

Centuries ago, the rabbinic sages designated Tisha B'av, the 9<sup>th</sup> day of the Hebrew month of Av, as the date on which both the first and second destructions of the Temple in Jerusalem occurred. Each of these devastations not only destroyed the central place of worship for our Israelite ancestors, they signaled the end of a way of life in the Promised Land, setting into motion exile, bereavement, and profound change.

Though the time between the destruction of the first Temple in 586 BCE and the rebuilding of the Temple 538 BCE was short; and the time between that return to Jerusalem and reestablishment of Israelite life and the destruction of the second Temple in 70 CE was long; the two events remain linked in our shared history. They are the moments when the covenant between God and the Israelites was challenged and when the Jewish people—a people of exile and survival—rose up out of tragedy.

The ancients understood this tragedy to be a punishment by God for a failure on their own part. Whether the sin was idolatry, abandonment of the Torah, or senseless hatred toward one another, their world view offered divine retribution as the explanation.

Observing a day of national mourning for what was lost became essential for generations in exile because it implicitly held the promise that return to Jerusalem, and the idealized past, was possible—despite the continued destructions of Jewish communities throughout the Diaspora.

The idea that tragedy and disaster are the result of divine punishment for human failings is no longer part of contemporary Jewish theology. We know that a life of godliness, faith, and piety does not guarantee protection against illness or evil, nor does misfortune imply a lack of moral strength. We also know how dangerous it is when a group of people or even a nation, are accused of bringing disaster simply by existing.

That does not mean that we are powerless against tragedy or that our words and deeds cannot powerfully harm and even destroy. Our ancestors said that all Jews are responsible for one another—today we know that in order to safeguard our communities, we must extend that web of responsibility.

In the past several months we have experienced national tragedies for us as Jews and for us as Americans. These tragedies are not simply about lives threatened or lost, but about the failure of nations and leaders; and a failure of citizens to demand justice for themselves, and for their neighbors.

Tisha B'av today—when we are both Jews in Israel and in the wider world, when our lives are enmeshed with our neighbors' in ways the rabbinic sages never could have imagined—is a time for us to reflect on our failure to take responsibility for others when we could have. It is a time to stop and mourn the impact of our individual and communal decisions that have put our world and its inhabitants at risk.

In the months ahead—Elul and Tishrei—we will atone and make amends. Today we reflect on our individual and communal lives, remembering when we felt the world to be a safer place, and when we felt secure in the systems set in place to protect each of us. And as we reflect, we mourn the incidents of stability that have been lost, and think how we might contribute to restoring balance to our world.