

Shabbat Shalom

For most of the world, momentous occasions are marked in space. The Arc d'Triomphe in Paris was erected after Napoleon's victory at Austerlitz. Cleopatra's Needle in London was quarried in 1450 BCE to honor Pharaoh Thutmose III, moved by the Romans to Alexandria, and then finally given to the United Kingdom by Egypt in commemoration of Lord Nelson's victories in the Battle of the Nile; three honors with one obelisk. There are monuments, cathedrals, palaces, mausoleums, gardens, and pyramids. Objects built by man, to honor man. What do Jews have? Where do we have our monuments? How do we bring the lessons of victories and defeats to our children and our children's children?

In Shmot 20:7-10, God gives us the fourth commandment; Zochor et-yom haShabbat l'kadsho.

[זְכוֹר אֶת יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת, לְקַדְּשׁוֹ]

Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. It is a record of creation. Abraham Joshua Heschel amplifies on this and calls Shabbat our "Cathedral in Time". In the rest of Torah, we are given the festivals to celebrate, recall, and relive our history; Passover to relive the deliverance from Egypt, Shavuot to recall the Revelation; the giving of the Torah, and Sukkoth to celebrate our time in the desert under the direct care of Avinu Malkenu. Of all the festivals, Sukkoth is the most instructive to the idea of a Monument of Time. All of the monuments we build at that festival are not kosher if they are permanent.

God seems to be instructing us from the very founding of our people that the calendar is our only hope of continuity. We are a nation that has spent far more time out of its borders than in them.

Tomorrow is the tenth of Tevet. My guess is that that means very little to many people here, but perhaps it should mean something.

It is one of only six fast days on the Jewish calendar.

The tenth of Tevet is specifically referred to in 2 Kings 25:1-4. It says, "Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylon. And in the ninth year of his reign, on the tenth day of the tenth month, Nebuchadnezzar moved against Jerusalem with his

whole army. He besieged it; and they built towers against it all around. The city continued in a state of siege until the eleventh year of King Zedekiah. By the ninth day of the fourth month” . . . which is Tisha B’Av. . . “The famine had become acute in the city; there was no food left for the common people. Then [the wall of] the city was breached. . .”

Tomorrow is one of those occasions when we are called on to remember. And to remember something specific. The armies of Babylon built siege works around Jerusalem. No food could enter the city. People could not leave it to bury their dead. As the siege works is built, what do you do? Do you start rationing your food? Is HaShem going to deliver you from your enemy, or is this the just reward for a nation that has gone astray? In the streets you hear both views expressed by angry men shouting at each other, with neither side being able to effect any change. Still, you know your children will be hungry. And how long will this go on? How much should you save? Should you start bartering early for more stable supplies? And still, outside the gates the army continues to build against your city.

Eventually the city walls will be breached. The temple, the jewel in the crown of both Solomon and the nation will be put to the torch. The physical monument will be lost. What was built by man is destroyed by man. You managed to keep some of your children alive. . . and for what? They are carried to Babylon as slaves.

Your husband is dead. Your children are gone. You sit weeping -- and our Tanakh captures that moment, that anguish, and reflects it back for the rest of time. People far into the future will join with you in your mourning. In fact, it is you they will bring to mind when comforting other mourners. HaMakom yenachem et'chem b'toch shar avay'lay Tzion vee'Yerushalayim . . .”May you be comforted among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem”.

[הַמָּקוֹם יְנַחֵם אֶתְכֶם בְּתוֹךְ שָׂרָר אֲבֵלֵי צִיּוֹן וִירוּשָׁלַיִם]

Half of all the fast days, both daylight and full-day, mark the destruction of Jerusalem. We are meant to remember. We are meant to feel Zion’s pain, to recall her sorrows. That as a people, turning away from God has consequences that stamp our souls as well as our calendars.

In every generation there is talk of ending the fasts. There were two specific times in recent history when there was a call to end these observances. The first was at

the emancipation of Jews in Europe. Many Jews felt that freedom from the ghetto or shtetl was in fact the Messianic age. And yet, the Messianic horizon continues to recede.

The second and more convincing argument is that the founding of the modern State of Israel make these fast days irrelevant. Others believe that the fasts will end when the Temple is rebuilt. And still others call to use the Tenth of Tevet as a day of general Kaddish for those killed in the Shoah with no yartzheit. To bring to mind the six million -- to consider those who have no one to remember them, and no prophet to record their suffering.

I am not sure that we will ever want to forget the pain of forced exile and destruction.

Zechariah 8 gives us another picture of these fast days. We read, “And the word of the LORD of Hosts came to me saying, “Thus said the LORD of Hosts: the fast of the fourth month, the fast of the fifth month, the fast of the seventh month and the fast of the tenth month shall become occasions for joy and gladness, happy festivals for the House of Judah; but you must love honesty and integrity”

One thing I am sure of, though, is that I don't want the marking of these events to simply sputter out. In our home each week we faithfully make Havdallah before resuming the lives brought to a rest on Shabbat. The times we have not done so, and simply let Shabbat drift away have been sadly unsatisfying. Likewise, when the age arrives when our fasting transforms into occasions of joy and gladness, I trust it will be immensely clear – that it will have its own Havadallah or separation and clear ending.

Tomorrow's fast is a daylight fast. Here in Seattle, that makes it an easy day. The rules of the fast are very lenient. Pregnant and breastfeeding mothers are forbidden to fast. Likewise anyone with any medical issue at all.

But whether or not you fast, on this or on the 17th of Tammuz or Tisha B' Av -- mark the day, remember the defenders and the dead, and help Rachel weep for her children.

Thank You and Shabbat Shalom.