

"In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice" (Romans 11:5)

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Tisha B'Av and the Real Story of the Destruction of the Temples of Jerusalem

by Galen Peterson

Each year in mid-summer *Tisha B'Av* (meaning the ninth day of the Hebrew month *Av*) takes place. It has been called the saddest day of the year for the Jewish people because it is considered to be the date when both the first and second temples in Jerusalem were destroyed. In that light, it is a traditional day of mourning and fasting in Judaism.

The destruction of both temples in Jerusalem is naturally a distressing remembrance for a people whose history is substantially linked to that highly revered location. The book of Lamentations, in particular, was written as a reflection on the loss of the first temple, built by King Solomon. You can sense the attitude of sorrow and mourning regarding that loss:

"The elders of the daughter of Zion sit on the ground, they are silent. They have thrown dust on their heads; they have girded themselves with sackcloth. The virgins of

Jerusalem have bowed their heads to the ground. My eyes fail because of tears, my spirit is greatly troubled; my heart is poured out on the earth because of the destruction" (Lam. 2:10-11).

The destruction of the first temple took place in 587 B.C. when the Babylonians took the people of Judah captive. Jeremiah tells us that after an 18-month siege by the Babylonians, the city of Jerusalem was broken into and destroyed:

"Now on the tenth day of the fifth month, which was the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, Nebuzaradan the captain of the bodyguard, who was in the service of the king of Babylon, came into Jerusalem. He burned the house of the Lord, the king's house and all the houses of Jerusalem; even every large house he burned with fire. So all the army of the Chaldeans

who were with the captain of the guard broke down all the walls around Jerusalem."

(Jer. 52:12-14)

In 2 Kings 25 we are told the Babylonian army came on the seventh day, which indicates the beginning of the assault. According to the Talmud the Babylonians entered the temple on the seventh day of the month, started burning it on the ninth, and it finished burning it on the tenth (*Taanit 29a*). For that reason, the rabbis decided that the day to commemorate the event would be the ninth or *Tisha B'Av*.

Over the next six and one-half centuries, much would take place on this same site. The Jewish people returned from captivity. The temple was rebuilt by Zerubbabel and later expanded by Herod the Great. With the exception of the writings of John, the Bible was completed before the destruction of the second temple in 70 A.D., so it does not describe how that event transpired.

But we are given a highly detailed account of its demise in the writings of the historian Josephus. Rome responded to a revolt led by Jewish zealots that began in 66 A.D. by sending massive numbers of soldiers to put down the rebellion. Ultimately the battle focused on Jerusalem where, according to Josephus, one million Jews took refuge in the fortified city, while five Roman legions laid siege until the walls were breached in 70 A.D. The city walls, buildings and the Temple were torn down and everything else was burned. When it was over, one million Jewish people had perished.

It was the fulfillment of the words of Yeshua (Jesus): “Truly I say to you, not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down” (Mat. 24:2). His prophecy came to pass four decades after his death exactly as He foretold.

Josephus very clearly linked the timing of the destruction of both temples: “it was the tenth day of the month” (*Wars of the Jews* 6:4:5). This was a significant occurrence in his eyes:

“Now although any one would justly lament the destruction of such a work as this was, since it was the most admirable of all the works that we have seen or heard of, both for its curious structure and its magnitude, and also for the vast wealth bestowed upon it, as well as for the glorious reputation it had for its holiness; yet might such a one comfort himself with this thought—that it was fate that decreed it so to be. However, one cannot but wonder at the accuracy of this period relating;

for the same month and day were now observed, as I said before, wherein the holy house was burnt formerly by the Babylonians.”

(*Wars of the Jews* 6:4:8)

Josephus could record this chronicle with such accuracy because he was not just writing about what transpired, but he was actually involved in the story, for at one point he was used by the Romans as a mediator trying unsuccessfully to get the Jews to surrender.

In spite of the eyewitness account of Josephus, Talmudic rabbis concluded over two centuries later that the destruction



Relief on the Arch of Titus in Rome showing the artifacts of the temple being captured by the Romans in 70 A.D.

took place a day earlier on the ninth of the month, so that it would correspond with their calculation for the demise of the first temple (*Taanit* 29a). In other words, it is true that both temples were destroyed on the same day of the calendar (Av 10) but that is the day *after* the annual commemoration (Av 9) that has been inaccurately established by the ancient rabbis and continues on today in modern Judaism.

It is further claimed by some people that other events in history with unfavorable outcomes for the Jewish people took place on the ninth of Av. Many websites and emails promote such claims. Are they valid? They include...

■ ***The twelve spies returned from exploring the Promised Land on the ninth of Av and gave their negative report.*** This teaching originated in the Babylonian Talmud, not in the Bible. The rabbis based their argument on the description that when the people of Israel heard the disappointing news, they “lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night” (Num 14:1). So even

though there is no mention of a specific date, the rabbis concluded it had to be the ninth of Av, because that’s the day when Jews cry and weep. Thus we can rightly conclude that the association of this event with *Tisha B’Av* is a baseless speculation, not a biblical fact.

■ ***In the year 71 A.D. the Roman army plowed the city of Jerusalem with salt on the ninth of Av.*** This claim is based again on the Talmud in *Taanit* 4, with some rather fanciful reasoning. It is mentioned only one other place in literature 1300 years

after the fact in an English epic poem called the “Siege of Jerusalem.” But Josephus only describes the city being dug up, without mentioning the use of salt, and he says nothing about it taking place on the ninth of Av. Since he was there and wrote in great detail, this legendary association with the ninth of Av is also unwarranted.

■ ***Bar Kochba, the leader of the second Jewish revolt against Rome, was killed and his army***

destroyed on the ninth of Av, in the year 135 A.D. Again the Talmud is the only place that assigns a specific date to this historical reality, and it even acknowledges that this belief is a legend (*Taanit 4*). It is more likely that because of the previous associations with the destruction of the two temples that this destructive event was also mythically associated with the date of the ninth of Av.

■ ***The First Crusade began, which led to the death of many thousands of Jews.*** If you check the facts, the Crusade began on August 15, 1096, which was actually the 24th of Av. So that claim is off by over two weeks.

■ ***The expulsion of the Jews from England.*** This event on July 18, 1290 is the ninth of Av. So that date does correspond to the commemoration day, but as we have seen, it is not the true date of the destruction of the Temples.

The expulsion of the Jews from France. July 22, 1306 is the 10th of Av. Here we do have coinciding dates. Oddly, this event usually doesn't make the list making the rounds on the internet today.

■ ***The expulsion of the Jews from Spain.*** July 30, 1492 is the sixth of Av. This claim is off by four days.

The outbreak of WWI. The date cited is August 1, 1914, which corresponds to the ninth of Av. But the war actually began over a month earlier on June 28, 1914 with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria.

■ ***Beginning of the mass deportations of Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto to the Treblinka death camp.*** July 22, 1942 is the eighth of Av. So this claim is off by two days.

Why is this important?

The results are mixed. The destruction of the two temples did occur on the same day of the calendar—the tenth day of the eleventh month, but that is the day *after* the annual commemoration day of *Tisha B'Av*. That Bible states it. The reliable historian Josephus states it. But the Talmudic rabbis said otherwise.

The dates of other events in history with unfavorable outcomes for the Jewish people are either based on legend and speculation, or they tend to miss the exact date of the destruction of the temples. Moreover, we can identify many other comparable events in Jewish history that occurred at various times throughout the year, because unfortunately there is no shortage of persecution and calamity when it comes to the Jewish people.

What can we learn from Tisha B'Av?

Some people (especially on the internet) focus on these supposed coincident disasters on the calendar and extol the way that God works behind the scenes of history. But we should appreciate the reality of His work without embellishing it. For ours is a faith based on factual truth, not myth and hype.

Some people use the destruction of the Temple as an excuse to demonize the Jewish people. But they have made a great mistake. Instead of seeing the demise of the second temple as an indication of the sacrificial system no longer being needed, they see it as a sign from God that the *Jewish people* are no longer needed. Yet that is a contradiction of Paul's clear declaration that "God has not rejected His people" (Rom 11:2).

Some people focus on

rebuilding the Temple. The most active of these groups is the Temple Institute based in Jerusalem. They have completed virtually all of the furnishings for a rebuilt structure if somehow that should come about. And while this group is very much in the minority in Israel, it is a reflection of some unfinished business in Judaism.

Some people fast on *Tisha B'Av*. According to the book of Zechariah, the people instituted four fasts after returning from exile, and it was done without a biblical mandate from God. One of them was set during the tenth civil month in commemoration of the date when the first siege of Jerusalem began.

This tells us that fasting on *Tisha B'Av* is a practice that was never ordained by God, but it has been perpetuated by rabbinic Judaism. God has made it very clear that there is something He desires more than institutionalized religious obligations like fasting.

In the day of Zechariah, men asked him if they should stop fasting now that the exile was ending and the second temple was nearing completion. Zechariah told them that the issue was not whether to fast, but to "Dispense true justice and practice kindness and compassion each to his brother" (Zech. 7:9).

He then goes on to say that fasting will give way to "joy, gladness, and cheerful feasts for the house of Judah; so love truth and peace" (Zech. 8:19).

Back in those days, the actual reason for sorrow and fasting was because they had lost the place to carry out atonement for their sins. But with a new temple being built and a renewal of atonement, there was no longer a need for fasting and mourning for the loss of the first temple. God's desire for the people was not for them to

conduct religious ritual. He wanted people to live their lives based on justice, kindness, compassion, joy, gladness, truth and peace. Nothing more.

The first temple was taken away because of severe disobedience of the people. But the purpose of the temple as the place of God's dwelling and atonement for the people was still in effect. They still needed a place for atonement for their sins. So the second one was built.

Six centuries then passed. At that time the work of atonement was accomplished "once for all" by the death of Messiah Yeshua (Heb. 7:27). Forty years later God allowed the second temple to be destroyed because it was no longer needed as the site for providing atonement. So without a purpose in God's plan of redemption for humanity, it was within God's sovereign will that the temple was eliminated.

Today it is relevant to ask the question again, just as it was asked and answered the first time by Zechariah—should we continue to fast over the destruction of the temples? The answer to that question is based on the answer to another question—is the situation the same today as it was when the fast was instituted the first time? That answer is no because, unlike the first time when the means of

atonement was lost, we still have the means for atonement through faith in Yeshua. So the most significant reason for fasting has been removed.

Zechariah's words still hold true. Instead of merely performing a religious obligation and mourning over something that was lost, God is calling us to redirect our focus to practicing justice, kindness, and compassion because we have a responsibility to one another as good neighbors. He is calling us to be people of joy and gladness because we know what He has accomplished for us by giving us the gift of salvation through belief in Yeshua. And He is calling us to be people of truth and peace by being witnesses to others and taking a stand wherever there is conflict—between people groups, in our communities and in our interpersonal relationships.

All this to say that fasting, in and of itself, can be a good thing. But it can also become a religious obligation that distracts us from some far more important virtues and godly living. These, then, are the key things we need to know about *Tisha B'Av*:

- There is a historical reality to the destruction of both temples on the same date, but not on the date being commemorated, and other events associated with the date are ungrounded

speculations.

- Their destruction does not imply the rejection of the Jewish people, but it confirms the end of the temple as God's means and place of atonement, as well as the fulfillment of Messiah's atoning ministry that endures forever.
- God has released us from expressions of sorrow by giving us the ultimate reason for spiritual joy.

The history of *Tisha B'Av* teaches us that our focus must be on what has been gained rather than what has been lost. And it is clear reminder that God calls us to a higher standard than mere religious obligation, namely a life characterized by faith in Messiah, and godly character and actions.



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