



Meaningful Mourning

During the Three Weeks we observe certain restrictions, such as not getting a haircut, refraining from listening to music, and so on. The Noda B'Yehuda during the Three Weeks wouldn't eat anything from animals—no fish, meat, and the like. From Rosh Chodesh Av until Tisha B'Av he would only eat dry bread with ashes. He wouldn't sleep in a bed, but rather on chairs, and would use a pillow for his head.

R' Elya Lopian (Lev Eliyahu, Yisro) related that he remembers from his youth that he once went into shul during the Three Weeks at two in the morning. He found it full of people sitting on the ground, lamenting as they went through the tefilos of Tikun Chatzos. These were the simple people—shoemakers, tailors, carpenters, and the like. These people made such a big impression on him that he was relating this 76 years later.

As part of her Israeli army service in 1993, Keren Gottlieb was a teacher in an absorption center that housed thousands of new Ethiopian immigrants. This was shortly after Operation Solomon in 1993, during which roughly 14,500 Jews from Ethiopia were airlifted to Israel (In February 1973, R' Ovadia Yosef ruled that Ethiopian Jews were halachically Jewish and campaigned for their aliyah to Israel—See Yabia Omer, 8:11 in Even Haezer.). Although they had observed Shabbos and kept Jewish traditions sincerely, after being isolated from mainstream Jewish communities for thousands of years, there were many gaps in their knowledge of Judaism.

Keren decided to teach her young students about Jewish holidays. When Nissan began, she taught them about Pesach, and said that Pesach was one of the three holidays when the Jewish people used to go to the Temple in Jerusalem. The children interrupted her and asked what the Temple looks like and what it feels like to be in the Temple. She replied that it had happened a long time ago. Her words were met by an uproar among the students. She raised her voice and said loudly that the Temple had been destroyed and burned down more than 2,000 years earlier.

When she arrived at school the following day, she was surrounded by a group of angry parents. They told her that their children came home the previous day and told them that their teacher taught that the Temple in Jerusalem no longer exists! She nodded that this was indeed what she said. The turmoil then grew even louder.

One woman fell to the ground while another broke down in tears. A man just stared at her in disbelief. Another

woman emitted a heart-rending cry, and her husband came over to comfort her. Keren stood in utter shock. Having been separated from the Jewish people before the destruction of the Temple, these Ethiopian Jews had no idea that it had been destroyed.

Keren Gottlieb had just brought them the worst possible news. The Temple was gone. The Divine Presence had left. Holiness had been taken from their lives. They were devastated and grief-stricken over the destruction of the Temple. For the first time Keren understood how we are supposed to mourn on Tisha B'Av—to cry and break down over the loss of something extremely precious that has been ripped away from us.

A few months later, in shul for Eicha on Tisha B'Av, Keren remembered the angry looks of the children, the parents' screams, the crying of the mothers, and the pitiful silence of the men. She recalled the shock that overcame them as they received the terrible news, as if they had just been told about the death of a loved one.

Here is another story that brings out the same point. Jennifer Waldman joined the Peace Corps soon after graduating from college. Since she was fluent in Spanish, she was sent to Nicaragua, where she was posted in Las Palomas. After she had been there for about four months, her mother, Judy, visited. When she entered Jennifer's house, she was pleased to see the mezuzah on the front door; surely the only one for hundreds of miles.

Jennifer and her mother were sitting in the living room when they heard someone at the door. It was the preacher. Jennifer explained to her mother that the preacher had been fascinated by her Jewishness, as neither he nor anyone else in the village of 670 residents had ever met a Jew. When he learned that Jennifer was Jewish, he begged for details of the Temple and the sacrifices.

Jennifer told the preacher that the Temple no longer existed, and therefore we are no longer able to offer sacrifices. To her bewilderment, after first politely arguing with her, the preacher grew increasingly agitated. He said that he read the Bible every day, and knew all about the Temple and the Jews' special duties as the Chosen People.

Jennifer had calmed down the preacher by telling him that her mother would be coming to Las Palomas in a few weeks. "She is very religious," she informed him. "She will be able to explain." So now he was there, eager to speak with Judy. However, he wasn't appeased but thought that Judy was

making up stories about the destruction of the Temple only because she herself had never been there nor watched the offering of sacrifices. The preacher insisted that Judy give him a firsthand description of the Holy Temple since she was from the older generation. He wanted to know if the priests wore vestments as described in the Torah, as well as a detailed description of the aromas.

Judy was dumbstruck. The preacher had grown up in Las Palomas, a village without electricity and no exposure to the media. But she certainly thought that news of the Temple's destruction had reached it in the last 2,000 years. The preacher sat across from Judy, looking intently into her face to determine whether she were telling the truth as she explained that the Babylonians had destroyed the Holy Temple, that it had been rebuilt 70 years later, and was destroyed again by the Romans about 400 years after that.

Then, to her astonishment, the preacher started sobbing. She watched, baffled, as he laid his head on his arms and cried from his very soul. Suddenly he jumped up and agitatedly begged her to please tell him it wasn't so, that the Temple still existed in Jerusalem. Spent, he sat back down, his head on the table, and asked to have a few minutes alone. Jennifer and her mother stepped outside, but they could still hear his painful sobbing, then his pleading. Eventually the preacher came outside with his head lowered, wiping his tears on his sleeve. He couldn't even say goodbye as he walked heavily down the path, his life forever changed.

This was a life-changing moment for Judy as well. As she remarked, "If only I could cry for the destruction of our Holy Temple as the preacher did. Every Tisha B'Av I distinctly recall his tear-streaked face and reddened eyes, and even more, his expression of genuine pain at hearing the tragic news that we no longer have our Holy Temple. I too now cry on Tisha B'Av."

An elderly Jew living in Yerushalayim was asked how Tisha B'Av was commemorated by the previous generation in Europe. He said, "I can't tell you about the gedolei hador because their greatness was way beyond me. But I can tell you about the simple Jews, whom I saw in my youth. I lived in a small village of simple Jews and I remember the reading of Eicha on Tisha B'Av. There was no such thing as the baal korai reading Eicha straight through. He had to stop many times throughout the reading because either he himself broke down and cried or the tzibur cried so loudly that one couldn't hear the reading of Eicha.

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