

TISHA BAV (DEUTERONOMY 1:1-3:22)

Wearable Clothes for Terrible Times

2007 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

Whatever you do, do it like you mean it.

I once attended the funeral of a very dear friend who passed away at the age of 22. One of the speakers at the funeral was our Rebbe, one of the great Sages of Israel. His words of eulogy brought me to tears. He himself seemed hardly able to control his emotions, so overwhelmed as he was by the terrible loss.

That night, my Rebbe attended his nephew's wedding. In celebration of this wonderful event, he danced up a storm. Anyone witnessing his joy at the wedding would never have guessed that a few hours earlier he seemed heartbroken.

Which emotion was real? Did he put on a show of sorrow at the funeral, only to become his happy self at the wedding? Or was he shattered by the tragic death of a student, and forcing himself to dance through the tears?

The answer, of course, is that both sentiments were real. In life, it is important to recognize, as King Solomon writes, that:

...There is a time for everything under the heaven; A time to be born and a time to die... A time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to wail and a time to dance. (Ecclesiastes, 3:1-2, 4)

The irony of life is that often these times seem to overlap.

We are now in the middle of an intense period of national mourning. Next Tuesday is Tisha B'Av, the ninth day of the disastrous month of Av. Tisha B'Av is the day when we sit on the floor with non-leather shoes like mourners sitting Shiva. We express our bereavement over the destructions of both Temples, and an array of other catastrophic events in our history.

But we don't mourn just on Tisha B'Av. During the three weeks leading up to the fast we don't listen to music, take haircuts or make weddings, similar to a mourner in the 12 months following the death of a parent. In the nine days up to and including Tisha B'Av we refrain from meat and wine (like a mourner before a funeral) and refrain from bathing and wearing freshly laundered clothes or Shabbos clothes (like a mourner during Shiva).

It is not good enough to say we're in mourning. We have to look like mourners and dress like mourners in order to properly feel like mourners. Someone who has lost a loved one is unconcerned about whether his shirt is appropriately starched or whether he's got a few days worth of stubble that he needs to shave off. The clammy feeling of needing a shower serves to further bring home the feeling of depression over one's loss. Shivah is not a time to engage in creature comforts.

The Sabbath is an interesting array of mixed messages. The original practice of Ashkenazic Jewry is to carry over the mourning of the Nine Days into Shabbos itself. "Lecha Dodi", a song/prayer that introduces the Sabbath, is sung to the tune of "Elee Tziyon," one of the dirges recited on Tisha B'Av. The Haftara is read to the tune of the Book of Lamentations, which is read Tisha B'Av night. Shabbos during the Nine Days is not like Shabbos during Shivah. An individual interrupts the mourning of Shivah to put on his Shabbos clothes. However, during this time of PUBLIC mourning, we wear weekday clothes even on Shabbos. I recently heard that in the Chofetz Chaim's Lithuanian home town of Radin, the farmers used to come to Shul on the Shabbos before Tisha B'Av in their work boots. Yes, we may eat meat and drink wine on that Shabbos, but we must still dress like mourners.

It must seem strange to envision people celebrating the Sabbath in a less-than-"Sabbatical" mode of dress. Can you imagine sitting in Shul Friday night next to a carpenter in his overalls and the Roto-Rooter guy in his galoshes?

Actually, most people don't follow that custom. The Chofetz Chaim writes that the prevalent custom is that of the city of Vilna where they permitted the donning of Shabbos clothes on the Shabbos before Tisha B'Av. One of the reasons given for this custom is that the practice of wearing weekday clothes was established at a time when weekday garb was similar to Shabbos clothing, except that the Shabbos clothes were a little nicer. Since the difference is rather subtle, it is not a blatant affront to the honor of Shabbos. However, when one's clothes are significantly different, (e.g., Chassidim who wear fur Shtreimels rather than simple hats, and shiny satin robes rather than simple suits) the distinction is more obvious. Dressing in a manner which conspicuously departs from Shabbos fashion would constitute a violation of the prohibition against public mourning on the Sabbath.

As a result, most people do wear their Shabbos clothes on the Shabbos before Tisha B'Av. There are various customs regarding bathing. Some people take a quick, cold shower in order to be clean for Shabbos. Others honor the Sabbath by taking a full hot bath or shower just like on the eve of every other Shabbos. (Remember, going without a shower during nine days in July can make one feel rather mangy!)

One may be tempted to ask – Isn't this rather superficial? What difference does it make? Why so much emphasis on what you're wearing? If you want to dress for Shabbos, dress for Shabbos! If you want to wear weekday clothes, wear weekday clothes! What's the big deal? And, as long as we're on the topic,

why don't you rejoin the human race and take a bath?!!

The answer is that it is only because of a lack of sensitivity that we could even ask the question. We are all rather removed from understanding what Torah is all about. It has been pointed out that the farther removed we become from Mount Sinai, the more distant we find ourselves from a true understanding of G-dliness.

Let's talk a bit more about clothes. The way we dress illustrates how we feel, and also affects how we feel. (See "Dress to Impress".) We all have our own ideas about appropriate modes of dress. Consider that time you went to your best friend's wedding. (Or your own!) You want to dress your very best; this is a major milestone in your life. Suddenly, you see your reflection in the mirror. You are missing a button. Or there is a tiny stain on your suit/blouse. You are distressed. You want to be dressed perfectly on this special day, and now your outfit is ruined!

Or, consider the opposite. You are dressed to the nines. You have to go to a funeral. As you walk in, everyone compliments you on your beautiful dress, your lovely necklace, and your stylish Shaitel. This is a sad time. You are upset. The last thing you feel like hearing right now is how great you look.

Do you know why we may feel ambivalent about the clothing requirements of the Nine Days, and Shabbos? **Probably because we don't fully appreciate the enormity of either.**

The Fast of Tisha B'Av has been compared to the Fast of Yom Kippur. There are many similarities. Unlike the four other fasts days of the year, Yom Kippur and Tisha B'av are full day fasts, from night to night. On both days we are prohibited from bathing and wearing leather shoes.

The difference, however, is stark. On Yom Kippur, we are considered to have reached the level of angels; we don't require physical nutrition. On Tisha B'Av, we are distraught mourners. On Yom Kippur we say, "Who needs to eat?" On Tisha B'Av, we say, "Who can bring oneself to eat?"

If we truly understood the extent of the suffering we have endured and continue to endure, we would tear our clothes, put on sackcloth, and cry our hearts out in utter desperation and beg G-d to send the Messiah and rebuild the Temple.

What about Shabbos? Do we have any idea what that's all about? Shabbos is a day that is infused with sanctity. It is the day that our Creator "rested" from His constructive labor of earth building. It is a day when the angels in Heaven rest. Our abstinence from work on the Sabbath makes us partners in Creation. What an uplifting experience! What a lofty feeling! When we come home from the synagogue on Friday night, we are accompanied by two angels. That is why we begin our pre-meal ceremonies by singing, "Shalom Aleichem – Peace to you, Ministering Angels..."

If we had the slightest clue as to what Shabbos is really about, we would long for it all week, every week. (That's why the Hebrew names for Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, etc. are First Day, Second Day, Third Day, etc., and only Saturday has a real name – Shabbos. We count the days till Shabbos.) We would go to every effort to honor this special day with the very best foods and very best clothes.

If we understood how terrible the Nine Days are, and how holy the Sabbath is, we would feel the pull in both directions; the need to celebrate and the need to mourn. We would be torn by the dilemma. Unfortunately, for most of us there is no dilemma. We have become desensitized to all we have lost by the Destruction and to all we gain through celebrating the Sabbath.

We are so far from understanding the tragedies of our history; and that, perhaps, is the biggest tragedy of all.

Have a Good Shabbos, and a meaningful fast.

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