



## Tisha b'Av or Life and Death with God

A. Hadas

### *Joseph Dov Soloveitchik (1903-1993)*

*The renowned Lithuanian Talmudic scholar Rabbi Soloveitchik is looked to in North America as the leader of modern centrist Orthodoxy and was popularly known simply as “the Rav.” His teaching of Jewish philosophy has formed two generations of Orthodox rabbinical students at Yeshiva University in New York. His annual lectures on teshuvah (Repentance) at the convention of the Rabbinical Council of America became the major annual academic event for United States Orthodox Jewry.*

*Soloveitchik was born in Ruzhan, Poland. At the age of 28 he received in 1931 his doctoral degree at the University of Berlin for his dissertation on Hermann Cohen. The following year he emigrated with his wife to the United States and founded in Boston the Maimonides School while serving as Rabbi of the Orthodox community in Boston. In 1941, Soloveitchik was called to teach at the theological seminary at Yeshiva University in New York where he eventually became head of the Seminary. In 1985, his ill health caused him to retire. Soloveitchik published only three books (Halakhic Man, The Halakhic Mind, and The Lonely Man of Faith) but every one became an outstanding piece of Jewish philosophy. His thought focused on assessing the human situation. mp*

“I have set before you today life and good, death and evil . . . choose life so that you may live, you and your descendants” (Deuteronomy 30:15, 19).

Tisha b'Av is one of the darkest days in the Jewish calendar.<sup>1</sup> Its meaning evokes destruction and death. What could Tisha b'Av have to do with life with God?

Tisha b'Av is however more than the mere commemoration of a black day of Jewish history. Tisha b'Av is more than nostalgia for a glorious past, more than the nationalistic longing for a new temple and a new Jerusalem. Tisha b'Av is more importantly a reflection on the causes behind the destruction of the temple. On Tisha b'Av, Jews mourn less the actual de-

struction of the temple than the deeds that led up to it. Tisha b'Av is a day of repentance, and in this sense, a fresh start, a new beginning. Tisha b'Av functions as the prelude to a life with God: “Let us search and examine our ways and return to Hashem” (Lamentations 3:40). A reflection on Tisha b'Av is thus the best way to orient our lives towards God. Indeed, what does

it teach us about life with God? What does it teach us about life with others?

### **1. Life with God**

It may seem rather odd to start our investigation of life with God on such a somber note: death, and death with God at that. Indeed, what does death with God have to teach us about life with God?

We leave the question open and turn to the book of Lamentations. There we see three curses: wanderings, humiliations, and death. Death with God, or life without God thus takes on three aspects. First we have wanderings. Without God, we are indeed condemned to wander upon the earth. But what does this roaming and ro-

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ing teach us about life with God? Let us examine what wandering is all about. Wandering is first of all a certain instability stemming from a certain dissatisfaction with one's surroundings. And therefore we drift from place to place: “The wicked are like chaff . . .” But wandering is much more than that. Wandering is the incapacity to produce something that

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lasts. It is the incapacity to create. Only the one who settles down has time to plant the seed, tend it, and live to see it mature into the fruit. Creativity involves a part of settling down, a stability.

Life with God is thus a life by which creativity is made possible. The drifter will never create something that lasts. He will manifest the sparks of genius but will never be able to channel his talent into a work of art. Life without God can thus be compared to a desert where one drifts, always looking for fresher land and never taking the time to plant the seeds of one's own garden.

It is from wandering that come humiliation and death. In his book *The Lonely Man of Faith*, Joseph Soloveitchik distinguishes between two Adams. The first Adam is created in the image of God and is thus capable, like God, of creativity. The first Adam is indeed asked by God to fill the earth and subdue it. And it is from there that he gets his dignity and majesty. The incapacity to create leads thus to humiliation as one has nothing to show for oneself. In the eyes of others, whence we get our dignity, we are nothing.

Finally comes death. Quite disturbingly this death is depicted in the book of Lamentations as coming from God: "The Lord has become like an enemy" (2:5), "You have done it" (1:21). And indeed, are we to hold God responsible for the death that befalls the Israelites? Is He at the origin of death as well as of life?

Perhaps it is that death befalls those who wander so far from God that He cannot protect them anymore. Indeed, the exile of the Israelites started way before the Diaspora. It is the exile from God that led to the exile from Jerusalem. The exile of the heart led to the exile of the body.

Life with God has taken a clearer meaning with our analysis of death with God. The negative attributes of death with God—wandering, humiliation and death—have all clarified the positive aspects of creativity and dignity that accompany our life with God. Yet there remains one problem. And our analysis of life with God will not be complete until we have acknowledged this problem. Our problem stems from a post-Ho-

locust reading of the book of Lamentations.

Indeed, the passage of Lamentations becomes a very strange yet familiar setting when we read it in the light of the 1945 events: "The adversary has stretched out his hand over all her precious things" (1:10), "my children are desolate" (1:16), "the little ones ask for bread" (4:4), "their skin is shriveled on their bones, it is withered, it has become like wood" (4:8), "our skin has become as hot as an oven, because of the burning heat of famine" (5:10). All

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ividly evoke the historical happenings of 1945. We are reminded of the massive seizure of Jewish belongings and wealth; we are reminded of the ghetto of Warsaw, of the concentration camps.

The harsh depiction above would however make perfect sense were it not for one problem. There were in this case no iniquities. Indeed the Holocaust did not befall secular Jews or wayward Jews, but crushed one of the most faithful and spiritual communities of the Jewish world.

Death with God takes suddenly a new aspect. The Holocaust becomes death with God in the sense of martyrdom, of *Kiddush Hashem*. But martyrdom has not much to teach us about life. And it is life we are concerned about. Our question is as follows: How are we then to live with God so as to avoid death? What does the Holocaust teach us about life with God? It would seem that to avoid sin is just not enough anymore. Does life with God entail more than our individual faithfulness to Him?

## 2. Life with Others

It would seem that such things as death occur not only when we have strayed from God, but also when our neighbors have. In this sense, we are

not only to worry about our own sins but also about the sins of our neighbors.

This is what Emmanuel Levinas means when he speaks of the weight of responsibility. There is no individual good conscience inasmuch as I am originally bound to the other and thus to his sin. To think that one has only to account for one's own wrongdoings was Job's error. Indeed, crushed by the curse, Job does not understand, for as an individual he has done nothing wrong. But what Job needs to comprehend is that there is no individual innocence. We are all culprits, we are all responsible. It is only when Job realizes the collective dimension of his relation with God that God forgives him: "The Lord restored the fortunes of Job when he prayed for his friends" (Job 42:10).

Indeed, life with God is not an individual matter. Any soul-searching on our part should include a prayer for our neighbor's soul. After Auschwitz it is impossible to live isolated as to what goes on in the world. For our destinies are linked. It is not enough to live with God; we must learn to live with others just as others must learn to live with us.

This is why on Tisha b'Av we pray not only for the rebuilding of the temple but also for the rebuilding of the world. Tisha b'Av is anything but a nationalistic holiday. After Auschwitz it cannot be so anymore. To pray for our sins is not enough anymore. If we want to live, we must also pray for the sins of the world.

Tisha b'Av should not be an exclusive holiday, focused solely on the rebuilding of the temple and the restoration of the people of Israel, but should open up a space for all peoples, and break the barriers, the walls that separate us from the nations because our destinies are linked.

Life with God is not a secret between me and God. We are not to stand alone before God, but to stand with our neighbor before God. Such is the essence of a complete and authentic life with God.

<sup>1</sup>Tisha b'Av, "the Ninth of (the month) Av," is the commemoration of the destruction of both the First and Second Temples. On Tisha b'Av, Jews fast and the megillah Eikhah, the Book of Lamentations, is read.