



Between Exodus and Exile

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One of the poetic laments we recite on Tisha B'Av is the poem that begins “*eish tukad be-kirbi* - A fire shall burn within me.” An acrostic, each stanza of the poem juxtaposes something glorious that occurred during the Exodus from Egypt, with something equally ignoble from our exile from Jerusalem. For example:

אֶז יִשִּׁיר מֹשֶׁה, שִׁיר לֹא יִנָּשֶׁה בְּצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרַיִם	Then Moshe sang, a song that will not be forgotten, When I went out of Egypt.
וַיִּקְוֶן יִרְמְיָהּ, וְנָהָה נָהִי נָהִי בְּצֵאתִי מִירוּשָׁלַיִם	But Yirmiyahu recited laments, and moaned and wailed, When I went out of Jerusalem.

The effect is clear, marking Exodus and Exile as polar opposites, alike in their intensity, but with inverted memories, the former reflecting the heights of joy and the latter the depths of despair. This juxtaposition intensifies the sorrow of our loss. As one early modern rabbi put it:¹

¹ R. Yisrael Ya'akov Hagiz (1620-1674), Responsa Halakhot Ketanot II:139.



כדי שיצטער האדם ויורגש בצער שהוא יושב יעלה בזכרוננו הטובות והנחמות שהיה לו ועי"ז יצטער ביותר ולכן אפשר	In order for a person to be more troubled, and to feel the pain in which they are sitting, they should recall the good things and the comforts that they [earlier] had, and they will thereby be more troubled.
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The parallel structure makes this particular lament both easier to comprehend and more emotionally effective. Yet, the juxtaposition of our escape from Egypt and our destruction at the hands of the Romans is, when we peer beneath the surface, not nearly as obvious as the poem's author would like us to believe. The poem sets us up to see the Exodus and the Exile as perfect antitheses, but they are more alike than we might want to admit.

We tell the story of *yetziat mitzrayim* and celebrate it as a paradigm of redemption. We know, however, that the salvation occurred only after hundreds of years—hundreds of years of Jews living and dying as enslaved people on foreign land. Even the moment of redemption itself was not, in the understanding of our Rabbis, an unmitigated moment of celebration. Commenting on the obscure biblical statement that the Israelites “went up *hamushim*”—a word that sounds as if it is related to the Hebrew word for “five”—“from the land of Egypt” (Shemot 13:18), an early *midrash* states:

מכילתא דרשב"י שמות יג:יח וחמושים עלו שלא עלו עמהן אחד מחמשה: ד"א אומרין אחד מחמשים: ויש אומרין אחד מחמש מאות: ר' נהוראי אומר העבודה ולא אחד מחמשת אלפים... ואימתי מתו בימי האפלה שהיו מצרים	Mekhilta de-Rashbi Shemot 13:18 “They went up <i>hamushim</i>”—for only one out of five went up with them. Alternatively: They say one out of fifty. And some say: One out of five hundred. R. Nehorai says, “By the Temple! Not even one out of five thousand.”... And when did they die? During the days of darkness, when the
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שריון בחושך וישראל קוברין מיתיהם והודו ושבחו לשם שלא ראו שונאיהן ושמחו בפורענותן:	Egyptians were dwelling in the dark, and Israel was burying their dead, grateful to and praising of God that their enemies did not see it and rejoice in their suffering.
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If R. Nehorai is correct, then literally millions of Jews died during the plague of darkness. According to Josephus, just over a million Jews were killed in the Roman sack of Jerusalem.² Nonetheless, we recall the Exodus as a moment of redemption, and the Exile as a national tragedy.

Two points in Jewish history, more alike than their reception would make them seem: two national migrations accompanied by massive death, with only a small remainder of the people saved to carry on the national mission. So why does one become the pinnacle of our joy, the cause for Hallel and gratitude, and the other is marked as a day of communal mourning?

The difference between Pesah and Tisha B'Av reflects the importance of direction. Looking at 15th Nisan and 9th Av in respective vacuums, we might not see much distinction. Both are days that were littered with corpses, with only a small remnant surviving, days that initiated long periods of wandering, homeless. Only when we attend to the direction of history—toward construction, home, and wholeness in the case of Pesah, but away from all of those in the case of Tisha B'Av—does it make sense that these days are commemorated in such opposite manners. Indeed, this is precisely the deepest meaning of our reciting Dayyeinu at the Seder—not that each step would, on its own, have indeed been enough, but rather, that each step of the way was building toward an ultimate redemption. The same could never be said of Tisha B'Av.

² See Josephus, *Jewish War* 6.420-421. Modern historians assume that this number is an exaggeration (see, e.g., Seth Schwartz, *The Ancient Jews from Alexander to Muhammad*, p. 83).



The mournful spirit of Tisha B'Av, then, does not fundamentally derive from its nature as the anniversary of destruction. What sets this day apart for sadness is the sense of looking forward into the future as far as one can see and seeing nothing but more descent and destruction. Perhaps that's why some of the mournful practices of Tisha B'Av, unlike their cognate practices on Yom Kippur, do not end when the day does, but rather continue into 10th Av.³ What makes the day so sad—and what we're meant to focus on—is the sense that as bad as things are, they are somehow still getting worse.

We of course cannot live in an ongoing way in such a depressed state. Eventually, our liturgical calendar will turn this around, and we will enter the seven Haftarat of consolation—seven weeks that lead us into the renewal of Rosh Hashanah, that is, a shift of orientation that directs us toward greater and greater possibility. But for a few days on the calendar, we must engage with the darkness that comes from the recognition that things do not always get better, and that sometimes, we simply have to sit with the sadness, without looking for the silver linings or the seeds of hope.

³ For example, the prohibitions on eating meat and drinking wine, as well as the prohibition on haircuts. Indeed, both Talmudim include testimony that the bulk of destruction occurred on the 10th, rather the 9th of Av; see Yerushalmi Ta'anit 4:6 (69a-b) and Bavli Ta'anit 29a.

