

Readers Respond: What Is Tisha B'Av Today?



“Commemorate,” as Cambridge Dictionary defines, is “to remember officially and give respect to a great person or event.” Tisha B’Av is precisely that: a day to remember the Beit HaMikdash’s destruction through mourning, reflection, and the like. The difficulty, however, is that since we never saw the Beit HaMikdash, we cannot “remember” the Beit HaMikdash. That leads us to ask: How do you relate to Tisha B’Av and to the loss of the Beit HaMikdash? Are there personal experiences that you channel for the day? National resonance? Something else entirely? We turned to our 18Forty readers to help probe these questions. Here are their answers:

A Day for Year-Round Tears

To me, feeling the loss and mourning of Tisha B'Av is about allowing ourselves to feel the sadness, grief, and bewilderment we may not allow ourselves to feel year-round. There has always been turmoil and uncertainty in the world that are frightening. I don't believe that there is a person around, even the most blessed, that doesn't have something in their life that makes them sad or causes doubt. However, in order to function in our daily lives, we cannot wallow in these feelings. We are not meant to be sad and in a state of mourning year round—that would be debilitating and unhealthy. We learn to process, compartmentalize, look for the good in things, feel gratitude. But once a year, once a year we can rip off the band-aid and allow ourselves to feel those difficult feelings that normally we need to keep under control. We can feel the fear, uncertainty, doubt, and grief that is part of life. We can allow those feelings to wash over us and then channel them into the recognition that the cause of those feelings is the fact that Mashiach has not yet come and we don't have a Beit HaMikdash and we cannot connect completely to God.

For me personally, Tisha B'Av is about allowing myself to feel sad and angry that I didn't have older siblings like my friends did because mine were born severely disabled. It's about allowing myself to feel the grief of my older brother dying when I was 14 and the recent loss of my sister last year. Then I take that grief, that loss, and I cry and beg Hashem to bring us back to Him because I know that is the only way we will be fully healed both personally and globally.

— *CB Berkovits, Bet Shemesh, Israel*

A Day for Yearning

For better or worse, I have always found Tisha B'Av to be one of the most moving days of the year. I think it can sometimes be easier to connect to the longing and hope that is manifest in Tisha B'Av, as opposed to the joy that is present in other holidays. While joy and happiness might be elusive for many, the longing and yearning for better days is something that I think is much easier to share, as almost everyone can likely think of something incomplete in their own lives.

At the same time, it's always been a little unclear to me what we as Jewish people are actually longing for. While it seems that it's the third temple, or the Beis Hamikdash, do we even know what that means? As has been discussed in recent episodes of 18Forty, Judaism likely looked fairly different in temple times in comparison to our current generation. Who is to know what that future would look like? And while every Tisha B'Av that question continues to bother me, perhaps it's worth emphasizing and appreciating that though we don't know what the future has in store, we as a nation still have a day of longing for something better, for a world more complete and more whole.

— *Ezra Cooper, New York City, NY*

A Day for Personal Mourning

I lost my grandmother this past December. She was not Jewish, as my mother converted to Judaism after being raised Italian-Catholic. Therefore, there were none of the usual mourning rituals we have to help cope with a loss. There was no shiva or shloshim. No learning campaigns in her memory. There were none of the normal halachic, structured, mourning rituals that we were supposed to do or that were supposed to happen.

But without that, it gave us all chance to find our own ways to mourn. To do the things that we would normally be barred from doing by halacha, like listening to the music that she loved or sitting around her dining room table and having a meal together, sharing joyful memories of her and her life.

Your question here about “commemorate” got me thinking about how this might relate to mourning on Tisha B'Av where, in the absence of personal experience of the loss of the Beit Hamikdash, we fall back on a ritualized form of mourning to compensate for not having something too personal to draw upon. I'm not saying to abandon the codified rituals, but I do think it's valuable for each of us to find our own ways to mourn, our own personal or family rituals, that work within the framework of the larger halachic order.

— *Aharon Schrieber, New York, NY*

A Day for Hope

It's one of the few contexts that our tradition calls on us to feel something (as opposed to cultivating a certain attitude). I find it hard to evoke in myself any specific emotion but can get there by recalling the first funeral I ever attended. The hollow "thud" of the first shovelful of dirt hitting the coffin is the worst sound I have ever heard. Even typing these words makes me tense up.

But I have seldom felt as truly and intensely as in that moment. I revisit it when I sense the need to connect to mourning. Like Tisha B'Av itself, the raw power of the experience becomes not entirely negative. In that sense, the "euphemism" our tradition assigns to mourning—"s'machot," joyous occasions— isn't really a euphemism, because *simcha* means connectedness, not just "a good mood." The depth and intensity of the grief itself naturally lead me to a sense of hope, if not right away, because in connectivity lies hope for redemption and rebuilding of relationship.

— David Swidler, *Y'rushalayim*
