



The Fourth of July and Tisha B'Av

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Over the past several years, I have informed my American side with my learning of Torah. This summer reminds me that it is also possible to better understand the story of the Jewish people through a contemplation of American “civil religion”. Allow me to explain.

Fourteen years ago, I traveled to Washington D.C. to be with friends for the Fourth of July weekend. I had been to D.C. before on a teen tour, but never on a major national holiday. We packed a picnic dinner and some blankets and met up right next to the Washington Monument, along with tens of thousands of others. It was a wonderful day, and my memories from that day are of my friends and fireworks.

This past week, I spent the Fourth of July with my family in the same spot I had been fourteen years earlier. We had spent the day Smithsonian-hopping, and experiencing first-hand some of the values that we as Americans hold dear: our public institutions, diversity, law, art, history, science, freedom, and justice. In the blazing afternoon sun, we set out our blanket near the Washington Monument, not far from where I had sat fourteen years earlier. From this spot, we could see both the Lincoln Memorial and the Capitol. Many people had set up large umbrellas, tents and other shelters, and nearly everyone had brought something to eat while waiting for the fireworks. On a large outdoor stage, the army band played contemporary American music, every division of the military's theme song, and a slew of patriotic songs.

Then all of a sudden it became obvious: this was not simply waiting for a fireworks show; this was an American pilgrimage festival. This is what it felt like in Jerusalem at Pesach, Sukkot or Shavuot. For many years, I have longed to have some idea of what the Three Pilgrimage Festivals might have been like. Unbeknownst to me, I had already been to one, and was now at my second. I looked around my American setting and tried to imagine the ancient Israelite version of the same scene: Throngs of people gathered on the hills around Jerusalem, coming together because they share a national story and to affirm the truth and reality of that story. The American story is essentially one of independence and freedom, while the Jewish story is one of freedom and responsibility. D.C. is America's Jerusalem, our sacred city that represents all that we hold dear, and, like Jerusalem, some corruption as well.

Both the Torah reading this week and the Jewish calendar connected me further to this Jerusalem-D.C. relationship. In this week's double Torah portion, Matot-Masei, B'nai Yisrael have come to the end of their wanderings and stand at the edge of the Promised Land. They have journeyed from Egypt to Canaan - from slavery to freedom. The core of our national story has been forged. In Parshat Masei, there is a litany of places where we

had camped over those forty years, each place brimming with memories, both recorded and lost. This is the story that we affirm on each of the Three Pilgrimage Festivals. However, our story continues after our entry into the land and the establishment of the first Jewish state, culminating in the designation of Jerusalem as our capital, complete with the establishment of a central Temple.

During this coming week, we will begin the month of Av, which includes Tisha B'Av, the day on which we remember the destruction of Jerusalem, both the first and second Temple, and a series of other calamities that have befallen the Jewish people. The Jewish national story contains both destruction and restoration. In contrast, the American national story does not contain a chapter on national destruction. I hope that it never does. I have spent two Tisha B'Avs in Jerusalem, several at Jewish summer camps, and many more in synagogues around the country. Yet, I rarely feel any emotional connection to this day. I understand the day. I have learned about the day, and I have taught about the meaning of this day. Sitting on the hilltop in Washington D.C. has changed my relationship to Tisha B'Av.

As I sat near the Washington Monument earlier this week, I tried to imagine an American Tisha B'Av, a reality were America had been attacked by a foreign power, D.C. laid waste, and Americans forbidden to live or even visit the city that had been the center of American life for two and a half centuries. Imagine the devastating blow to the American people this would have: How would the American people deal with the destruction of our sacred center? Would they commemorate the tragedy in song and prose? Would they have any hope for a national restoration, or would they resign themselves to this new reality? Who would have the daring to carry on the America way in that reality? Would the government begin to meet in secret in another city? Would some continue to fight to the death? Would some just submit to the new situation? How would America's "civic religion" adapt to this new situation? Maybe we would take a cue from the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of the people of Tibet, who asked a group of Jewish leaders how to help the people of Tibet live in exile.

Thinking about these questions helps me connect me the anger and despair of the book of Lamentations, which describes the aftermath of Jerusalem's destruction; to the perpetual state of mourning some people lived in for years afterward; and most importantly, to the drive to carry on and find new ways to live in this reality.

It is the drive to carry on in creative ways that most inspires me at this time of year. Yes, we remember our collective tragedies, from the Golden Calf to the Expulsion from Spain and beyond, and I note that the Rabbis put them all into one day of tragic recollection. The legendary figure of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai symbolizes the Rabbis' courageous and creative actions that helped the Jewish people. According to tradition, Zakkai escaped the Roman seige Jerusalem and established the rabbis' leadership in the city of Yavne, and enacted a series of changes in Jewish law that would help people both remember the Temple in Jerusalem and carry on a meaningful Jewish life without it.

As we enter into this month of tragic Jewish remembrance, we should also remember that those tragic events pushed us to become a stronger, more resilient and creative people.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Pepperstone

As a family, talk about:

- What the difference is between being a Jewish American and an American Jew, if you think there is one.
- How being Jewish informs your being an American.
- How being an American informs your being Jewish.

To learn more about this week's two Torah portions, Mattot and Masei, read the parsashiyot and try to answer the following questions:

Mattot Questions

1. We are told that when a person makes a vow, he or she is bound to fulfill it. What kind of vow is specifically mentioned?
2. Under what circumstances may a minor woman, living in her father's home, make a vow that stands? Under what circumstances may this vow be voided?
3. How many men from each tribe were armed to go to war against the Midianites?
4. Pinhas was sent out with the men of war. What did he carry with him?
5. Precisely where are the plains of Moab?
6. How were the spoils of war divided between those who went to war and those who did not?
7. Which tribes asked to remain east of the Jordan River, choosing not to go into the Land? What was Moses' response to this request?
8. God swore that no men who left Egypt that were over the age of 20, with the exception of Caleb and Joshua, would see the Land. Is this, in fact, what happened?
9. What are the two commandments in this week's parashah?

Masei Questions

1. From where in Egypt did the Children of Israel begin their journey, and where did they camp first?
2. Where did Aaron die?
3. How old was Aaron when he died?
4. God told Moses to tell the Children of Israel to do four things when they came into the land. What were they?
5. What did God say would happen if the Israelites did not drive out all of the inhabitants?
6. How many tribes were to receive an inheritance in the land?
7. How many cities of refuge were to be given to the Levites? How many were to be in the land and how many outside?
8. How many cities in total were given to the Levites?
9. In order to be safe, how long must the person who has fled to a city of refuge remain?

10. What ransom could be taken for the life of a murderer?