

Last Monday night the Jewish community marked Tisha B'av. As Noa mentioned it is a day of mourning for the destruction of the first and second Temple and has become associated also with other tragedies in Jewish history, ranging from Moses smashing the first set of tablets upon seeing the Israelites sinning with the Golden Calf, to the outbreak of World War I with all that followed. Some years Tisha B'av and the anniversary of the atomic bomb at Hiroshima or Nagasaki also coincide. It is a bleak day on the calendar, and even though the state of Israel has been reborn, the Jewish community has not dropped this day of mourning.

But a week after Tisha B'av, there is another Jewish holiday, Tu B'av, the 15th of the month of Av. It is a day praised by no lesser scholar than Rabbi Shimon Ben Gamliel, the leader of his generation and the man who established the Passover seder. He calls it one of the two greatest days of joy on the Jewish calendar. Why Tu B'av? And why doesn't everyone know about it?

Tu B'av, revived to some extent in Israel today, has been called the Jewish Valentine's Day. The Mishnah tells us it was a day when the young maidens would go out on the hills and dance in the vineyards, to be courted by the young men. Why on this date? The Talmud provides six answers, a sure sign that no one had any clue why, yet their list leaves out the most obvious explanation.

At the end of the book of Numbers, five daughters of a man named Zelophechad plead with Moses that they might be allowed to inherit their father's land, thus perpetuating his name in Israel. After consulting with God, Moses gives permission, but then their tribe's leaders object, concerned that if the women marry outside their tribe, their tribe's portion would be diminished. Moses then rules that these women must marry within their tribe. According to the Talmud Tu B'av was the day that this rule was rescinded and permission was given to marry across tribal lines.

Other explanations relate to the tribe of Benjamin being forgiven after its offense in the time of the Judges, to the end of the deaths of the generation of the desert, to the northern King Jeroboam rescinding his ban on travel to Jerusalem in the Southern Kingdom, to permission for those who died in the final rebellion against Rome, at a place called Beitar, to be buried. Some of these events took place many centuries before the Mishnah and Beitar, almost a century after Rabbi Gamliel made the original pronouncement, so I am skeptical that these are the origins of the holiday.

There is one more explanation given in the Talmud in the name of Rabba and Rabbi Yosef, which gives a hint of the perhaps the real answer. They explain that

it was on Tu B'av that they stopped chopping down trees for the use on the altar. They needed a certain amount of wood for the offerings in the Temple, and so would chop down trees until they had a sufficient supply. Why did they stop on the 15th of Av? Rabbi Eliezer the Elder explains, because from the 15th of Av onward, the sun grows less and the trees would not dry sufficiently to be good kindling.

Now you can understand this if you lived in a northern climate. When I was a child growing up in New York city, my father was involved in the training of medical interns and residents. Since they started their year on July 1st, we could never take our summer vacations until the middle of August- he didn't trust them with the patients until then. But if we went on vacation too late in August and went to upstate New York, it would already be cold at night and you could really feel the coming of the fall and winter.

Of course that is not the case in Israel, where the weather is like it is here in California and September can often be a brutally hot month. Still it does get darker earlier, allowing the night to cool off. And for me that is the hint of what this is really about.

Why did they dance in the vineyards on the 15th of Av? Because it was the last full moon of the summer, what a perfect time to be outside.

But the more interesting question is why was Tisha B'av preserved in the Jewish community while Tu B'av was allowed to lapse? We actually aren't sure whether Tisha B'av was marked while the second Temple stood, but we do know that during all the years from 70 C.E. when the Romans destroyed the second Temple until 1948, the lack of a Jewish homeland was felt profoundly in the insecurity of Jewish life in so many times and places. There is even a legend, first found in print in 1891, that Napoleon happened upon a synagogue on the eve of Tisha B'av, and seeing the Jews sitting on low stools with ashes on their heads asked what had happened. When he was told that they were mourning their Temple destroyed 1700 years ago, he said that a people so attached to its history would certainly be restored to their land.

We often tell our story as a Jewish people, as one of disaster and despair, ignoring the brighter times in the Diaspora. A prominent contemporary rabbi recently argued that "we are more afraid of good times than bad times." Yet the commandment is, "Ivdu et Adonai be Simchah" worship God in gladness.

Both as a people and as individuals there is the danger of losing sight of the good, in focusing on the scary. Reviving Tu B'av would be a great way of restoring balance to Jewish life, giving time to joyous celebration along with mourning. There is an expression in Jewish culture, that those who are with you in supporting you through hard times, merit also being together to celebrate joys. So may it be for us.