

HOLIDAYS: TISHA B'AV

Juliet's Balcony

BY ILANA KURSHAN

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As a teenager, I attended a public high school on Long Island where I was the only observant Jew. I quickly got used to explaining to my teachers and classmates about the various Jewish holidays, which were the reason for my poor attendance record at various points throughout the year. The only holiday that I never had to explain was Tisha b'Av, since it always arrived in the summer, when school was not in session. And so the story of the destruction of the Temple, which is the reason we mourn and fast on the ninth of the Hebrew month of Av, was unknown to my classmates, who had otherwise received from me quite a comprehensive Jewish education.

One summer, when I was training for

dreds of years after both the first and second Temples (destroyed in 586 B.C.E. and 70 C.E., respectively) were no longer standing? Why is it that this day—which falls on Aug. 10 this year—in which we sit on the floor and chant in a dirge-like tune the book of Lamentations, took on successive levels of sadness—to the point that the Mishnah in Ta'anit (4:6) explains that five of the most devastating tragedies in Jewish history took place on this date? Not only were the two Temples destroyed, the Mishnah asserts; also, this was the day on which the spies sent to scout out Canaan brought back a negative report, and Bar Kochva's revolt failed and the Romans razed Jerusalem. The rabbis convert Tisha b'Av into a general national day of mourning,



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ditionally invoked just don't do it for me. And so I prefer to conjure a different image—one that reflects my own associations with loss and longing.

I think of the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, in which Juliet is standing at her

window leaning her cheek against her gloved hand, and Romeo gazes up at her under cover of darkness. Juliet sighs ("Ay me!"), and Romeo hangs on to her every sound and gesture ("She speaks! O, speak

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One summer, when I was training for the high school track team, I made a plan with my friend Katie to go running three days a week. She would pick me up in her car at 7 a.m. and we would drive to the school track, where we would run laps for 45 minutes. It just so happened that during that particular summer, there was construction work being done on our synagogue, which we would pass in the mornings on our drive to the school. One day I realized that our next scheduled morning run coincided with Tisha b'Av. I called Katie on the phone to inform her that I'd have to miss a day. "Why?" she asked. "Oh," I explained. "It's a day of mourning tomorrow because of the destruction of the Temple." Katie paused for a moment, and then responded in astonishment: "The Temple was destroyed? I thought they were just doing construction!"

This story still makes me laugh, but I think it also hints at a more serious issue, namely how difficult it is to understand the significance of Tisha b'Av in today's day and age. Why was the destruction of the Temple such an incredible tragedy for the rabbis, even for those rabbis living hun-

into a general national day of mourning, unquestionably the saddest day on the Jewish calendar.

In the absence of the Temple, rabbinic Judaism proceeded to engage in the creative process of inventing a decentralized, prayer-based form of Jewish worship; but the rabbis never stopped missing the Temple and longing to return to its glory days. The Talmud is filled with statements and stories that give voice to these sentiments. We are told, for instance, that Rabbi Yosef reports that God Himself mourns the destruction of the Temple, wailing like a dove and crying: "Woe to the children—because of their sins I destroyed my home and burned my sanctuary and exiled them among the nations" (Brachot 3a). Elijah then goes on to compare the destruction of the Temple to the banishing of children from their father's table, since the people of Israel, lacking the system of sacrificial worship, can no longer attain the same degree of closeness to their heavenly father.

It has been nearly 2,000 years since the second Temple was destroyed, and yet still we are obligated, each year, to mourn this loss. But, try as I may to get into the right mindset for Tisha b'Av, the metaphors tra-

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The Golan Heights

Whom Do They Belong? Can Israel Survive Without Them?

Transparent effort to improve his thuggish image, Syria's president Bashar Assad proposed to meet with Israeli government officials to discuss the possibility of peace. There can be no question that "peace" is not on Mr. Assad's mind, but rather the recovery of the Golan Heights, from which Syria has launched three major wars against Israel.

What are the facts?

Historical Background—The Golan Heights has always been part of the Jewish homeland. The Syrian claim to the Golan is tenuous. As a political entity, it did not exist until after the first World War. Until then it was just another province in the Ottoman Empire, with ill-defined borders. In 1923, in an Anglo/French great power agreement, the border between Syria and Israel was established. The Golan Heights were assigned to Syria.

Before the establishment of Israel in 1948, the Syrians, who had heavily fortified the area, subjected the villages in the Golan Heights to almost daily shelling, making normal life impossible. In the 1967 Six-Day War, Israel attacked Syria and was defeated. Israel occupied the Golan Heights and in 1981, for all practical purposes, annexed them.

Syria and its President—Syria is the most destabilizing influence in the Middle East. It is classified by the U.S. State Department as a narcotic-dealing

Military Security—The Golan is a small plateau of about 400 square miles. If it were a part of Syria it would be less than 1% of its territory. But it is of supreme strategic importance to Israel. Its high ground provides early-warning capability, without which Israel—just as in 1948, in 1967, and in 1973—would be subject to surprise attack by the Syrians. Its loss would obligate Israel to stay on constant alert and to maintain a state of

readiness and mobilization that would be economically and socially untenable. The Golan, which ranges up to a height of 2300 ft., dominates

the Jordan Valley, the lowest point on earth, about 700 ft. below sea level. On the Golan itself, there are only two natural terrain bottlenecks through which tanks can advance. Those choke points are defensible and made possible by the repulse of 1400 Syrian tanks that attacked Israel in the 1973 war. But with the Golan in Syrian hands, and without the radar installations that would give

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again, bright angel"), wooing her from below her balcony in language reminiscent of the Song of Songs, which Shakespeare seems occasionally to invoke ("Stony limits cannot hold love out"). I imagine the balcony as the site of many subsequent late-night trysts, as it is the one place where the lovers can speak freely to one another without risking the wrath of the Montague and Capulet clans. I think about how Juliet must long, each day, for night to come, so she can go out on her balcony to speak to her Romeo.

And then I imagine that one day, Juliet comes home from school to find that her parents have boarded up her balcony. Her window is covered with wooden planks fixed rudely to the wall; her balcony has been hacked at with axes and spades; and pieces of the railing lie strewn on the street below her window. "Her gates have sunk

ark curtain to reveal the cherubs, who were hugging each other, and saying: "Look at how beloved you are of God, like the love between a man and a woman" (Yoma 54a). That very same passage compares the poles that protruded through the ark curtain to the breasts of a woman, using a proof text from the Song of Songs: "My beloved to me is a bag of myrrh, lodged between my breasts" (Song of Songs 1:13).

And when it comes to the loss of the Temple, the rabbis invoke similar images. In a passage in Tractate Yoma that pulses with lyrical poetic intensity, they take turns reminiscing about the Temple. Rabba bar bar Channa recalls that the smell of the incense in the Temple was so fragrant that a bride in Jerusalem during the time of the Temple would not need to wear perfume. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha responds with a story: "An old man told me: Once I went to the city of Shiloh [where the portable sanctuary used to reside], and I breathed the smell of the incense from between the

In the rabbinic imagination the Temple was, indeed, the rendezvous place between God and Israel. As Rav K'tina says in the Talmud, 'At

perceived as a bulwark of Western influence and civilization, both of which Syria abhors and totally rejects.

Syria's former president, Hafez Assad, was a tyrant, every bit as ruthless and as cunning as his unlamented Iraqi counterpart Saddam Hussein. His son, the current president, is equally despotic, though not quite as smart as his father. Syria is a world center for terrorism. It still harbors Nazi bigwigs, who found welcome there after the World War. Few doubt that Hafez Assad was the mastermind behind the attack on the US Marines barracks in Beirut in which 241 Americans were killed. The Syrian government oversees one of the largest narcotics and counterfeiting operations in the world.

Syria has attacked Israel three times across the Golan. Given its implacable hostility, no responsible Israeli leader could possibly return the Golan to Syria. If it were to give up the high ground of the Golan and return to the "death trap" borders of 1967 or anything close to it, Israel, in order to survive, would have to rely on the good will of the Arab states, whose main policy objective is the destruction of Israel. Even though peace-for-peace would be the best solution, how about this: In order to assuage Arab pride, consider granting formal ownership of the Golan to Syria and having Israel—given the precedents of Guantánamo and Hong Kong—lease it back for a hundred-year period. An aggressor will attack only if confident of victory. With the Golan in Israeli hands, attacking Arab armies could be confident of defeat, and peace would be preserved. To hand back the Golan to Syria at this time would be a prescription for war and for Israel's destruction.

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Gerardo Joffe, President

backed up by missiles and airplanes—could overrun Israel in a matter of hours. It would be a strategically impossible situation, especially for a country as small as Israel—smaller than Lake Michigan, smaller by half than San Bernardino County in California. The Golan does not make for perfect defense, but it gives Israel a small, vitally important breathing space for mobilization.

The Golan is the source of over one-third of Israel's fresh water. In 1964, with the Golan in Syrian hands, Syria attempted to divert these headwaters and to cripple Israel's water supply. It is more than likely that, given another opportunity, Syria would once again attempt to destroy Israel's water supply.

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the time when Israel would go to the Temple on the festivals, they would roll back the ark curtain to reveal the cherubs, who were hugging each other.'

into the ground, he has smashed her bars to bits." (Lamentations 2:9). Juliet is utterly distraught: how will she see Romeo that evening? How will she communicate with her lover? "See, O Lord, the distress I am in! My heart is in anguish" (Lamentations 1:20). It is not only her balcony she has lost, but the whole elaborate system of semaphores and scheduling that she and her lover have constructed to ensure that they see each other regularly. Juliet wails. "Bitterly she weeps in the night, her cheeks wet with tears. There is none to comfort her of all her friends" (Lamentations 1:2).

It may seem surprising that I choose such a romantic image to describe the loss of the Temple, but this kind of analogy is not without precedent. In the rabbinic imagination the Temple was, indeed, the rendezvous place between God and Israel. As Rav K'tina says in the Talmud, "At the time when Israel would go to the Temple on the festivals, they would roll back the

city walls" (Yoma 39b). This imagery is deeply passionate, if not overtly sexual. Who said the rabbis were not romantic? It is true that the tractates dealing with marriage are preoccupied with brute economic facts, and that marriage in the Talmud is essentially a business transaction; but when it comes to the Temple, the rabbis wax more poetically than Romeo, Don Juan, and Cyrano de Bergerac combined.

In preparing myself for Tisha b'Av, I think of Juliet pouring out her heart like water as she cries, "My eyes are spent with tears, my heart is in tumult, my very being melts away" (Lamentations 2:11). The language of Shakespeare flows into the language of Lamentations and then I, too, am able to mourn and weep. **WJD**

Ilana Kurshan works as a literary agent and studies Talmud in Jerusalem.

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