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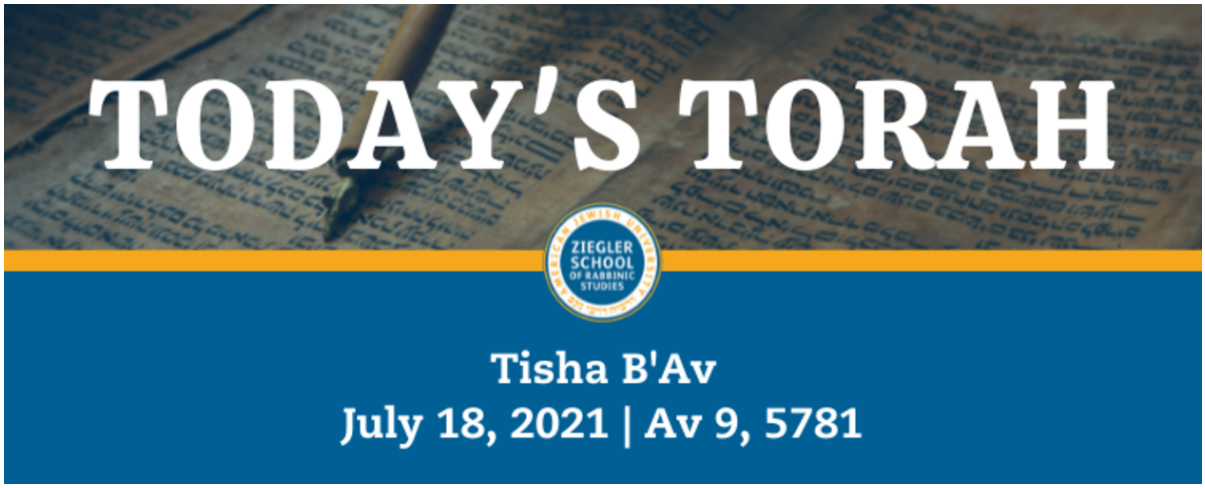

Sacred Play-Acting

By: Rabbi Dr. Gail Labovitz

Like a number of Conservative Jews, I first learned the "script" of Tisha B'Av at summer camp (in my case, Ramah Poconos). After a pre-fast meal and as the sun began to set, we filed into the Beit Am Gadol (meaning, fairly literally: the Large Communal Space). At the front, by the stage which usually hosted camp plays, a choir of staff, and perhaps campers from older groups, sang mournful Hebrew songs as everyone gathered. The lights in the room were turned down, and instead the vast, hanger-like space was lit with candles. No benches were set out; we clustered in circles on the concrete floor. And then came the aching minor-key notes of Eichah, the Book of Lamentations. Most of us didn't understand a lot of the Hebrew, but we could try to read along with the translation in the flickering, dim light. And if we did, we encountered horrors that still stand out to me with the vividness that they did encountering them as a child of 9 or 10. Enslavement. Exile. Slaughter. Starvation. Mothers cannibalizing their infant children.

Now, of course, "we" (the campers) in this scene were mostly (though surely not all) children of the North American suburbs, middle class, attendees of day schools or reasonably well-funded public schools. Certainly, some of us had experienced various individual or familial disruptions and tragedies. Some of us were children or grandchildren of survivors or those who had been murdered in the Holocaust. But it's pretty unlikely that any of us had personally experienced anything on the scale of the national catastrophes that took place when the Land of Israel was conquered and either the First or the Second Temple was destroyed, by the Babylonians in the 500's b.c.e., or the Romans in 70 c.e. What we were being taught to do at Ramah and other camps with similar rites is a kind of sacred play-acting.

As adults, we can tend to become jaded. Routine may take over. Or we learn that there have been terrible acts inflicted by some groups of humans on other groups of humans throughout recorded (and pre-recorded) history; we can and even must find ways not to be overwhelmed by the horror so that we can live our lives. Or we simply wonder how important it is that a way of Judaism that is now almost entirely foreign to us perished with the Temple, and whether we aren't better off with what the rabbis and generations of Jews created to replace it – or even to what degree we should be mourning at all, when a Jewish state lives again in our ancient homeland.

But every so often, there are years that remind me that what we are doing when we participate in these practices (which many of us brought home from our summer camps and into the synagogue communities we belong to as adults) is not "play," nor exactly "acting," but, as I've already said, a sacred task. For me, the year I truly learned (or perhaps relearned) this was August of 2014. After the kidnapping and murder of three Israeli teens in June (boys the same age my son was at the time), Israel and Hamas engaged in seven weeks of war that was still going on when Tisha B'Av came. The Syrian civil war was in one of its bloodiest phases, and refugees overwhelmed neighboring states and beyond. That year, I huddled by myself in a corner of our prayer space, not wanting to interact with anyone. Afterwards, I wrote this on Facebook:

> I try every year, I really do. A bit of sacred play-acting: we turn down the lights, and sit on the floor, sing in a minor key, and I try to mourn, or if I am feeling especially ambitious, try to imagine a city burning down around me.
>
> This year it was a lot less hard to imagine sitting with my family and neighbors in a bomb shelter, listening for booms. Sitting with my family and neighbors in an over-crowded classroom of a school that is supposed to serve as a refuge. Sitting with my family with no more shelter from the elements than a tent in a desert city that didn't even exist a year or two ago. Actually being without power or wondering how long the power will last. Actually being concerned over my next meal. Actually worrying that something will blow up or burn down around me, or knowing that it already has. Actually mourning people I know who have been cut down in the violence.

There has also been 2019, when Jews around the United States gathered on the morning of Tisha B'Av to protest the detention (in terrible conditions) and deportation of refugees – many from violence and lawlessness in Central America, or civil war in the Middle East; alongside friends, neighbors, members of our congregation, my colleagues and my students, my husband and I read Eicha together outside the Metropolitan Detention Center in downtown Los Angeles. Or, of course, last year, each of us sitting home alone or with only our closest family – frightened, isolated, lonely, perhaps even sick or grieving ourselves – may have been one of those years for many of us.

Why does this matter? Why should we be doing this? As one powerful answer, I want to bring you the words of my intellectual inspiration and dear friend, Dr. Rabbi Rachel Adler, from a more "ordinary" year. In 2015, Tisha B'Av was observed on a Sunday, as sometimes happens when the 9th falls on Shabbat (whereas this year the 9th itself is on Sunday). I posted (again on FB) a question about balancing Shabbat observance with the traditional restrictions of Tisha B'Av, and whether it was preferable to bathe on Shabbat (which was the 9th in actuality) or on Sunday (the deferred observance) – or not on either – given that bathing is usually prohibited on the fast day. When one respondent suggested that before discussing fine points of observance we must

question what makes this day meaningful at all (as I already noted some of us may have reason to do), Dr. Adler wrote this:

> …meaning is not just what happens in our heads. Meaning is also ENACTED, and we are talking about how it is properly enacted. When we perform being too shattered to eat, drink, bathe on Tisha B'Av, we are teaching ourselves what grief should look like AND what is worth grieving for…

Surely, the brokenness of our world, the cruelties we human beings continue to inflict on each other, the insecurity that can always lurk just under the surface of our lives even when we think we are in a place of comfort – surely that is worth acknowledging and grieving, and enacting. Surely, year by year we need to ask ourselves, what in our own history and that of the world is worth grieving for? What in our own history – and so too when inflicted on others – ought to leave us too shattered to eat, drink, bathe for at least a day? Tisha B'Av is the date that our ancestors and our history have given us for this purpose. May a bit of sacred play-acting be just real enough to bring us face to face with these questions.

Tzom kal – may you have an easy fast.

Rabbi Gail Labovitz, PhD is Professor of Rabbinic Literature and former Chair of the Department of Rabbinics for the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies. She also enjoys serving as the Ziegler School's faculty advisor for "InterSem," a dialogue program for students training for religious leadership at Jewish and Christian seminaries around the Los Angeles area. Dr. Labovitz formerly taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTS) and the Academy for Jewish Religion in New York. Prior to joining the faculty at AJU, Dr. Labovitz worked as the Senior Research Analyst in Judaism for the Feminist Sexual Ethics Project at Brandeis University, and as the Coordinator for the Jewish Women's Research Group, a project of the Women's Studies Program at JTS. Rabbi Labovitz is also the author of two responsa adopted by the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly, one on whether a person who is unable to fast for medical reasons may nonetheless serve as a leader of communal prayer on Yom Kippur and the other on alternatives for egalitarian marriage.

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