is no longer. We are a generation and a people that has rediscovered its purpose. That knows that it needs to fight. And that it will write its own chapter on the pages of Jewish history. The story about Napoleon actually no longer speaks to us. Jewish history is now.

One part of this is of course tragic. A pogrom is no longer confined to the history books but has taken place in our lifetime very close to us. But there is another element. One of courage and heroism of responsibility and commitment. Of rising to the call of the hour.

Let us talk about Yosef for a moment. Yosef is sold by his brothers.

In a terrible midrash, the Roman general tells ten of the sages that the penalty for kidnapping is death - and that Joseph's brothers never paid the penalty for their crime. And so these ten sages will become ten martyrs. On Yom Kippur we read their story during the avoda section of mussaf. The story of Yosef is the story of a terrible crime internal to the family.

Earlier this year an educator called Racheli Markowitz wrote a poem in which she responded to her young son's question of how Yaakov's sons could do this to their brother. And she responded with the following poem:

בני חזר מהמערכה ותרמילו מתפקע
מכל מה שלא אני ארזתי לו.
גרבים שתרמה קהילה מארגנטינה
שמיכה משבצת בריח בית אחר
מגבת כחלה ממשפחה מהמושב
ציצית מירושלים
פליז מתנת חברת היטק
צעף שסרגה קשישה
גופיות שנקנו מקבוצת פיבוקס
סדין שנתן לו חבר
כפפות שקנו נערות
מעיל מארון של מישהו שבא ובקש לתת.
פורסת את כל האריגים
ורוקמת כתונת פסים חדשה.
ראה יוסף, ערבו לך אחיך.

My son returned from battle, his duffel bursting
with things that I had not packed for him.
Socks donated by a community in Argentina
A quilted blanket smelling like someone
else's home
A blue towel from a family from the
Moshav
Tzitzit from Jerusalem
A fleece jacket, gifted by a high tech
company
A scarf knitted by an elderly lady
Undershirts purchased by a Paybox group
A sheet that was given to him by a friend
Gloves bought by teenage girls
A jacket from the closet of someone who
came and requested to give.
I spread out all of these garments
and weave together a new coat of many colours
See, Yosef, your brothers were there for you

Yosef and his brothers - forever a symbol of internal strife and violence to our siblings, replaced now by a new coat of many colours.

Alongside the terribleness, this year has been the story of those who dwell in the land of Israel reforging their bonds with one another. This is the story of soldiers, of society and of global Jewry. It is also our story.

Part III - Our Role And The Difference Between This Tisha B'Av and Last Tisha B'Av

It is also our story. Exactly a year ago today I [wrote](#) a letter to our community during the peak of the judicial overhaul strife. I wrote how that as a community with too many *olim* this was a uniquely alienating experience, watching the society we had worked so hard join, tearing itself apart. I also argued that we had a unique role to play.

We need to remember the reasons why we moved here and not be shy to share them with others. It often happens that those who are newer to something are in a position to remind those who are more experienced of what it's all about. The young child reminds the parents of the joy of questions... The newlyweds remind older couples of loving our partners. And the ba'al teshuva reminds those who have long tried to live observant lives of the beauty of mitzvot we take for granted. Perhaps we too, new immigrants to this country, can help remind those who have lived here for generations of why this place matters.

When I wrote those words I could not have anticipated the journey that our country, our city and our community would embark on in the following 12 months. If in the year leading up to October 7th we felt like outsiders watching people we love tearing themselves apart for no good reason - culminating in the disaster that was Yom Kippur - this year has been one where our integration has been fast tracked, where we have not been onlookers but have become an integral part of the story.

Critically it has been a year of היכרות - of getting to know individuals, families and parts of society that would have been unimaginable a year ago. We have built genuine friendships with Kollel families from Sderot and chiloni families from kibbutzim. We have forged strong bonds with Druze and Bedouin communities understanding how we inhabit different parts of the same story. With children and parents from the north and the south. This is our coat of many colours.

Part IV: Tisha B'Av: Between Halacha and Nevuah Or, the story of a Nine Days DJ, bar and dance party

I want to conclude with a reflection on a story from last week. We have engaged with thousands of *mefunim* (a phrase I hate - we think of them not as evacuees but as *orchim* - guests) and put on literally hundreds of events from bar mitzvahs and Thanksgiving dinners, to after school activities to wine and cheese nights for exhausted mothers. But perhaps last week's leaving party for Kibbutz Nir Am was the most special of all.

Finally, after 10 months Kibbutz Nir Am was leaving the Herods hotel where they had been staying since their home was attacked on October 7th. This is a secular kibbutz who we have forged close ties with as they have become our neighbours. After a year of such dislocation and pain, the 200 adult members of the kibbutz wanted a night to relax and dance, to celebrate with each other, to end this period on a high and give them the strength for the next stage.

They asked if we could help with the organising and logistics, the fundraising, planning and execution. On the hand - of course, what an honour. But on the other hand - this is the 9 days. Dance parties and open bars are not really in the letter or the spirit of the law.

I spoke to our posek about it. There was no other date available. By Tisha B'Av they would have left. It's an important cause and one cannot impose the harsh restrictions of the nine days upon those who have never observed them. Sushi instead of meat. Tequila instead of wine. And if you think about it, a DJ isn't *actually* live music. A *heter*. A technical allowance to do something important.

And then the party. Twenty of our volunteers on their A game providing an incredible night to remember. Not simply a party but also a therapeutic moment. Each attendee found an envelope with their name on the wall and a station with prompts for other attendees to write them messages of appreciation. Here is just one of the messages we received afterwards:

בוקר טוב חברים, רציתי להגיד תודה אישית לכל אחד ואחת מכם, פשוט וואו אתם אלופים. המסיבה הזאת לא הייתה יוצאת לפעול אם לא היה את הגב שלכם. שימחתם הרבה אנשים שהיו צריכים את זה. ♥ בעזרת השם ברגע שנתארגן בקיבוץ וכשהמצב יאפשר את זה, שמח לארח את כולכם בקיבוץ שלנו.

I wanted to personally thank each and every one of you. Wow, you are amazing. This party wouldn't have happened without your support. You brought joy to many people who really needed it. ♥ God willing, once we get settled in the kibbutz and the situation allows, we would love to host all of you at our kibbutz.

So the *heter* was certainly justified. But then that night, out of the blue as it were, the verse from Zekharia came to me:

כֹּה־אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת צֶדֶם הַרְבִּיעִי וְצֶדֶם הַחֲמִישִׁי וְצֶדֶם הַשְּׁבִיעִי וְצֶדֶם הָעֲשִׂירִי יִהְיֶה לְבֵית־יְהוּדָה לְשִׂשׁוֹן וּלְשִׂמְחָה וְלִמְעֻדִים טוֹבִים וְהָאֵמֶת וְהַשְּׁלוֹם אֶהְבֹּב:

Thus said Hashem: The fast of the fourth month, the fast of the fifth month, the fast of the seventh month, and the fast of the tenth month shall become occasions for joy and gladness, happy festivals for the House of Judah; but you must love truth and peace.

That one day in the future, says the prophet, the fast days will cease to be days of mourning and will become days of simcha. And it hit me hard - are we living this in a way we never could have anticipated? Was last week's party - bringing two very different populations together - not simply based on a technical *heter* but viewed through different eyes a partial fulfilment of Zekharia's prophecy?

[Kohelet](#) says there is a time for love and a time for hate, a time for peace and a time for war. The Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai disagreed. He wrote:

*A man doesn't have time in his life to have time for everything.
He doesn't have seasons enough to have a season for every purpose.*

Kohelet was wrong about that.

*A man needs to love and hate at the same moment,
to laugh and cry with the same eyes,
with the same hands to throw stones and to gather them,
to make love in war and war in love
And to hate and forgive and remember and forget,
to arrange and confuse, to eat and to digest what history
takes years and years to do*

That has been our experience this year. That is this year's Tisha B'Av - so much to be paralysed with grief over, so much to feel pride and even joy over.

May next year's Tisha B'Av be one in which Zechariah's prophecy is fulfilled in its entirety

B'ahava, Rav Joe