

Remembering Jerusalem

Ephraim Borowski (Director, Scottish Council of Jewish Communities)

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I am writing this in Jerusalem, the city central to Judaism, Jewish history, and Jewish ritual, on the fast of Tisha B'Av, the day when that place is more than ever the focus of all our thoughts.

It is well known that both the most solemn communal event, and the most evocative family event of a religion that is almost obsessed with both community and family - Yom Kippur, that iconic day of collective self-examination, and the Seder, the formal and formalised Passover meal - end with the declaration "Next Year in Jerusalem".

What is less well known is that to this day, more than two-and-a-half thousand years after its destruction by the Babylonians, and again 650 years later by the Romans, we mourn the loss of Jerusalem in just the same way as we mourn the loss of a parent - if not more so. We sit on the floor, wear torn clothes, suspend business activities, but only for the city do we also observe a day-long fast at the end of three weeks of increasing privation. When mourning a parent, we receive visits of condolence; on Tisha B'Av, the date of both destructions, we do not even greet friends. We turn down the lights, remove the decorative coverings from the synagogue, and read Jeremiah's book of Lamentations with its haunting poetry to an even more plaintive melody.

A friend once described to me spending this day in an ancient Sephardic synagogue. The chandeliers are not lit but worshippers sit in the dim light of their own candle. At the end of the service each worshipper in turn blows out his or her candle, until only the one light on the reading desk remains. The rabbi announces, "Today is the 2596th anniversary of the destruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem" and blows out that final candle. Who can greet a friend in such total physical and spiritual darkness?

And yet, no sooner are these three weeks without music, ten days without meat or wine, and one day without food or drink over, than the mood changes. On the Festival of the month of Av, the Talmud tells us, the young girls of Jerusalem used to go out in plain, white, borrowed garments to choose their husbands - and the Talmud adds that someone who has not seen this day has never seen true joy.

Almost two thousand years after the Romans put an end to that gladness by destroying the Second Temple - the Temple that the New Testament says that Jesus visited - driving out its inhabitants and plowing over the city, and attempting even to eradicate its memory by changing its name, we still remember. We make the connection by heading wedding stationery with the verse of Psalms, "We will raise Jerusalem above our greatest rejoicing", by breaking a glass under the wedding canopy to recall the destruction and signify that without the Temple no happiness can be complete, and by singing the Psalm "If I forget thee, Oh Jerusalem" as part of the ceremony.

And of course, we pray for the peace of Jerusalem, whose very name means "City of Peace". That is a prayer we must surely all share.