

The fast of
Tisha Be'av
is marked
on August 2

Permission to Hope

Is the world irredeemably flawed, or can it be repaired?

Shalom Rosenberg

TISHA BE'AV DEMANDS A HARD LOOK AT THE march of folly that is human history. It is not only a day of mourning, but of examining the mistakes and misdeeds of the past, many of which continue to this day. As the liturgy says, "We and our fathers have sinned."

Jewish tradition regards Torah study as pleasurable — and so forbids it on days of mourning. But it is permitted to study Job and the many Talmudic and midrashic stories concerning the destruction of the Temple, so that we won't repeat the sins, crimes and stupidity they describe.

The greatest of the sins is hubris — believing in "my strength and the might of my hand" (Deuteronomy 8:17) — as expressed, for instance, in slogans like "Israel trusts in the IDF" and in the genre of coffeetable books on military victories. The rabbinic stories warn us not to repeat the mistake of Bar-Kochba (known to the rabbis as Bar-Koziba, the False Hope), who shouted at heaven, "I can get along without You." The worst of the crimes is senseless divisiveness; it's described in the story in Tractate Gittin known as "Kamtza and Bar Kamtza" about the way Jews fought Jews in besieged Jerusalem while the amused Romans looked on. The stupidity portrayed in rabbinic stories is that of people who went to war with justice on their side — but not realism.

Yet another perspective on history is possible, best expressed by the Maharal of Prague in the 16th century. In that rabbi-philosopher's view, we are obligated to examine our deeds and find the reasons for what has happened in history — but there are also reasons behind the reasons, which do not show up in what we'd call academic analysis.

Without trying to lay out his entire philosophy, I'll describe the feeling I had when I first understood it: Are we really responsible for everything that happens, or is the world a cruel place, with no place for a decent person or an uncastly nation? The only reaction a decent person can have when reading history books is alienation. The Jewish people and its exile, says the Maharal, is the embodiment of that alienation.

One could say that according to the Maharal, Providence has given us the tragic role of being the existential gauge of the world.

Our fate expresses the fact that the earth has been given over to evil, that the world is unredeemed and perhaps unredeemable.

Sometimes I think that the Maharal had to return to the world as Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the mystical master of redemptive Zionism, so he could correct the mistakes he made in his first reincarnation.

Rabbi Kook saw history as progressing. Even if it sometimes makes strange detours, even if progress sometimes brings brutal reaction, in the long view we must see history as positive. The Maharal, I believe, thought redemption was possible only if the world was destroyed and made anew, in an apocalypse. Kook believed that it was possible to redeem *this* world, that there was reason for hope.

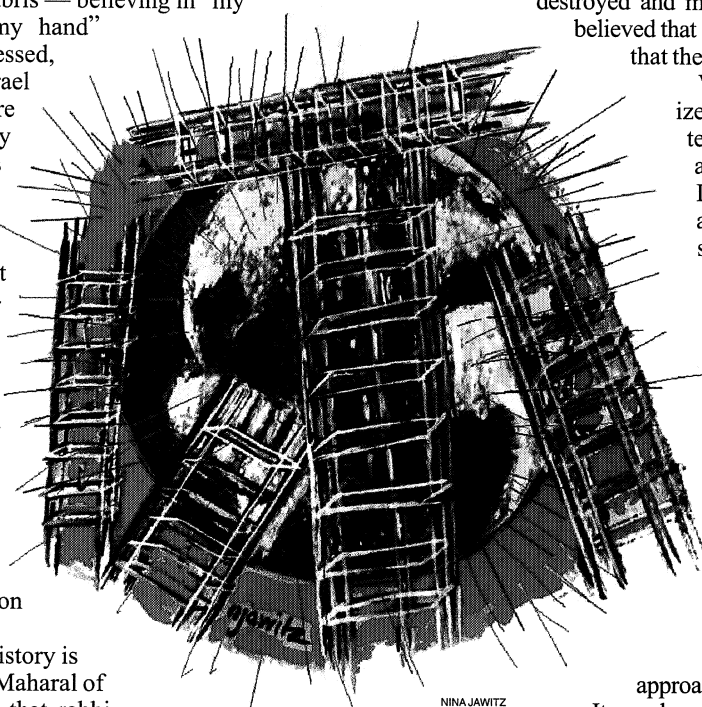
We experience Tisha Be'av as citizens of a Jewish state. Fifty years after its founding, we have to examine all that it has done. Independence Day was the time for counting up accomplishments. Tisha Be'av should be the time for adding up everything written in red ink, the sins, crimes and stupidity. Yet against the backdrop of the lost hopes, the normalcy we haven't achieved, the world bristling with atom bombs, we can ask whether it's all because of our sins, or because that's the nature of our world, which may be fated for catastrophe and not redemption. The redeemed world would have to be built by the Creator of Worlds.

The difference between the two approaches expresses the human dilemma.

It speaks not of what we need to do, but of whether we can feel hope. Those who wrote of the end of history and saw before them a postmodern world in which humanity's only concern would be maximizing pleasure — such people don't see that the great dilemma remains. The coin of the End of Days has two sides — apocalypse and utopia. The coin is still spinning in the air.

Tisha Be'av is also a day of prayer. It's strange to pray for the success of a philosophic theory. I once heard of a woman in pain who prayed, "God, don't listen to Yeshayahu Leibowitz, who posited that You aren't a health maintenance organization." My Tisha Be'av prayer is similar: God, don't listen to the theory of alienation; accept the theory of utopian hope. ●

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The coin of the End of Days is still spinning