

"WHEN WE TRY TO KEEP GOD IN HIS PLACE"

If there is one word which symbolizes and characterizes this day of Tisha B'Av -- set aside for woe and anguish from the ^{time of the} Israelites' obstreperousness towards Moses in the desert, through the destruction of the two Temples, ^{and} from the Spanish Inquisition in 1492 to Hitler's extermination ^{in 1941} order against Polish Jewry, all of which came on the ninth of Av, the Black Day of the Jewish calendar -- that word is ekhah. It is a simple word, which means "how." But the peculiar poetic construction of the word, ekhah instead of the more usual ekh, has a connotation of woe, of gloom and moroseness. It is the word with which Moses in today's Sidra expresses his exasperation - ekhah esa levadi, how can I bear them? ^{by myself} Isaiah in today's Haftorah chooses this word to bemoan the sad fate of Jerusalem: ekhah, "how is the faithful city become as a harlot?" And, of course, it is the refrain of Jeremiah's dirges, his Lamentations, known in Hebrew as the Megillah of Ekahah.

The Rabbis of the Midrash (Introduction to Ekahah R.) were intrigued by the word, and what they say throws light not only ^{we} on the word itself but ~~in upon~~ the broader concept which informs this day and the historic events it commemorates. Indeed, they see ekhah as part of a structure which expands Tisha B'av from a day of national mourning ^{into a symbol of} ~~to one of~~ the most crucial universal significance. They tell us: kol mah she'ira le'Adam ira le'Yisrael, everything that happened to Adam happened to Israel. Adam was placed by God in the Garden of Eden; Israel was brought ~~is~~ by the Lord to Eretz Israel, a Paradise in its own right. Adam was given a commandment; Israel was given 613 commandments. Adam sinned; Israel sinned. Adam was sent away and expelled; Israel was sent away and expelled into a long and bitter exile.

What the Rabbis intend by this parallelism is the teaching that Israel's exile issues from a human failing rather than a specifically Jewish weakness. By pointing to the identical pattern in the life of Adam and that of Israel, they underscore the universal dimensions of Tisha B'av.

And the final example of the parallel developments that the Sages of the Midrash offer is the climax of each of the two epics. In the case of Adam, the Almighty konen alav ayekah, wails over Adam, calling out Ayekah, "where art thou?" And in the case of Israel, konen alav ekhah; He wails over Israel's fate, Ekhah, how could all this have come to pass? Both words, Ayekah and Ekhah, are essentially the same. Without the vowel signs, they are spelt the same way: ayekah. God's query to Adam, Ayekah, "where art thou?" bears an intimate relationship to the prophet's lamentation, Ekhah, "how is this come to pass?"

For indeed the hurban ha-Bayit, the destruction of the Temple, recapitulates the tragedy of man in the face of God. Adam, having eaten of the Tree Knowledge, and supposedly grown more sophisticated, now flees to the cluster of trees in the midst of the Garden -- and attempts to hide from God! His illegitimate grasp for knowledge has gained for him the idiotic illusion that he can set boundaries for God, keeping Him away from his own areas, and that he can erect impenetrable barriers between the domains of God and man. Adam thus invites the response of the Almighty, in syllables of searing sarcasm, Ayekah, where art thou? Adam, where do you think you are that you can hide from Me? What makes you think that you can declare any place in the world out-of-bounds for God?

Was not the Temple destroyed for the same reason? Our Tradition enumerated some of the ^{moral} causes of the tragedy visited upon the Sanctuary. But all of them add up to one basic idea: the people imagined that God's presence dwells only in the Temple; elsewhere one may do as he pleases. A man may hate his brother, so long as he prays in the Bet Mamikdash. He may exploit the worker and drive his slaves; does he not bring his sacrifices regularly to

Jerusalem? This was the blasphemy of which the generation of the Hurban was guilty: they conceived of God as imprisoned in His reverent House, and ^{imagined that} as long as one appeased Him there, He would not interfere elsewhere. But that whole philosophy is pagan, unholy, and unwholesome. That is why Isaiah, in the Haftarah we read this morning, pours out his bitterness against those who so piously corrupt the whole vision of Torah: mi bikesh zot mi-yedkhem remot hatzerai, who asked this of you (to visit the Temple); you are but trampling My courtyard underfoot! When you restrict God only to the Synagogue, then He refuses to dwell even in the Synagogue. When this is how you undermine the meaning of a Temple, then as a sign of divine displeasure, that very Temple, symbol of your profane misunderstanding, must be destroyed! For God, whether man likes it or not, peers into man's "exclusive" preserves -- his office and home, his bank and theater, his market-place and hotel -- and acidly asks, Ayekah, where do you think you are? You have failed to look for Me, and so I shall seek you out. And when the Almighty grimly poses the Ayekah, then man must whimper, in return, Ekhah.

Modern man repeats the same syndrome -- with even more tragic results. We have eaten of the Tree of Knowledge like no generation before us -- and we have found the fruits bitter; for such is the taste of radioactive ash. We have developed science and technology at an incredible pace. Yet we have become what in Jewish literature is known as bakham le'hareia, wise for our own hurt. Our genius has proved an evil genius. With our increase in knowledge has come a shrinkage of wisdom; with the conquest of the universe, we have discovered that we have let our own lives lie fallow; learning to make a living, we have forgotten how to live; exploring outer space, we have ignored the thunderous silence of our inner space and inner void.

For what has all this learning and sophistication led us to? -- to an ever ^{stricter} ~~clearer~~ seclusion of God from life. Like Adam and like our ancestors 2000

years ago and more, we have determined to incarcerate God in His reverent jail and we have declared the rest of the world forbidden to Him. What is to God is to God, but all the rest is to Caesar.

What is the name of this ideology which "respects" religion so long as it does not venture out of its prescribed sphere? It is the theory and practice of secularism. Secularism is not atheism. It is something else, though equally as bad. It agrees to the practice of religion - provided that the limits are set and that beyond them life and experience are hermetically sealed off from the influence of faith. Secularism characterizes the overwhelming majority of religions and religionists today. It accepts God -- but equally as much accepts that one can hide from Him, that in some little clump of trees one can surround himself with cool shade and be free from the searing gaze of the Deity who has clumsily been permitted to escape from His House of Worship. Modern secularist man gets even with God; once He expelled us from Paradise, now we shall build ourselves a little Paradise and keep Him out!

But God won't go away. He won't abide by the rules that secularism has put down for the game of religion. God is a poor sport. He doesn't like to be locked up and is annoyed with those who test His claustrophobia. To the self-important secularist -- the Jew who worships God in the Synagogue but rejects His judgment (Halakhah) elsewhere, the man who opts only for "ritual" but ignores ethics and morality, or vice versa --- God appears in all His awesome might and poses His devastating question: Ayekah, where art thou that thou thinkest to exclude Me? And when that happens, Man can but answer, from the shambles of his super-modern ^{Paradise-}playground, Ekhah.

The Temple is the Bet Hamikdash, the House of Holiness. And the opposite of kedushah or holiness is hol, the profane. The antonym of kiddush Hashem, the sanctification of God's Name, is hillul Hashem, the profanation of the Name. Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin once explained the origin of hillul: the word derives

from halal, a void, empty space. For when man acts as if God were elsewhere, not here; when his demeanor and conduct are such as to indicate his inner belief that right here and now is a halal, a void where God's omnipresence is countered and entrance denied Him; when man believes, or his deeds bespeak the belief, that there are places where God is and places where He is not --- that is the vilest and basest profanation of His Name. It is the hilul Hashem, the spiritual obscenity of secularism. That is why the Bet Hamikdash must be destroyed if men distort its purpose and abuse it in the service of hilul rather than kiddush.

This then is the relevant message of Tisha B'av and Ekhah: we must learn to avoid the mistakes of the past and the present and to acknowledge God in all existence -- personal, national, and international. Even as the Temple was destroyed by hilul, we must rebuild it through kiddush.

Then, in place of ekhah will come the pirkei nehamah, the chapters of consolation. For instead of hiding from God and inviting His ayekah, our generation will seek Him out: zeh dor dorshav. And the divine answer will be: anokhi anokhi hu menahemkhem, I, yea I, will be your Consoler.