

July 2006 Article for Kol HaLev Happenings
Rabbi Steve Segar
Kol HaLev – Cleveland’s Reconstructionist Community

One of the core tenets of Reconstructionist Judaism is the importance of “living in two (or multiple) civilizations. This means among other things that our lives will be maximally enriched to the extent that we recognize and engage with the rhythms, imagery and practices of both our American and our Jewish culture. There is no time harder to do this than in the middle of the summer. Passover in the spring and the Days of Awe plus Sukkot in the fall create a sense of organic overlap between the Jewish and American rhythms. But in the middle of summer, at the height of vacation and recreation time for the American calendar, we are suddenly hit with the jarring note of the three weeks of mourning which culminate at Tisha b’Av on the Jewish side of things.

This period begins traditionally with a minor fast on the 17th day of the Hebrew month of Tammuz which this year falls on Thursday July 13th and proceeds with increasing intensity for 21 days until we reach the 9th day of the Hebrew month of Av which falls this year on the night of Wednesday August the 2nd and the day of Thursday August 3rd. This day is the only day besides Yom Kippur on which Jewish law prescribes a full 24 hour fast from all forms of physical pleasure and sustenance. At least two questions immediately present themselves as we reflect on this calendrical cacophony. Firstly, why would we even want to engage with this particular part of the Jewish holiday cycle which seems to evoke themes so antithetical to the optimism embedded within the American part of our psyches? And secondly, even if we were to decide that it was worth engaging with, how can we possibly fit such engagement into this most “care-free” time of year which pulls us in exactly the opposite direction?

Turning to the first question, it is important to note that this period of the Jewish calendar, like all others, can be understood and experienced on multiple levels and along a spectrum of meanings. The most well known dimension of the Three Weeks is the commemoration of the many horrific events that occurred on or around these dates to the Jewish people across the centuries including the destruction of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem, the commencement of the Spanish Inquisition in 1492 and the expulsion of the Jews from England in 1290. But our tradition has developed alongside this level of interpretation others which stress that this day should call our attention to the problem of causeless hatred (*sinat chinam*) between people as well as to the reality of being in spiritual exile from ourselves, from our people, from our world and from God.

Weaving these themes together, we could say that Tisha b’Av along with its three weeks of preparation confronts us with the experience of humanity in exile, the repression of which can often lead to causeless hatred (as we seek to expunge our own inner pain by blaming it on others) and ultimately to acts of violence and destruction as a perverse expression of the struggle against internal chaos. Finally, we acknowledge and grieve our fundamental vulnerability to this destructive dynamic when it explodes into human society. Why would we ever want to intentionally cultivate this type of consciousness, even for a short period of time? I can suggest at least two possible responses. The first is that we all deal with these feelings at some level of awareness as part of the human condition and this sector of the Jewish calendar provides us with

a kind of psychic safety valve that gives us a short respite from the constant management of these darker regions of our souls.

The second is the recognition of the unfortunate reality that we are living through a period of history in which we are threatened with destruction of a global magnitude in more ways than we ever have been in the history of our species. It strikes me that having a holy day or sacred time dedicated to getting in touch with this truth could be helpful both psychologically and spiritually, and eventually allow us to live our lives a little less dominated by these menacing shadows.

In terms of the tension that exists between typical American Summertime activities and the underbelly of life represented by the Three weeks and/or Tisha b'Av, the first thing is to admit that the tension exists and is powerful. I also think this serves as example of a way in which our Jewish culture has something to offer our American one. The strength and the weakness of America is its tendency to be future oriented and to avoid dwelling on unpleasant aspects of its own history and society. What better corrective could there be than to focus for a limited amount of time on those places we are normally afraid to tread. One other effect of this type of exploration is to immeasurably deepen our ability to appreciate the joyful and life-affirming moments when we encounter them. Perhaps Tisha b'Av is just what our American Summer needs.

For more information about the Three weeks, please see myjewishlearning.com.

Kol HaLev will hold its annual observance of Tisha b'Av on Wednesday evening August 2nd. Please watch the weekly update for specifics of time and location.

Rabbi Steve