Is Tisha B'Av still relevant?

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This past week we have observed the fast of Tisha B'Av, marking the destruction of the first and second Temples. Our tradition Views Tisha B'Av as a commemoration of the sin of the spies in the desert who brought back a false and evil report, calculated to convince the nation of its inability to conquer, put down roots, and thrive, in Eretz Yisrael. The date was Erev Tisha B'Av, and the Israelites chose to believe that report, causing them to sink into a national depression, as the Tporah states: ויבכו העם בלילה ההוא - 'and the people wept on that night'

Our Talmudic sages depict God as saying, אתם בוכים בכיה של חנם ואני קובע לכם בכיה לדורות - 'You wept unnecessary tears, for which I shall impose on you justifiable ones *that shall span the generations* (*Ta'an* 29a).

This last phrase perplexed me greatly in my youth. Growing up as a passionate Zionist in the late 1950s, I could never reconcile that prophecy of doom with the reality of our national rebirth, and with the idealism, brotherhood and industriousness, being displayed by the pioneer chalutzim of Israel. They were universally regarded as representing a microcosm of the unity and vibrancy that characterised the nation as a whole; and their selfless dedication to the upbuilding of the State, with the sweat of their brows, was an inspiration to world Jewry.

I even preached, one *Shabbat Nachamu,* on my inability to reconcile the clearly anachronistic references to Jerusalem, in the Tisha B'Av *Nachem* blessing, as עיר האבלה, 'a city in mourning' and הבזויה מכבודה, 'robbed of its glory.' This may have characterised the situation from the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in the year 70CE, and down until the 19th century, but it certainly did not reflect that of my youth.

I even had the temerity to recommend to my congregation that they make adjustments to that *Nachem* blessing, such as by converting the verse into the past tense by the simple insertion of the one word **שהיתה:** 'the city ***that was*** in mourning and robbed of its glory' – but no longer is.

But, as the decades passed, it slowly dawned on me that my zeal had been misplaced, and that I had in fact betrayed a lack of faith in the inspired foresights of our ancient sages, who had used advisedly the term בכיה לדורות - 'tears that would outlive the ages.' They believed in the accuracy of God's reference to Israel as 'a stiff-necked people' (Ex. 33:3) and recognised that the divisiveness that was ingrained in our national psyche was an even greater danger to our collective aspirations and the safety of our land than the enemies all around.

So, while there was a time when I even considered whether, with the realisation of our millennial dream of a rebuilt Medinat Yisrael,

perhaps Tisha B'Av had lost its significance and purpose, I sadly came to appreciate its validity, abiding message, and value as a trigger for a national re-evaluation of, and reconciliation with, its founding principles.

As I matured, I came to a heightened appreciation of the inspired wisdom and prophetic insights of our Talmudic sages. And I learned not to make generalisations, about Jewish life, history and destiny, on the basis of a sudden twist in our fortunes, however exciting and exhilarating.

As I studied further, I found many other examples of Talmudic statements being confirmed by later history, however discordant they originally sounded. Take the affirmation recorded in our Pesach Haggadah: אלא שבכל דור ודור עומדים עלינו לכלותינו, 'in every generation they rise up against us to destroy us.' Some 2nd-century Talmudic contemporaries must have thought that its author had a persecution complex, but the tragic truth is - as we can affirm - that his prophetic instinct was accurate to the letter, and his vision of our blood-stained history of exile, decimation, persecution, Crusades, blood-libels, the Holocaust, and modern-day anti-Semitism in this fair isle and around the globe, has been corroborated without doubt.

A stiff-necked people, more than capable of bringing incalculable woes upon itself through its disunity and the guile of its political and

religious representatives – undeserving of the title, ‘leaders.’ And all this when Israel has so much to be proud of, to celebrate and exploit to its advantage, and to contribute toward the progress of the world at large.

It is that factionalism that first destroyed our Temples and which is currently weakening the vibrant spirit of the citizens of Israel in our day, causing it to lose the respect and admiration, as well as the support for its cause around the world.

Perhaps that is why the psalmist felt it necessary to urge his audience - וראה בטוב ירושלים כל ימי חייך – to ‘seek out the good of Jerusalem all the days of your life’ (Psalm 128:6).

The continuation phrase, however, seems, at first glance, to be a non-sequitor: וראה בנים לבניך שלום על ישראל – ‘May you see your children’s children, with peace in Israel.’

We may ask what ‘seeking out the good of Jerusalem’ has to do with ‘seeing one’s grandchildren’ or with achieving peace in Israel? The answer is clearly that, if those who guide the destinies of Israel, as well as those who live there, were to put aside their own narrow factional interests, making as their priority the goal of ‘seeking the good *of the entirety* of Israel, so that it may live up to its name, ‘city of

peace,’ then they would be securing its future for their children’s children, and guaranteeing *shalom al Yisrael*.

May that approach be universally embraced, speedily in our day, so that עם ישראל חי

Amen.