

# **In Compassion & Companionship**

***Reflections for Tisha B'Av  
and the Three Weeks***

Compiled and Edited by



## INTRODUCTION

מִשְׁנַכְנֵס אֶב מִמְעֵטִין בְּשִׁמְחָה.

*When the month of Av begins, we decrease our joy.*

– Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Taanit 26b

The Talmud instructs us to decrease our joy as the month of Av begins, to commemorate the destruction of the Temples and other events that occurred on the ninth of Av. Over time, some Jewish communities extended this mourning period from nine days to three weeks, beginning on the 17th of Tammuz, a minor fast day, and ending on Tisha B'Av, a major fast day.

*For those able to fast without harm, it is a mitzvah to fast.*

*If fasting is harmful, it is a mitzvah to eat.*

For those who generally feel joyful, limits on certain activities (defined as joyous by Jewish law) can be a meaningful way to mourn the destruction of the Temples and the *sinat chinam* (baseless hatred) that tore (and tears) us apart.

But what does it feel like to be told to feel less joy or to restrict specific activities that might bring us joy when we are already dealing with illness, trauma or grief? How does it feel to be told to feel more sad when we are already crying?

As an initiative dedicated to supporting Jews needing accommodations for mitzvot and minhagim (customs), we see and sit with those who can't decrease their joy.



So, in the spring of 2022, we reached out to a diverse group of writers to ask them to write pieces that might speak to, or for, the experience of those needing to relate to the Three Weeks/Nine Days and Tisha B'Av differently.

Our contributors, who represent many Jewish movements and backgrounds, wrote of what it is like to encounter the imagery of Eicha (the book of Lamentations, read on Tisha B'Av) as a disabled person, what mourning looks like from a gender perspective, mourning as a survivor of child abuse, and more. We have pieces on the Three Weeks and Tisha B'Av after pregnancy loss, after the loss of a child, and related to the losses from the Covid pandemic. We have a selection of poetry, an option to see the Three Weeks as a way to uplift love for ourselves, and a prayer for those who need to eat on Jewish fast days, including Tisha B'Av.

Whether you see yourself in these pieces, or your experience is very different, however you need to connect to the Three Weeks or Nine Days before Tisha B'Av, we support you.

We sit with you in compassion and companionship.



## **ABOUT A MITZVAH TO EAT**

A Mitzvah to Eat is a pluralistic social network and online resource hub for Jews who need accommodations for Jewish ritual practices due to health conditions, disabilities, trauma, and more. We provide educational and spiritual resources, original personal prayers, as well as Jewish learning and workshops. We are building a more connected and compassionate Jewish community that illuminates sparks of holiness within acts of self-preservation.

Find us on our [website](#), [Facebook](#), and [Instagram](#).

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## Grief, Weddings; Open First

By Rabbi Jen Gubitz

Originally published on July 14, 2021, in Lilith Magazine.

*“Someone I loved once gave me a box full of darkness.  
It took me years to understand that this too, was a gift.”*

— Mary Oliver

Despite the label’s demand, the brown U-Haul box remained taped up, stacked up, and out of sight. After years ensconced in our rental apartment that became a true haven during the pandemic, our landlords were selling and we had to leave. Our first home together was now packed up, loaded up, and off we went. The new home was only one mile away, but it felt like the diaspora. Unpacking was slow and despite each of us being *people of the book*, our books remained ensconced in a wall of boxes.

And then suddenly on our way out of town, I felt a yearning. I could not leave the house until I’d opened *that* box, hoping to find within a particular book my dear friend Sara assured was a gift to the heart, which I had purchased in the pandemic seemingly ages ago, then left unread at my bedside, then packed away in a moving box labeled: “Death, Weddings; Open First.” And I simply could not leave without finding it.

This was a July 4th jaunt out of town after months of personal tumult—the walls of life as we knew it falling down around us: shifted wedding plans, a painful and drawn-out conclusion of a beloved job, family health issues, fertility treatments, the move, unpacking... a collective uprooting that still weighed heavily on

our hearts. On a weekend devoted to celebrating our nation's independence, perhaps we hoped fireworks might muffle the wailing cries of global grief, national bereavement, communal sorrow, and individual suffering from months of isolation, loss and fear. The fissures of our society truly revealed, the heat of climate change boiling, a racial justice reckoning, a rise in antisemitism, and so, so much loneliness—we sought respite from the reverberations of collective catastrophe.

So I needed *that* book because freedom means to read—unfettered— at an Airbnb in the Berkshires for as long as you want. I ran inside, cut the heavy-duty packing tape with scissors and... it wasn't there. I panicked, ran to another wall of books and sure enough, in this fortification of book boxes each labeled to describe the books within- and maybe my inner life—was a second box, similarly labeled "Grief, Weddings; Open First."

Then I tucked "The Way of Solomon" by Rami Shapiro in my bag, we buckled our rescue dog Joey in the back seat and drove off. And for a moment, this past year, with its pain and joy, the packing, the unpacking, the resettling, the recreating home—and the heaviest question of "What do we do when things fall apart?"—was in the rearview mirror as the waters of Stockbridge Bowl beckoned.

\*\*

What do we do when things fall apart? I imagine my friend Matt, whose final moments with his dying mother were on Facetime, as she made the shape of a heart with her hands and left this world

with love. I imagine the young adults I served in that beloved job, whose goals and dreams were delayed, who sought partners or professional growth, but instead sat for days on end in their homes, with only the nurture of Netflix to accompany the silence. I think of my parents rejoicing with bride and groom on Zoom because it wasn't safe to travel. I think of the new parents who labored alone in the hospital and whose family waited months to meet new babies. I think of the students and teachers, the essential workers and the full-time parents, the elderly and the toddlers – most of whom languished as the walls of society came crumbling down around us, and we humans became a danger to one another. So, *what do we do when things fall apart?* How do we recover? And will we ever recover?

The Book of Lamentations, classically read on the observance of Tisha B'av, asks these same questions. "Alas! How? *Eicha...*" the author weeps, lamenting the bitterness and desolation in the wake of destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. The loss of the Temple in Jerusalem was a destruction of the "world as we knew it" not once, but two times. Tremendous grief ensued, still rooted in the hearts of many today, as our ancestors sought to rebuild their lives. But as history and hindsight remind, these periods of destruction led to tremendous innovation. It began first with grieving, longing, and wailing; and in time (well, centuries) this tragedy led to a process of conversation and storytelling. Whether exiled by the waters of Babylon or remaining in the Land of Israel, academies of scholarship began to write down their stories, conversations, questions and ideas... starting with their grief as cried out in Lamentations. And eventually, over centuries, the literary innovation of the Talmud, the documentation of oral Judaism, emerged.



Even though our central place of gathering was now gone, our ideas, our stories, our thoughts, our questions – remained.

So, too, living in the diaspora without a holy Jerusalem Temple to bring sacrificial offerings, Rabbinic Judaism emerged in the form of prayer, practice, and obligation one to another. We learned we couldn't be fully Jewish alone – rather we need a quorum of ten to bring holiness and wholeness into our midst. We learned how to be Jewish in a world that was not, exploring our relationship to Otherness, to difference and diversity. And we leaned into being those people of the book. Even though our central place of gathering was now gone, our ideas, our stories, our thoughts, our questions – remained. The world as we knew it was no longer, and many worlds, many lives ended, but perseverance, creativity and growth ensued.

So what do we do when things fall apart? And how do we recover? Will we ever recover? I don't know. I hope we do, but I have no idea how long it will take. But I think it starts with crying.

We need to cry. And then we need to cry some more, calling out ancient words of grief from Lamentations: "*Eicha!*" Alas! Or the words from Ecclesiastes, "*Hevel Hevalim: All is futile!*" As we cry, we will tell stories of remembrance – to reencounter the traumatic experience and to lift up the memories of lives lost. We will sing songs, or find poetry, or art, or movement, or silence – to express our heart's inner longings, our grief, but also joy. Perhaps in time we will have a day devoted solely to remembering the pandemic and each and every individual who died in it. Just as we return each year to days of sorrow such as Tisha B'av, we will always carry our grief with us. But in time it will transform.

Amidst the fall of the second temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E., we find the powerful story of Yochanan ben Zakkai. He escaped Jerusalem in a coffin en route to establish a new center for Jewish life in *Yavneh*, the root word for which means “to build.” Even in the wake of great *hurban*, tragedy and disaster, he and our ancestors sought ways to build and rebuild.

Sometimes the walls of life come falling down around us: but in time we pick up the pieces to rebuild. We pack and unpack the boxes of our lives, casting away what no longer serves us, while keeping with us enduring learnings of the story of a resilient people. As exhibited in both the tiniest fractals of creation and the greatest moments of modern innovation, from death eventually comes life, mourning turns to dancing over and over again until wholeness and peace reign.

That weekend, it rained on and off in the Berkshires. We saw friends, enjoyed meals, celebrated Shabbat and our nation’s independence at Tanglewood. Although I’m sure it’s worth the read, I never even pulled that book out of my bag but am grateful for the comfort it brought. The wall of boxes that reminds us of all the joys and sorrows, of the laughter and so many tears of this past year are slowly finding their new home. “Grief, Weddings; Open First”—such is the art of living throughout the ages for the *people of the book*.

*Rabbi Jen Gubitz is a rabbi in Boston and the founder of Modern JewISH Couples, an Indiana Hoosier at heart, and the co-host of the OMfG Podcast: Jewish Wisdom for Unprecedented Times.*

## The Love Starts with You

By Rabbi Ari Hart

We've heard the Tisha B'Av teaching: Sinat Chinam, baseless hate, destroys. It destroyed the Temple. It destroys us today.

Rav Kook reminds us that Ahavat Chinam, boundless love, is the opposing force that rebuilds.

How do we practice this?

The Torah speaks of love. It tells us: Love your neighbor as you love yourself.

Perhaps this is a prescription: extend your love outwards - do not stop at yourself. Share your love widely.

But what if it is a description?

What if it is a reminder that our ability to love others is founded on our ability to love ourselves. If we do not love ourselves, we will never be able to love our neighbors. If we cannot freely love ourselves, we will never freely love others. There is no *ahavat chinam* for my neighbor if there is no *ahavat chinam* for me.

Some of us are challenged by too much self love that crowds out our compassion for others.

And some of us are challenged by not enough self love that limits our ability to shine our love outward into the world.



If limited, constricted love of self is your challenge, perhaps you might use the Three Weeks to build up love for yourself: self love without condition and clause, Self love based on the knowledge that you are awesomely and wondrously made (Tehillim 139:14).

Perhaps your practice could be to focus each day on loving a different aspect of yourself. Start the rebuilding small; an action you are proud of, a trait you admire in yourself, a memory that lifts you up. Build the love from there, day by day. The Temple was built one brick at a time.

Once your boundless love of self is strengthened, then you may find your capacity for boundless love of others strengthened as well. May we all merit to spread love this year that is founded on the most fundamental love of all: love for ourselves.

*Ari Hart is the rabbi of Skokie Valley Agudath Jacob, a thriving, welcoming modern orthodox shul in Skokie, Illinois.*

## Loss, Comfort and Healing

By Maharat Ruth Friedman

The traditional explanation for why we fast on Tisha B'av is that both Temples were destroyed on that day. However, our sages in the Talmud in Tractate Taanit provide us with a timeline of the destruction of the Second Temple that paints a more complicated picture. As the Talmud explains, on the 7th of Av the Romans entered the temple and proceeded to desecrate it through the 8th and majority of the 9th day. As dusk on the 9th of Av approached they set fire to it, and it continued to burn through the majority of the 10th day.

In this Talmudic discussion, Rabbi Yochanan asks the obvious question - if the Temple burned on the 10th, why do we mourn its destruction on the 9th? Shouldn't the Fast of Tisha B'av really be the Fast of Asara B'av?

The *Ramah* (Rav Moshe Isserles) lays the groundwork for a beautiful explanation for this apparent contradiction in his commentary on the Shulchan Aruch. He comments on the fact that we recite the special *nachem* prayer that asks God to comfort the mourners of Zion only at mincha (afternoon prayers) on Tisha B'av. This raises an obvious question - why do we wait until the late afternoon on Tisha B'av to ask for God's comfort if the entire day is devoted to mourning the destruction of the Temple? He answers that the reason that we ask God for comfort at this time is because, according to the Talmud, late afternoon on the 9th of Av corresponds to when the Temple began to burn. And it is specifically at that time that it is appropriate to shift and ask God for comfort.

The Beit Yosef helps us understand the significance of this practice. He compares the experience of Tisha B'av from nightfall through the following morning as that of an *onen*, or someone whose relative has died but is not yet buried. It is a position of limbo - of having experienced a loss but not yet buried the body- and a position of anticipation. The *onen* knows that the funeral and shiva are coming, but has not yet actually begun that process of mourning. They simply have to wait.

Once the body is buried at the funeral, the *onen* becomes an *avel*, or a mourner. The *avel* has now emerged from their previous limbo state, and said goodbye to their relative. There is nothing more that they can do to care for the deceased; the *avel's* job now is to process the loss, and begin to heal. And it is the community's responsibility to attend shiva and comfort the mourner and aid them in this process.

That, according to the Beit Yosef, is why we only recite the *nachem* prayer at mincha. Until the Temple began to burn, the Jews were in a state of limbo. The fighting was terrible, and the Romans were desecrating the Temple. However, the fate of the Temple was not completely sealed; perhaps a miracle could have come, and saved them from the Romans. They knew what was coming, but, just like for the *onen*, there wasn't a sense of finality. It is only when the Temple began to burn late in the afternoon that it became completely clear that the Temple was gone. That is when the Jews transformed from the state of *aninut* to the state of *aveilut* (mourning), and that is why it is only appropriate to start offering comfort at mincha in the afternoon.

This topic speaks to how we confront struggles and losses in our own lives. We have all found ourselves in a limbo *aninut*-like state at some point of our life - knowing that we are in pain, knowing that we are facing unknown and seemingly insurmountable hurdles. It is a terrible, uncomfortable space to occupy. Sometimes we can become so overwhelmed by it that we get stuck in that place, and other times we try to rush out of it before we are ready. As the timing of the *nachem* prayer teaches us, we must honor that place of uncertainty and pain. And, at the same time, we must also learn how to accept these losses and struggles, and create space for others to comfort us and help us begin to heal.

*Maharat Ruth Friedman is a member of the inaugural class of Yeshivat Maharat, which is the first institution to ordain Orthodox women as spiritual leaders and halakhic (legal) authorities. She serves as Maharat (clergy) at Ohev Sholom Synagogue in Washington, DC, where she performs all traditional rabbinic functions. Maharat Friedman is a proud member of the Washington Boards of Rabbis, and sits on the Executive Committee of the board of the International Rabbinic Fellowship, of which she is also a member. Maharat Friedman is also a founding member of the Beltway VAAD. She and her husband Yoni are the proud parents of Ezra, Jobe and Evie, and their four-legged princess, Cocoa.*

## **Mourning for the Past, Dancing for the Future**

Writer Anonymous

This is the time of year when Jewish tradition guides us to mourn. But I mourn all year. I mourn the loss of the creativity, intelligence, insights, interpretations, commentary, midrash, and halacha (Jewish law) of Jewish women, the half of Am Israel (the Jewish people) whose ideas and holy insights were not preserved as part of Jewish tradition. But I also honor all their uncredited contributions and look with hope to the future.

To understand what I mean, first try this thought experiment: What if the Temple had never burned and Rabbinic Judaism never arose in its place, and Hillel and Shamai and Rashi and Rambam and all the other G'dolim (great scholars, masculine form) spent their time doing... what? What would they have discussed or written? Would it even have been preserved if they had?

Now try another thought experiment: What if we still had Rabbinic Judaism but Hillel had been born a girl and all we had was the school of Shamai? A machmir (strict) Judaism, with no tradition of voices in conversation? Or what if Rashi had been a girl, and kept from the beit midrash (Jewish text study hall) as all girls were? An impoverished understanding of Torah, impoverished beyond imagination.

What we don't have to imagine, because it's right here, right now: The giant hole in our understanding of Torah, the missing voices in our centuries-spanning halachic (Jewish law) and midrashic (commentaries) dialogue, because women were not given equal





opportunities to contribute to Torah sh'beal peh (Oral Torah - the interpretation and analysis of the Written Torah).

Can you picture them? All the brilliant, creative, thoughtful, insightful Jewish women, the potential G'dolot (great Torah scholars, feminine form) who lived in the years 500 BCE to 1960 CE who were barred from learning, whose days were filled from dawn 'til dark with raising the children and keeping the house, whose Torah is lost. Gone.

All their complex and simple, stark and colorful, intellectually dense and easily accessible, delightfully playful and deadly serious, wide-ranging thoughts and writing and ideas and arguments- halacha and midrash...never memorized, never passed down, never recorded, destroyed.

If you love and value the wisdom and techniques of traditional Rabbinic Judaism, as I do, then it can be devastating to realize the magnitude of the loss. So how do we cope with that - particularly on a day of intense mourning for a system that not only excluded women, but which needed to end in order for the Judaism we live and love today to arise?

We can't ever know what these lost contributions would have been. But we have, today, a chance to learn from Maharot and Rabbaniot and female Rabbis. And as male Rabbis and male Jewish leaders increasingly find the humility and wisdom and curiosity to listen and learn from their female colleagues, I am hopeful that we are moving toward a better future.

When I feel discouraged about how long this process is taking, I

remember the women who saved Moshe (Moses). I remember the women who carried timbrels out of Egypt, so sure they were that G!d would save them and give them something to dance for. Our origin story is all about the power of women to change the course of our history with their optimism, creativity, bravery, and collaboration.

For reasons I will write about another day, dancing and staying well-nourished daily are among the strategies I use to keep myself well and safe. I'm in perpetual substantial danger, a danger made all the more challenging to evade and prevent because it is invisible to strangers and sometimes invisible to me - though always glaringly obvious to those who know me most intimately. I take seriously my responsibilities to myself, my family, and to G!d to do what I need to do to stay well, to continually choose life.

So while you're mourning for the past, I'll be dancing for the future, the one I can barely imagine, the one we all must imagine, if we want it to become a reality someday. On this day, we lost the Temple, and in its ashes arose the brilliance and the beauty and the holiness of Rabbinic Judaism. On this day, I will be honoring HaKedusha Brucha He (The Holy Blessed One, feminine form) by eating because I need to, and by remembering and believing in the possibility that our future will be richer, fuller, and holier than our present.

## From Horror to Compassion

By Rabbi Marianne Novak

When I moved to Skokie over 27 years ago, I joined a neighborhood group that on Tisha B'av had a mixed (men and women) reading of *Megillat Eichah*, the Book of Lamentations, coupled with traditional davening (praying). The group's intrepid leader - as of late, a very busy pediatric infectious disease doctor - also added interpretative readings, videos and poetry.

I volunteered to read *Perek Bet*, chapter two, of Eichah, which has the horrifying line describing the siege upon Jerusalem: (2:20)

רְאֵה ה' וְהִבִּיטָה לְמִי עוֹלָלָת כָּה  
**אִם־תֹּאכְלֶנָּה נָשִׁים פְּרִים עֲלֵי טַפָּחִים**  
 אִם־יִהְרַג בְּמִקְדָּשׁ אֲדֹנָי כֹּהֵן וְנָבִיא:

See, O LORD, and behold,  
 To whom You have done this!  
**Alas, women eat their own fruit,**  
**Their new-born babes!**  
 Alas, priest and prophet are slain  
 In the Sanctuary of the Lord!

It's a stark reminder of the particular horror mothers experience in times of war and distress. The mothers here did not cause such horror, yet the guilt over the loss of their children in such a horrible manner is everlasting.

Every time I *lained* (chanted) this verse— the first time after the birth of my first child - my voice would catch and I would have to

focus harder in order to finish the last few lines of the chapter.

The visceral, and initially bodily, connection for parents and children (especially if you choose to nurse your child), is all encompassing and unlike any other. No matter the cause, if there is harm to their child or loss of their child, many parents feel responsible. They may feel that their one job was to keep their child out of harm and at least alive, and that they have failed. How much added despair did those mothers in Jerusalem experience in addition to their own deprivation and degradation?

When reading this line, if I wasn't already in the 'Three Weeks/Tisha B'av mindset', by the time I struggled to chant that line, I certainly was.

But then my middle daughter died.

And then I didn't need any extra meditation or focus to make me lament. I could now lament with a snap of a finger.

When I chanted that Perek (chapter) again, my voice didn't catch with sadness or horror. My voice rang with stark recognition. And my focus moved from extreme sadness and loss to one of compassion, empathy and love.

When observing this trying time on our Jewish calendar, some people may need to focus on loss, death and destruction to fall in sync with the feeling of the Three Weeks and Tisha B'av. But if you recognize the horror and loss in your own life, there is no requirement to connect so much that you retraumatize yourself. My lens is now focused on comforting those who have also lost

children and trying to do the work both internally and externally to ensure that the complete breakdown of society that precipitated the awful siege and destruction of society doesn't keep happening.

We sadly have enough in our world at present to keep us busy with this endeavor. And as always, be gentle with yourself so that compassion is possible.

May we merit the day when we receive a complete redemption and this commemoration will be no longer.

*Rabbi Marianne Novak received her semikha, rabbinic ordination, from Yeshivat Maharat in 2019. She served her rabbinic internships at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, and Congregation Netivot Shalom in Teaneck, New Jersey. Rabbi Novak has been on the faculty of the Melton School of Adult Jewish Learning for over 25 years and has served as gabbait and Bat Mitzvah tutor for the Skokie Women's Tefillah Group. She has served as Scholar-in-Residence and lecturer at various congregations. She received her B.A. cum laude from Barnard College and has a JD from the School of Law of Washington University in St. Louis. This fall, Rabbi Novak joined the Judaic studies staff at Akiva-Schechter Jewish Day School. Additionally, she is an educator with the Jewish Learning Collab and has recently joined the Hadassah Foundation Board. She lives in Skokie, IL with her family.*

## How They Sit in Solitary Loneliness

By Shana Aaronson

I don't frequently allow myself to think about mourning. Perhaps it's because if I did, I would never stop. In my line of work, there is a never ending stream of stories and cases to mourn and grieve. They consume my mind and heart.

I have been working in sexual abuse advocacy in the *chareidi* (ultra-orthodox) community for 9 years. I have seen and heard so many stories and situations of heartbreak. And there is one underlying theme which I have heard repeated over and over again by survivors of sexual abuse, the story of such devastating loneliness.

In a community where friends are often like family, that prides itself on taking responsibility for one another, so many survivors of sexual abuse describe suffering in utter aloneness.

And I'm not just referring to the situations (too frequent!) where victims are shunned or ostracized. No, I'm talking about survivors in communities that pride themselves on supporting victims of sexual abuse and prioritizing community safety.

One survivor recently described what it was like when she first publicly shared her story of abuse. The friends and family of the abuser retaliated hard. They spread rumors about her and bullied her. But this survivor was one of the "lucky" ones. She had some friends who rallied around her. She had people who came with her to court and held her hand while they waited for the guilty conviction.



And then when it blessedly came... they disappeared.

She called me one night, when her flashbacks were raging so much that she had taken to sleeping on the floor because her bed was triggering her, and she cried and cried.

"They were here when it was interesting and something meaningful was going on. And I'm grateful for that. But now everyone is gone and I'm so alone. And it hurts so badly".

How is it possible that in our communities of *chessed* (good deeds) and kindness, thousands of people are suffering, alone? Where are the mealtrains, the *gemachs* (free lending fund/services), the babysitting services for families affected by abuse? Where is the support? Is the bar truly so low that communities who claim to support survivors of abuse are content to view their NOT ostracizing victims as enough support for people going through such pain?

That's not acceptable. It should not be acceptable.

During these weeks, our community mourns for a *beit hamikdash* (temple) destroyed due to *sinat chinam* (senseless hatred), a *galut* (exile) that is long and painful, and that will end only through *ahavat chinam* (unconditional love).

And I mourn the thousands of people suffering in loneliness, all of whom have experienced the evil of being violated by another human being, and who are waiting, alone, for someone to show them some compassion and caring.

איכה יושבה בודד (How she sits in solitude)

I remain encouraged that there are those who out there committed to making a change to support those who are suffering. But for now, our survivors of sexual abuse, like our Jerusalem of old, sit in solitary loneliness.

*Shana Aaronson is the Executive Director of Magen in Israel. Magen creates safer communities by developing and implementing programs and services that focus on well-being of victims, holds predators accountable, and eliminates the stigma surrounding sexual abuse. They advocate for survivors within their communities, institutions and through the justice system; raise awareness and promote safety through educational events, creating and publishing resources, and the mainstream and social media; and support sexual abuse survivors with therapeutic and communal resources, as well as standing with them throughout their journeys toward therapeutic healing and justice.*



## When Heavy Baggage Makes You Feel Lighter

By Sharon Weiss-Greenberg, PhD

*Content Warning: pregnancy loss*

I remember the first time I really mourned Tisha B'Av like never before. As a 16-year-old, I had spent Yom Hashoah in Auschwitz. I had inhaled the same air that my grandparents, great aunts and uncles, and the rest of my family had inhaled, most for the last time. A few months later, I spent my first Tisha B'Av in Israel. I mourned. My view overlooked Har Habayit. I slept on the floor. I wanted to feel the pain. I wanted to somehow feel the pain to numb what I had experienced months before. I wanted to sleep on the floor and not on a comfortable mattress.

While this may sound extreme, I think it was pretty in line with the rabbinic restrictions of Tisha B'Av. My experience of visiting Poland had a profound impact on me and my empathy for all of Jewish history. It bothered me that it took a trip to Poland to internalize so deeply what I had read and heard about God only knows how many hours of my life in pictures, movies including documentaries, books and so many first-hand accounts from survivors. I was grateful that the rabbis had constructed ways to force me to empathize and internalize.

But. My life journey brought with it challenges as does everyone's life journey. I miscarried a fetus that died inside my body. I had to carry the fetus for over an hour, to the emergency room... in the ambulance... and in the hospital, until they could finally allow us to part ways. It was late in the pregnancy - in another week or two it would have been deemed a stillborn. How am I meant to mourn more when I am already holding so much? Is it too much?



Is this what the rabbis wanted? How can I read kinnot about mothers eating their children out of starvation while mourning my child that was lost? How can I entertain reading such kinnot after needing to have an abortion? Sometimes it is just too much.

### **Sometimes channeling sad is too easy.**

When you are grieving, sometimes you welcome not needing to think about dress or food on Tisha B'av. You welcome and embrace a period of time to not need an excuse for why you aren't polished. For why you don't want to eat.

Sometimes the tears fall and instead of feeling whatever I think you are supposed to feel, I have felt relief. I'm pretty sure that the rabbis wanted us to feel utter devastation. But Tisha B'Av is a time where it is okay to let the tears fall. People may think it is because you are supremely devout, but you may be unloading heavy baggage that you carry year-round.

Everyone struggles. Everyone has baggage. But some struggles can become worse when we feel that religion requires stronger feelings or behaviors, more than we can handle. The feelings, emotions, hesitations, and restrictions can intensify when mandated.

Sometimes rabbinic guidelines related to evoking emotions are helpful and appreciated. There are times when people who are not generally observant turn to said guidelines, particularly when it comes to mourning, because they can help people navigate their emotions during challenging times. They can provide a path, a much-needed path.

Sometimes, or maybe always, we are already on a challenging path. Above all, we are mandated to protect our minds and bodies. Pikuach Nefesh, saving and protecting one's body and soul, trumps any and all rabbinic and Torah restrictions.

You may be bearing a particularly heavy load right now. You may always be bearing a heavy load. Do not misconstrue what is most important when it comes to Judaism and Tisha B'Av. When the world is too dark, or your world is too dark, make a path for light and healing no matter the Jewish calendar date. And know that you are not alone in your struggle.

*Sharon Weiss-Greenberg, PhD is an educator and activist in support of feminism and protecting the community from abuse. Sharon earned her doctorate at NYU. She studied at Drisha Institute for Jewish Education and received her B.A. and M.A. from Yeshiva University. In September of 2023, she will be the Dean of Jewish Life at Donna Klein Jewish Academy.*

## The Mourning of Family Abuse

By The Tali Steine\* Writing Project (\*pseudonym)

They asked me to decrease my joy, but I couldn't. They asked me to mourn the loss of the Temples, but I couldn't stand to mourn any more. I've been mourning my whole life. It's like that when your parents are abusive.

When your parents are abusive, you mourn the loss of the parents you wish you had had. You wonder why you were given these. These human beings who broke you over and over and over again.

Mourning the parents you wanted, that you deserved but never had, is different than mourning the Temples, of course. It isn't the fleeting mourning of the Three Weeks, which starts with a few signs of mourning, then progresses to more and more, culminating in Tisha B'av, but then ending there, until the following year. The three weeks are a lesson. A teaching. This is how we mourn. This is what we do.

But when your parents are abusive, you don't need to be taught how to mourn. You don't need to read Eicha (the Book of Lamentations) or Kinot to get a sense of what suffering means. You don't need signs or customs or instructions on how to decrease your joy. You already know this grief. This sadness. This loss. This hurt. This pain. It has lived inside you your entire life.

For me, Eicha is a reminder of intense pain. Of the suffering that was never ending. Of the screaming on the inside, and the silence on the outside. It's not like you can stop your own parents



from abusing you. It's not like there's anyone you can tell. If you try to tell, it's not like anyone actually believes you.

When I approach the three weeks this year, I'm finding my own path forward, because there is no model of connecting to the three weeks for people like me. This year, I will mourn what was, and what wasn't. This year, I'm asking that my story, and the stories of those like me, be part of the Jewish community, too. This year, as I find my voice, I'm asking for someone to listen.

*The Tali Steine\* Writing Project (\*pseudonym) is written by a survivor of abuse in her family. She tells her story and teaches the Jewish community, and all of us, how to stand up for survivors. Read more at <https://talisteinewritingproject.substack.com/>.*

## A Poem for Tisha B'av

By Rabbi Emily Aronson

You say on Purim that I should be happy  
 That I should don a mask  
 And laugh and shout  
 And drink

You say on Tisha B'Av that I should fill my heart with sorrow  
 That anguish should consume my day  
 That I should cry and mourn  
 And fast

You say these are the 'real' ways to celebrate  
 To be in community  
 To be a Jew

But I am real.  
 My body is real.  
 My illness is real.  
 And only I can know my body's limits,  
 It's strength and beauty too,  
 The way it fights to pump blood through my veins,  
 To send signals across systems,  
 To allow me to awake anew each day.



So while you lean into anguish and affliction,  
While you abstain from food and drink  
I will nourish my body and my soul  
So that I may honor myself and the Creator  
Who formed me in Their Image  
Knowing that your observance is real  
But so is mine.

You say that I should feel a certain way on these holy days.  
Today I choose to banish 'I should'  
And embrace 'I am.'

*Rabbi Emily Aronson (she/her) was ordained from HUC-JIR in 2021. She recently launched Chronic Congregation (@chronic\_congregation), a project focused on the intersection of Judaism, Disability, and Chronic Illness. She is the Reform Campus Rabbi at the Bronfman Center for Jewish Student Life at New York University. She previously served as Interim Dean of Students at HUC-NY. Rabbi Aronson attended the Jewish Theological Seminary and Columbia University, earning B.A.s in Jewish Thought and Ethnicity and Race Studies.*

## Psalm of the Invalids

By Tyler Vile

*Eicha, the Book of Lamentations, is rife with metaphors of disability, illness, and disfigurement. The many references to disability as something undesirable and unholy throughout Tanakh are deeply unsettling and heartbreaking for disabled Jews. Many of us are made to feel that we still don't belong in our own Jewish communities. As a poet, I'm fascinated with the psalm as a poetic form. Taking an ancient meter and structure and translating it across languages and millennia has given me an opportunity to invert the imagery of disability as tragedy. Disabled people are b'tselem elohim, made in the divine image. Not in spite of our disabilities, but because of them. If we are disabled, so is Hashem (G-d).*

You could never fit a wheelchair  
 through the streets of Old Jerusalem,  
 like the bright crescent moon  
 hanging over Har Tzion,  
 but never quite clipping the peak.

We are blind  
 & G-d is blind.

We are deaf  
 & G-d is deaf.

We are mute  
 & G-d is mute.





We are gimped  
& G-d is gimped.

We are a tired metaphor  
& G-d is a tired metaphor.

Startled by war drums and horn blasts,  
our prayers rise in cacophony,  
lesions blooming like white flowers  
from our skin, sore & separate  
We move toward G-d!

*Tyler Vile is a writer, performer, and advocate from Baltimore, MD. She is a founding member of Hinenu: The Baltimore Justice Shtiebel, a radically inclusive shul. Her book of poetry, Never Coming Home, was published in 2015 by Topside Press.*

## Untitled Poem

By Anonymous Writer

*\*This poem contains an explicit description of an eating disorder. Please read with discretion and the best care to take care of yourself.*

I conceptualise my eating disorder like a chess game  
 With my eating disorder on one side,  
 And me on the other  
 Moving our pieces, one after the other  
 And I must say,  
 Though it was looking like I was outmatched,  
 I made a strong recovery  
 It went like this:  
 Check, I ignored my friends concern  
 Check, I stopped talking about my pain.  
 Check, I didn't tell my therapist about my restriction.  
 When she uttered checkmate, she misjudged,  
 And I took her queen, and the tides turned.  
 I ate on Tisha B'Av, a fast day,  
 And I ate on Yom Kippur, our holiest fast day,  
 As we are commanded to live by our commandments,  
 And not to die by them,  
 And the saving of life overrules almost everything,  
 Including the fast days.  
 And I continued eating.  
 Went from restricting, to eating healthily,  
 Not fasting reminded me of the beauty of making decisions  
 That can allow our bodies to thrive,  
 The caretaking of our bodies and minds  
 As vessels in which we serve Hashem.  
 The commandment for 3 meals on Shabbat,



even in the worst throws of my eating disorder,  
Reminded me of the simcha  
We are supposed to embody,  
When we enjoy nourishing our life force,  
And though I could see none of that simcha,  
Viewed eating on Shabbat as a setback,  
In my goal of starving,  
It tethered me to something.  
Now Tisha B'Av approaches,  
And I am flourishing,  
I know I cannot rejoice in the Temple sacrifices,  
I know I cannot rejoice in an end to my eating disorder,  
My eating disorder is still within me,  
Though in remission,  
But I can rejoice in how far we've come,  
I visited the Kotel and prayed for comfort,  
If all goes well, I will be cleared to fast again this year,  
But I will always remember the years I couldn't,  
And how our tradition necessitates  
Us placing our lives over  
Any commandment,  
Any act of mourning for our galut,  
Any act of self-affliction,  
Is meaningless if we cannot take joy  
In knowing it was healthy for us  
To begin with,  
And like the rabbis,  
Who danced around their chamber pot,  
Knowing it required them not to daven mincha,  
And enjoying the irony of the mitzvah being now  
To not daven mincha,

Sometimes a mitzvah is in not doing something,  
That we would normally be commanded to,  
And I will always try to take joy,  
In doing the will of my Creator,  
Even through grasping hands  
That feel at walls in the dark.

## **A Prayer for Eating on a Jewish Fast Day**

Created by A Mitzvah to Eat

Dear God,

As I prepare to eat on this fast day, please help me feel close to You.

As I nourish my body, heart, mind, and soul, may comfort envelop me.

May I connect to the meaning of the day in ways that support me.

May I find a community who will hold me where I am.

For who I am.

May the words of my heart reach Your loving and compassionate presence.

May I find peace and holiness through eating, through connecting, through You.

## Hebrew: A Prayer for Eating on a Jewish Fast Day

Translated into Hebrew by Rabba Dr. Anat Sharbat

אלי

בעמדי לאכול ביום צום הזה, אבקש להרגיש קרבתך.  
בעת שאני מזינ/ה את גופי ובריאותי הנפשית  
יהי רצון שתעטוף אותי נחמה.

כולי תפילה לחיבור משמעותי עם ענייני היום -  
באופן שיתמוך בי.  
כולי בקשה שאמצא קהילה שתחזיק ותקבל אותי כפי שאני, באשר אני, בצלם  
אלוהים שנבראתי.

כולי תפילה שמילים אלו המגיעות  
מעומק ליבי ונשמתי  
יפגשו באל הרחום וחנון,  
בשכינה שאוהבת כל ברואיה.  
ויהי רצון שאמצא שלוה וקדושה דרך אכילתי,  
דרך רצוני להידבק בך, דרכך.