YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Smiling on Tisha Be-Av**

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As early as the late 19th century the question of adapting *Tisha Be-av* prayer to the dramatic changes in the modern Jewish world emerged. In light of the renaissance of our people, the return to Israel, and the rehabilitation of Yerushalayim how can our *tefillot* on *Tisha Be-av* describe a city which “lies in mourning, empty and desolate”? Prayer mustn’t be dishonest and must be presented before God in a truthful and accurate fashion. Some have suggested altering the inserted Tisha Be-av prayer to reflect these modern changes while still articulating the great losses which *Tisha Be-av* commemorates.

Overwhelmingly, most authorities disagree with the prospect of actually modifying prayer. Our timeless liturgy was institutionalized during the early part of the Second Temple and alteration of this text may both undermine the sanctity of the prayer experience, as well as create slippery slopes in other areas of Halachik fidelity.

However, even if the syntax of our *Tisha Be-av* prayers are inalterable the core concern is, and should be, a compelling one: How to refresh our *Tisha Be-av* mourning to reflect the incredible Divine miracles we have witnessed and the unprecedented growth of our country. Mourning is an intensely personal and emotional experience and failure to assimilate our *Tisha Be-av* into the modern reality can yield a lifeless and even bifurcated experience. We face the great risk of divorcing *Tisha Be-av* from the jubilation we feel at our return to Israel. How can a Jew, living in our vastly altered modern world, experience *Tisha Be-av* mourning during a period in which history has once again smiled upon us?

We take our cues from the celebrated visionary- Rebbi Akiva! He lived during one of the darkest periods of Jewish history- the Roman destruction of Yerushalayim and the harshest phase of Roman persecution. In fact, he himself was martyred for defying Roman verdicts banning Torah study. Walking with his colleagues and witnessing the disrepair of the *Mikdash* site, he smiled at their fate. Questioned about his insensitivity in light of this horror, he replied with a sweeping and panoramic view of Jewish history: Indeed, at that particular moment our people endured disproportionate suffering, but this merely reflected the asymmetry or disproportion of Jewish history. The Romans were so brutal and merciless toward the Jews precisely because they recognized us as God’s people. Anti-Semitism isn’t random or arbitrary but based on our status as proxies of God and, ultimately, hatred of Jews flares in response to the great Jewish mission- to challenge this world to higher ground. Rebbi Akiva understood that the brutality and the horror he faced was part of a larger “algorithm” of Jewish history. Our ultimate rise and triumph would be just as meteoric as the rapid and precipitous decline he lived through. Rebbi Akiva sensed the integrated nature of Jewish history- our extreme suffering and our phenomenal successes are each based upon the same core truth we are chosen for mission and we operate on a supernatural plane. In the depths of national despair Rebbi Akiva envisioned triumph which would be driven by the very same condition which had yielded such suffering. Perceiving this algorithm he was able to forecast a brighter day of redemption upon that very same Temple Mount and sensing this inevitability he laughed.

Rebbi Akiva lived in a dark world of “endless *Tisha Be-av*” and yet he smiled. We, who inhabit a radiant world of renewed Jewish opportunity should certainly smile. If History has smiled down upon us we must smile back – even in the throes of *Tisha Be-av* mourning. Our generation has been resettled in our homeland- a reinstatement which was enabled by thousands of years of Jewish heroism, defiance and, unfortunately, a great deal of suffering. This oppression was never indiscriminate; we were disliked precisely because of our national historical agenda. Even at great distance from our land, we stood bold in the face of historical struggle as the Divinely-chosen people. Despite facing a world of hostility, we persevered in our mission and lessoned the world about our God and His moral will. Though we had forfeited both our home and our prestigious status we confidently yearned for the restoration of each. Had we not preserved that dream and had we not maintained that conviction, our license to return would have expired.

Having reached the final chapters of Jewish History we are uniquely suited to appreciate the struggles and tragedies which *Tisha Be-av* enshrines. Being able to look retrospectively at the entire sweep of Jewish History, we are best able to sense the great tragedy of our elongated detour. Our journey was intended to be simpler and more direct. We were meant to arrive in Israel six months after our departure from Egypt and we were expected to quickly construct a *Mikdash* and usher in a utopian era of universal welfare. Our repeated betrayals wrecked the arch of history and condemned us to a long march through a dark night of Exile. All the painful nightmares which we mourn on *Tisha Be-av* could have been easily avoided. *Tisha Be-av* affords an opportunity to relive our excruciating historical odyssey and mourn all the horror and heartache - especially in light of what “could have been”. Our unique vantage point at the tail of end of history enables a deeper appreciation of the two scenarios- our intended itinerary and the actual circuit we traveled upon. By smiling at our modern redeemed state we can better view our past history, probe its hardships, and mourn its darkness while celebrating our national achievements both throughout that gloomy Exile period and, of course, in modern Israel. Rebbi Akiva’s laugh in the dark midnight of Jewish history mandates that we laugh during the dazzling dawn of redemptive history.

The ability to stream our *Tisha Be-av* mourning through the prism of our current situation in Israel is critical for a second reason. Our ancestors were mired in hopeless conditions, dislocated from the land of Israel and the horizons of hope which it uncovers. For them, the possibility of Redemption – though constantly yearned for- seemed remote and almost apocalyptic. As their reality bared absolutely no semblance to the world they dreamed of, their hopes remained distant dreams. The dashing of these hopes was sad and heartbreaking but it could not have been devastating. By contrast, our generation is so close to the terminus and has begun to actually witness the initial stages of this revolution. If anything, these accomplishments have whetted our appetites for comprehensive and ultimate redemption and, for us, the emotional ‘stakes’ of *Tisha Be-av* are that much greater. Three times a day we petition that “our eyes should witness the return to Zion” and, indeed, our eyes have witnessed partial scenes of this return though not its full resolution. However, we desire so much more and in so many different aspects of our national and religious experience. The very prospect that our own “eyes” may miss these great events by a few years or a few decades rather than a few centuries is even more exasperating. For our generation, geula isn’t some apocalyptic wish about a complete overhaul of human history. We have lived through the dramatic changes both in human history and in Jewish restoration. Having reached these milestones, the final chapters of history seem more attainable than ever. If we fail to advance and our “eyes” do not behold Zion, our frustration must be commensurate. *Tisha Be-av* is the day to vent that frustration as well.

Mourning on *Tisha Be-av* is a formative experience for Jewish identity. It is pivoted upon acknowledging both our unique Jewish calling and the heavy price this mission has exacted upon our people. The rehabilitation of our people has altered our historical consciousness and our *Tisha Be-av* must be refreshed and reinvigorated appropriately. We owe it to *Tisha Be-av* to smile so that we may cry honest and modern tears. We owe it to victims of past *Tisha Be-av* nightmares to both smile and cry at once.