

MIDEI CHODESH B'CHODSHO

monthly column by

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You may not have noticed, but the march towards Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur has already begun...

Our journey started with the fast of Shiva Assar B'Tamuz; launching the three mournful weeks preceding Tisha B'Av. Seven weeks of consolation will follow; linking Tisha B'Av to Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

Marking this journey are two extraordinary fast days; Tisha B'Av and Yom Kippur, powerfully similar, yet vastly different.

Tisha B'Av and Yom Kippur share fundamental characteristics. They are the only full day fasts in Jewish tradition. They are the only fasts that include the five halachic inuyim, afflictions: the prohibitions on eating and drinking, washing, anointing, the wearing of leather shoes and marital relations.

Yet as similar as these days are, they are also poles apart. Yom Kippur is a biblical fast day; Tisha B'Av, of rabbinic origin. Tisha B'Av remains immersed in sorrow while Yom Kippur is cautiously, solemnly optimistic.

By connecting these two fast days, the calendar seems to challenge us: View these fasts, side by side. What can you

learn from the comparison and contrast between Yom Kippur and Tisha B'Av?

The answer may well emerge from the mists of history.

Intriguingly, the rabbis draw yet another link between Yom Kippur and Tisha B'Av. Each of these occasions, they say, originates in a seminal sin committed at the dawn of Jewish history.

Yom Kippur is born as a result of the Chet Ha'egel, the Sin of the Golden Calf...

In the shadow of Revelation at Mount Sinai, frightened by the specter of abandonment by Moshe, the nation creates and worships a Golden Calf. Moshe, upon descending the mountain, witnesses the nation's backsliding and smashes the divinely given Tablets of Law. God, forgiving the nation at Moshe's behest, commands Moshe to once again ascend the mountain and receive a second set of Tablets.

The rabbis relate that Moshe descends Mount Sinai with the second tablets on Yom Kippur. This biblical fast day, the holiest day of the Jewish year, thus rises out of the forgiveness granted by God for the Sin of the Golden Calf.

Tisha B'Av emerges as a consequence of the Chet Hameraglim, the Sin of the Spies.

A short time after their departure from Sinai, the Israelites find themselves at the southern border of the Promised

Land of Canaan. Twelve spies are sent to observe the land and its inhabitants preparatory to the nation's entry. Upon their return, ten of the twelve spies deliver an extremely pessimistic report, citing the Israelites' inability to conquer the land through battle. The nation then despairs; weeping through the night and rising up in rebellion against Moshe and Aharon.

The rabbis declare: "That very night was the eve of Tisha B'Av. Said the Holy One Blessed Be He to them (the Israelites): 'You have cried for naught-and I shall establish for you- crying across the generations.'"

Rooted in the nation's despair over the report of the spies is the tragedy and sorrow that will visit their descendants, over and over again, throughout the ages, on the mournful day of Tisha B'Av.

There are no coincidences on the Jewish calendar. To the rabbinic mind, concrete philosophical bonds link Yom Kippur and Tisha B'Av, respectively, to tragic transgressions deep in our nation's past. What are these connecting links and how can they help deepen our understanding of two of the most important observances in Jewish tradition?

Based on the Torah text, the Sin of the Golden Calf reflects the Israelites' desperate desire for distance from the demands of an omnipotent God

From the outset, the Israelites are

unable and/or unwilling to face the new responsibilities thrust upon them at Sinai. They, therefore, respond with immediate retreat:

"And the entire people saw the thunder and lightning and the sound of the shofar and a smoking mountain and they trembled and stood from afar. And they said to Moshe 'You speak with us and we will listen; and let not God speak with us, lest we die.'"

And when, forty days later, Moshe apparently fails to return from the summit of the mountain at the expected time-and the people face the fact that they will now be required to interact with God directly- their desperate desire for distance from God becomes an overwhelming fear. The Israelites create a Golden Calf to take Moshe's place, to stand between them and their Creator.

In the aftermath of the sin, after punishing those most directly involved, God moves to educate the nation to the ramifications of their crime. Threatening to distance himself from the people, as per their expressed desire, He forces them to glimpse the emptiness that would result from such distance. The nation, in response, falls into mourning.

God thus reminds the Israelites of a fundamental truth that courses through all human relationships. While safety can be found in emotional distance, the desire for such distance produces a life

of emptiness. Only those willing to risk the pain and heartache that can result from nearness to others will ultimately experience the potential beauty of friendship and love.

We can now understand why the rabbis perceive a fundamental connection between the Sin of the Golden Calf and Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish year.

Yom Kippur is the day when we move to repair the inevitable distance that develops between us and our Creator. We mourn our loss of perspective, explore our missteps and admit our failings. We atone for our tendency to pull away from God through our practice of comfortable rather than confrontational Judaism. We pledge to move close again; close enough to allow divine law to challenge and enrich our lives.

The message of this holiest of days is clear. The distance that develops between man and God can be repaired. Just as God ultimately forgives the Jewish nation at Sinai and invites them, once again, fully into his presence; so, too, through the process of teshuva on Yom Kippur, we can reconnect intimately with our Creator.

At the core of the Chet Hameraglim lies a profoundly different failing; yielding a profoundly different Divine response.

Ultimately, the Spies and the nation are guilty of a loss of faith in themselves.

Not only do they doubt God's ability to bring them into the land, but, even more importantly, they lose trust in their own capacity for change. They see themselves still as the slaves who toiled under Egyptian rule. They totally negate the transformative impact of all that has occurred during and after the Exodus.

Nothing could be more indicative of this failure than the final, closing words of the spies:

“We were in our own eyes as insects; and so were we in theirs (the inhabitants of Canaan).”

When we see ourselves as insects, the Torah testifies, so will we be seen by others....

To this failing, God responds with harsh judgment. The generation of the Exodus is declared irredeemable and will perish in the desert. Only the next generation will enter the land. When man loses sight of his own majestic potential, he simply cannot achieve.

The connection the rabbis draw between the Sin of the Spies and the mournful day of Tisha B'Av now becomes clearer.

In stark contrast to the ultimately optimistic, reparative day of Yom Kippur, Tisha B'Av remains an occasion rooted in mourning and sorrow. We bemoan our own replication of the sin of the spies; our loss of personal and national vision; our inability to rise

above our pettiness and spite; our failure to glimpse the majestic potential in others and in ourselves.

Because of these continued failings, Tisha B'Av rings to the Divine decree that was delivered those many years ago:

When you lose faith in yourselves, you and your generation will fail to achieve your potential. The realization of your dreams will be further delayed.

The lessons of our calendar journey at this time of the year are now evident...

Before confronting God on Yom Kippur, we must first confront ourselves on Tisha B'Av.

Only once we recognize how far we have fallen from our ideal selves; only once we move to reclaim a vision of our own majestic potential in our dealings with God and man; can we possibly approach God to repair the distance that has developed between us.

The road to Yom Kippur must first go through Tisha B'Av.

One day, when we travel that road successfully, when we finally realize who we can be -as individuals and as a people-we will be fully redeemed.