

# Tisha B'Av vs 'settler colonialism'

• By DAVID GOLINKIN

We are now in a period of the Jewish calendar called the Three Weeks in English, *Di Drei Wochen* in Yiddish, and *Bein Hametzarim* in Hebrew.

If one reviews the laws and customs of the three weeks and/or the nine days leading up to Tisha B'Av in the *Shulhan Aruch* (*Orah Haim* 551), one finds the following prohibitions: joy, business deals, betrothal feasts and weddings, haircuts and shaving, laundry, wearing new clothes, eating meat and drinking wine, bathing, and reciting the *shehehey-anu* blessing over a new fruit or piece of clothing.

These laws and customs reach their climax on Tisha B'Av itself, when we are instructed to read the Book of Lamentations (*Eicha*) and *Kinnot* (Elegies) while seated on the ground. We are forbidden to eat, drink, bathe, anoint the body with oil, wear leather shoes, or have sexual relations. It's even forbidden to study the Bible, Mishna, and midrash, except for the Book of Job and midrashim about the book of *Eicha*.

In addition to these well-known mourning customs, additional customs were observed throughout Jewish history. Rabbi Joseph Schwarz made aliyah to Israel from Germany in 1833 to study the historical geography of the Land of Israel.

In 1837, he sent home letters in which he described the customs of the people there. Regarding Tisha B'Av, he wrote that “the cantor puts ashes on his head, and after him, so do all the other worshipers... They wrap all of the Torah scrolls in the Holy Ark and the synagogue ornaments in black cloth” (Avraham Ya'ari, *Igrot Eretz Yisrael*, 1943, p. 372).

Rabbi Issachar ibn Susan (1510-1574) was the leader of the Moroccan Jews in Safed. In his book, *Tikun Yissachar*, published in 1564, he records the customs of the city of Safed:

“It is our custom in Safed in the upper Galilee... that on the night of Tisha B'Av the cantor stands up... before reading any of the elegies and says aloud: ‘Our brothers, the children of Israel, know that today is such and such years from the destruction of our Temple and our Glory!’

He and all the members of the congregation clap their hands [in mourning], and they say... *Barukh Dayan HaEmet* (Blessed is the True Judge). And they all cry bitterly, and then the cantor begins to chant the elegy for the night” (Ya'akov

Gellis, *Minhagei Eretz Yisrael*, Jerusalem, 1968, p. 159).

FINALLY, WE have some vivid descriptions of Tisha B'Av customs written by non-Jews.

“The Traveler from Bordeaux” was a Christian pilgrim who visited Israel and Jerusalem in the year 333 CE and left us a vivid description in Latin of what he saw:

“And there on the Temple Mount, there are two statues of Hadrian. And not far from the statues, a perforated stone to which the Jews come every year, pour oil on it, and they wail with sighing, and they tear their clothing, and then they depart” (Ben-Zion Dinur, *Zion* 3 (1929), pp. 78).

In other words, once a year, on Tisha B'Av, the Jews were allowed to enter the Temple Mount to mourn its destruction.

A similar, though not identical, description is given by Jerome, who translated the Hebrew Bible into Latin – the Vulgate – while living in Bethlehem from 386 to 420 CE. This is his vivid description of the Jews on the Temple Mount on Tisha B'Av, taken from his commentary on the Book of Zephaniah (1:15):

“Until today, it's forbidden for those two-faced ‘tenants’ (i.e., the Jews) to come to Jerusalem because of the murder of the prophets and the last of them – the son of God – unless they come to cry; for then they are given permission to eulogize on the ruins of the city, for a fee...

“On the day of the capture of Jerusalem and its destruction by the Romans, one can see the members of this people. Women wear rags, and old men bear the burden of the rags and the years; they gather for a time of mourning, they prove with their bodies and their dress the meaning of ‘the anger of the Lord’... the members of this poor people lament the ruins of their Temple, and they are not worthy of pity” (David Golinkin, *Sidra* 16 [2000], p. 10).

Jerome was clearly no friend of the Jews. It is precisely because he is making an incidental statement that his testimony is trustworthy.

So what do all of these quaint mourning customs have to do with Zionism and anti-Zionism today?

Everything.

I AM sitting in Jerusalem, and I have been living in Jerusalem for 53 years precisely because the Jewish people mourned for Jerusalem and the Land of Israel for 1900 years.

Let us travel back in time 122 years to August 1903. Tisha B'Av fell that year on August 2. Three weeks later, at the Sixth Zionist Congress in Basel, Theodor Herzl fought to approve the idea of a substitute territory from the British in Uganda. His



A DEPICTION OF Jews praying and mourn at the Western Wall on Tisha B'Av circa 1880.

(Wikicommons/print published by Boussod and Valadon/original drawing by Alexandre Bida)

friend, Max Nordau, called it a “*Nachtasyl*,” “a night shelter” for the persecuted Jews of Russia – right after the Kishinev pogrom.

A resolution to dispatch an expedition of experts to East Africa passed by a vote of 292 to 176 with 143 abstentions. A storm broke loose. The Russian members of the Actions Committee, led by Yehiel Chlenov, stormed out with their supporters.

According to Abraham Slutzki, “Some of them burst out in tears, and their wailing could be heard from afar.” (Mordechai Friedman, *Hasneh Bo'er V'ukal*, Jerusalem, 2016, p. 269). Jacob de Haas wrote: “Men sat on the floor, mourning in Orthodox fashion for a Dead Zion” (Amos Elon, *Herzl*, New York, 1975, pp. 387-388).

Herzl got the message. In his final speech, which turned out to be his final speech at a Zionist Congress, he said: “When I thought that all hope was lost for... the lifetime of a man, I wanted to propose to you an emergency measure, but since I learned in the

meantime to know your hearts, I wanted to say to you an ancient word of comfort and at the same time a pledge by me in the language of our forefathers.”

Then, slowly raising his right hand, he cried, in Hebrew: “*Im eshkakhekh Yerushalayim tishkakh yemini!* If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its cunning!” (Psalm 137:5). (Friedman, p. 272; Elon, p. 388)

And what of anti-Zionism?

For some 40 years, but especially since October 7, we have heard thousands of Palestinian demonstrators and their useful idiots on elite college campuses at Columbia, Harvard, and Penn say that we Jews are “settler colonialists” who came here to uproot the “indigenous people,” the Palestinians.

I have news for these antisemites and anti-Zionists: As Chaim Weizmann said to Lord Balfour: “We lived in Jerusalem when London was still a marsh.”

We lived in the Land of Israel from the days of Abraham until 70 CE – almost 2000 years. And then we continued to live here, though our numbers dwindled due to persecution by the Romans, Crusaders, Muslims, and Turks.

But we mourned for the Land of Israel and Jerusalem from 70 CE until 1948, as I have amply proved. We cannot *colonize* a land that God promised to Abraham 3,800 years ago. We cannot *colonize* a land in which Jews have lived for four millennia. We cannot *colonize* a land for which we fasted and wept and chanted Kinnot for thousands of years.

“*Im eshkakhekh Yerushalayim tishkakh yemini!* If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its cunning!”

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