

The Power of Hope – A Thought for Tisha b'Av

26 July 2012

The month of Av is the saddest in the Jewish year, and Tisha b'Av is the saddest day. On it the two Temples were destroyed, the first in 586 BCE by the Babylonians, the second in 70 CE by the Romans. It is also the day on which Betar – the last stronghold of the Bar Kochba rebellion – fell in 135 CE, and on which, one year later, the Roman emperor Hadrian rebuilt Jerusalem as a pagan city, Aelia Capitolina. In 1492, Tisha b'Av was the day on which Jews were finally exiled from Spain.

How did Jews survive these tragedies? That is one of the most enthralling questions about Judaism.

It is an iron law of history that civilisations rise, achieve greatness and appear indestructible, but in the end they fail and fall. Only Jews and Judaism have experienced catastrophe after catastrophe, exile after exile, but have endured. Each new defeat inspired resilience. Jews wept, but then rebuilt their lives, often in new and strange places. More remarkably still, each tragedy inspired a new burst of creativity.

After the destruction of the first Temple came the renewal of Torah under Ezra and the returning exiles. After the loss of the second Temple came the great literature of the sages: Midrash, Mishnah and the two Talmuds. The Crusades gave birth to the spirituality of the Hassidei Ashkenaz; the Spanish expulsion to the mysticism of Sfard. The greatest tragedy of all in human terms, the Holocaust, was followed a mere three years later by the single greatest collective affirmation of life in 2000 years – the rebirth of the State of Israel. There is something remarkable about this story, unparalleled in the history of any other nation.

I remember the moment when I first stood on Mount Scopus – today the site of the Hebrew University – looking down on the old city of Jerusalem, and realised that it was here that Rabbi Akiva and his colleagues stood, contemplating the ruins of what had been Judaism's holiest place. While the others wept, Rabbi Akiva smiled.

“Why do you weep?” asked Rabbi Akiva. They replied “How can we not weep, when we see a fox walking through the ruins where our Holy of Holies once stood. The question is, how can you

smile?”

Rabbi Akiva replied: “The prophets foresaw Jerusalem’s destruction and they also foresaw its rebuilding. I have seen the first prophecy come true. Now I know the second will also come true.”

Rabbi Akiva shared with the prophets the courage to hope. Hope is not a mere instinct. It is born in faith – the faith that God exists, that He keeps His promises and that He forgives. That hope is contained in the very name tradition gave to this month: Menachem Av, the month of consolation as well as tragedy. *A people that never loses hope cannot be defeated.*

The Jewish people kept hope alive. Hope kept the Jewish people alive.

