



Tisha B'Av - From Mourning to Renewal: Reform Judaism's Reappraisal of a Holy Day

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As this month begins, we note that the corresponding Hebrew date of August 1st is the 9th day of the month of Av – Tisha B'Av – which has been observed throughout Jewish history as the anniversary of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Roman legions, in 70 CE. Generations of Jews – and Orthodox and Conservative congregations to this day – have mourned this catastrophe with fasting and solemn services featuring the chanting of the Biblical Book of Lamentations by candlelight, highlighting the words of the Prophet Jeremiah, “When we remembered Zion, we sat down and wept...”

The sorrowful memory of this historic event was deepened by subsequent disasters in Jewish history that occurred on this date, including the Expulsion of the Jews of Spain in 1492. However, at the core of this observance was traditional belief that the Jerusalem Sanctuary forever remained the sacred ideal of Jewish life and worship – that its destruction was the result of the sins of the people and Israel's faithlessness to the laws of the Torah – and that one day, the Temple and its ritual would be restored with the coming of the Messiah. Traditional doctrine still upholds this belief, and it is expressed constantly in ways ranging from repeated petitions in the daily liturgy of the Siddur to the symbol of the braking of the glass at weddings.

From its earliest 19th century beginnings however, Reform Judaism rejected this regressive understanding of Jewish history and belief. Based on its embrace of modern historical study and scientific thought, the early Reformers perceived a dynamic, evolutionary pattern



in the experience of our people. They taught that Jewish history was organically progressive – moving from early primitive understandings of faith and worship to higher conceptions of the meaning of prayer and holiness. Modern Judaism's replacement of the sacrificial offerings that were the essence of ancient worship in the Temple, with the communal prayer, study and ethical service of the local synagogue, were seen not as the temporary “second best” status that Orthodox theology held, but as a higher stage of the growth and development of Judaism.

The Jerusalem Temple, with its priestly rites and rituals, was an important formative stage of our faith – but with its destruction, a process of renewal and reform that was already underway with the first generation of rabbis in that first century, emerged as the vital, creative channel for survival and renewal in the face of the catastrophe. It was out of this understanding that Reform Judaism reclaimed the term “temple” – using it instead of “synagogue” – a powerful “declaration of independence” from Orthodoxy. This was a symbolic statement that the local gatherings of Jews throughout the world were as sacred as the Jerusalem Sanctuary. The redemptive hope for the Messiah was no longer seen as the restoration of the Temple and the return

of all Jews to the Land of Israel, but rather as a future hope of universal redemption, with the Jewish people making its critical contribution to building a world of justice and peace for all the world.

Consequently, most early Reform Prayer Books eliminated special observances for Tisha B'Av, and rejected the tradition of fasting and mourning on this day. Even in the new liturgy, Mishkan T'filah, which so dramatically reflects the contemporary trends toward re-embracing traditional ritual and observance, there is no special prayer for this holiday. However, the leading pioneer theologian and liturgist, Rabbi David Einhorn (1809-1879), the "Father of Classical Reform," approached the issue in a very different way. His 1858 Prayer Book, "Olat Tamid" ("A Perpetual Offering"), became the major expression of the "radical" voice of the early Reformers. Its title suggested the transformed theological construct it represented – that the worship, study and community life of modern Jews had taken the place of the ancient sacrificial burnt offerings, which were described by that same Hebrew phrase.

Instead of simply eliminating Tisha B'Av from his liturgy, Einhorn recast it from a day of mourning to a reflective opportunity to gratefully acknowledge the spiritual progress Judaism had made in response to the loss of the Temple and the departure of the Jewish people from Jerusalem. In the special service he wrote for this day, he spoke of the "liberation" of Judaism's message from the confines of that one place, to become a world-wide presence. Even in their continued persecution and suffering, the Jews themselves now had become the redemptive presence in the world - a living conscience and exemplar of faithfulness to the Torah's spiritual and ethical ideals. This mission continued, and the hope remained bright that the promised "return" in the future would not be to a particular geographic location or ritual practice, but rather to the final realization of Israel's destiny to complete God's intended Creation of a peaceful and just human community here on Earth.

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