

D'varim 5782  
Eicha—How Did We Get Here?  
Rabbi Betsy Forester

Did you ever ride home on your bicycle, or drive home in your car, and realize when you arrived that you lacked a felt sense of how you got there—as if your vehicle knew the way and took you home, while your mind was elsewhere? I am not recommending it. But I suspect many of us have had the experience of wondering “how did I get here?”

On a practical level, not knowing how we got home suggests an unnatuned, narrow escape from physical danger. Living our lives without understanding how we got to where we are or how we intend to live better is spiritual folly, a series of missed opportunities for meaning making and personal growth.

Today is Shabbat Chazon, based on Isaiah’s prophetic vision of the destruction of the First Temple, heralded by the first word of today’s reading—Chazon. Shabbat Chazon always signals the coming of Tisha B’Av, the saddest day in the Jewish calendar, which this year will be observed tonight and tomorrow. Today actually is Tisha B’Av, the 9th of Av, but with the exception of Yom Kippur, we defer fast days that coincide with Shabbat and chagim.

This is the only Shabbat of the year in which we intentionally diminish a bit of our joy and begin our spiritual preparation for the observance of a tragic day. One verse of our Torah reading, began with the word “Eicha,” meaning “how,” and was chanted in the melody used for the cantillation of the Book of Eicha, Lamentations, which we will read tonight and tomorrow. Likewise, nearly all of today’s haftarah was chanted in that sad melody. Esther’s beautiful rendition might have masked that this is one of the most difficult haftarot to chant because of its tonal shifts.

The fast of Tisha B’Av is a major fast and a day of woe. On Tisha B’Av we mourn the destruction of the Beit HaMikdash, the loss of national sovereignty, our exile and dispersion, and the devastating loss of life and property—first, at the hands of the Babylonians in 586 BCE and then, by the Romans in 70 CE. We also recall subsequent calamities—the expulsions from Spain and England, and assorted localized tragedies. Tonight and tomorrow, we will sit on the floor and commune with our ancestors, feeling their suffering and their questions: “How did we get here? How has this happened?” We will sit with them until we realize that they are part of us—and we are sitting in our own “Eicha,” asking how we have come to live the lives we are living—individually and communally.

Our sages who kept their faith after the destructions we commemorate on Tisha B'Av sought to locate the cause of their suffering in their own behavior. They—our rabbis—attributed the first destruction to our People's lack of fidelity to Torah and the mitzvot, and the second destruction to rampant, baseless hatred among our People—”*sinat chinam*.” In truth, there is good reason to believe that our First Temple Period ancestors were widely unobservant of Torah law and that our Second Temple Period ancestors were factionalized to the point of violence. I am not sure, though, how many of *us* believe that the tragedies that have befallen our people have come as punishment for our sin. That is not my theology—though I believe we would do well to consider what we risk when we lose touch of the values and practices that make us proud of our heritage, and when we tolerate Jewish intolerance of one another.

This week I read an online message from Rabbi Yoav Ende of Kibbutz Hanaton, the only kibbutz in Israel that identifies with Masorti, or Conservative, Judaism. I want to share some of his words with you:

“They say good memories are forever etched into your mind. Unfortunately, this is also true for bad ones – except those that are etched into the soul. 25 years ago, I was finishing my service in the IDF right on the 9th of Av. Myself, my father and a few friends came to read the Scroll of Lamentations at the Western Wall. It wasn't a particularly big deal back then – many communities read the scroll together for years in circles of fasting and remembering the destruction of the Temple the way the Sages teach us to; remembering the ruin we brought upon ourselves due to needless hate.

The Ultra-Orthodox who were there began to curse us, to use swear words, to hit and mangle and throw objects. They gathered in their thousands and sought to drive us from the Wall. The officers of Jerusalem's police force herded us away and as they did I watched my father – in mourning, trying to say his Kaddish – get shoved, pushed, and dragged to “safety.”

“That experience made it very difficult for me to go back to the Wall and pray with all my heart, as I did before. But it also made me committed to a different form of Judaism, to a society that will behave differently, to Rabbis who will lead to better places. I decided to begin an Educational Center which will focus on the future leadership of Israel, strengthening their bond to a world of faith that chooses life and progress, and stands bravely against the needless hate that still divides us.

“Since that time the State of Israel has decided that not all of the Western Wall can

accommodate non-Orthodox communities. With much regret, we moved to the less attended southern perimeter, called Ezrat Yisrael. We conducted our services there on holidays, Shabbat, national holidays and family occasions. But now Ultra-Orthodox and right-wing radicals have come there too along with their Rabbis to cast us out. Disruption of prayers, verbal and physical violence, and all manner of abuse have become a new routine.

“I stopped at a gas station a few nights ago. A few young Ultra-Orthodox were standing there trying to hitch a ride. I told them they were more than welcome, but they should know I was a Conservative Jew. One of them looked straight at me and without missing a beat told me they wouldn’t go in my car come hell or high water. We are Jews, and we are brothers. And needless hate has no place in the State of Israel.”

It saddens me that on a day when we will sit here and mourn our collective losses that began with the destruction of the Temple on the platform of what is now considered the holiest site of the Jewish People, the Kotel, I am not welcome in that place as the Jew I am and certainly not as the Rabbi I am. Surely, we are not responsible for the outrageous and disgusting behavior of Jews who deny us our right to daven at the Kotel like we do here in our sanctuary. But in our distress and anger, we might ask, “eicha, how did we get here?”

Tisha B’av serves as a powerful day of identification with our people across the ages and a pivotal day of reckoning in our own lives. Each of us can and should ask: what is my part of the brokenness that lies before me and within my own heart, and what is my role in repairing it? That is the question we are called to lean into at this time.

And we can also ask how we got to the good parts of our lives, too, so that we can reinforce and enhance habits, practices, dispositions, and intentions that help us and others live more flourishing lives. That may not be a question for the morning of Tisha B’Av, but it’s a good one to begin to pick up later in the day, and in the days that follow.

We are already in the period that leads up to Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. Our time of introspection began three weeks ago on the 17th of Tammuz.. Starting tonight, we lean more consciously into our brokenness, as hopes for a joyful new year begin to form within us. Tisha B’av begins in pathos, but by afternoon, the mood shifts. In recognition of re-established sovereignty in the Land of Israel, we look with hope to the future, informed by what we have learned from our past and from our present.

So, may we lean in, and seek to understand the lessons of this moment, in order that we may open our hearts to new hope and renewal.

