

From the Parnas

By Mark I. Wolfson

This coming Saturday night we will commemorate Tish'a Be'Ab, the 9th day of the month of Ab. This day is a Jewish national day of mourning. There are a host of tragic events that occurred on this day throughout history, the most important of which was the destruction of the Temples in Jerusalem; by the Babylonians in 586 BCE and again by the Romans in 70 CE. Other tragedies that have been reported to have happened on this day include the expulsion from England on July 18th 1290, the expulsion from Spain on July 31st 1492, and the day that Germany declared war on Russia to start World War I on August 1st, 1914.

At Mikveh Israel, we strictly follow Sephardic tradition. We read the 5 chapters of Eikha, the Book of Lamentations which is Jeremiah's heart-wrenching account of the destruction of the first Temple and its aftermath. A total of 940,000 people were slain. We read Eikha both in the evening of Tish'a Be'Ab and the following morning. During the destruction of the second Temple, 1.1 million people were slain and another 100,000 were captured and exiled. We also read 25 Kinot, elegies or dirges written by various medieval Hebrew poets. These speak of the destruction of the Temples and also of later tragedies, catastrophes and massacres in the centuries after the destruction. We also read some chapters from the book of Job. The tunes we use were probably introduced in the 1700's by Hazzan Gershom Mendes Seixas, who learned them from his teacher Joseph Pinto, who in turn brought them to New York from Amsterdam.

According to the tradition received from our mother congregation in Amsterdam from hundreds of years ago, we create a specific setting in the synagogue on the night of Tish'a Be'Ab. The entire sanctuary is pitch black, and the only lights are the candles that each individual holds - just enough to read by. The joyous, lively, warm, happy setting of the sanctuary is completely gone. The table on the Tebah is covered in black. The cloth coverings on the lectern are black. The Torah scrolls are draped in black. The bells of the finials on the Torah scrolls are enclosed in black pouches so they don't ring their happy tune. We use a black ebony yad to read the Torah during the morning service. Even the beautiful curtains adorning the hechal are gone, leaving everything stark and cold. The room is cold and many people sit on the floor in mourning.

The overall mood in the synagogue is very somber in the evening service and also in the morning. By the afternoon, though, hope returns and in the afternoon service we put on talet and tefillin and use happier words and tunes of consolation and hopeful thoughts of a better future when the Temple will be rebuilt, hopefully in our days.

We have one account from Rebecca Gratz, writing to her sister-in-law Maria Cecil Gist Gratz, on a Tish'a Be'Ab in the early 1800's. Maria had sent Rebecca a book to read, which she was clearly enjoying when interrupted by Tish'a Be'Ab. She writes:

"I thank you, My dear Sister for the pleasure you have procured me in Smallie's Interesting book. I laid it aside today for the lamentations of Jeremiah & the book of Job but shall resume it tomorrow with no diminished relish, from having communed with these holy men. I always feel a keener interest in Jeremiah on the anniversary of the calamity he so eloquently mourns - and Job's admonitions are never out of season nor his example unprofitable."

Tish'a Be'Ab at Mikveh Israel is an experience not to be missed. Even though with the somber mood we diminish our enthusiasm in greeting each other, I do hope to see you all on Saturday night at 9:45.