

Comfort in Times of Tribulation

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The Dalai Lama was intrigued, and he wanted to learn. As the leader of Tibetan Buddhists, exiled from their homeland, he feared that he and his people might live in diaspora for a long time, perhaps even for centuries, and he wondered how they would maintain their religious life and community. As the Southern New England Jewish Ledger described it, “On a 1989 visit to the U.S., the Dalai Lama first met with a group of Jewish scholars in New York, seeking to learn what he called ‘the Jewish secret technique’ of survival. He continued the Tibetan-Jewish dialog the following year, at his palace in Dharamsala, India.”ⁱ

Cultural Survival Quarterly describes the Tibetan exile: Nearly 100,000 Tibetans “joined in a mass exodus from the country in March and April of 1959 as Tibetan resistance to Chinese Communist rule broke out in fighting. Many died on the trek through snow-filled passes of the Himalaya. Thousands more were to die in India—of heat, of disease, of the shock of losing a whole way of life—before international assistance could be organized.”ⁱⁱ

We have gathered this evening as a Jewish congregation, and I would be surprised to learn that anybody among us has been personally impacted by Tibetan exile. Instead, this past week, our Jewish calendar marked a date of horrific calamity in our own people’s history. *Tisha B’Av*, observed last Sunday, commemorates the destructions of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem.

Were I to try to answer the Dalai Lama’s question, “What is ‘the Jewish secret technique’ of survival after upheaval that at least temporarily ends a people’s way of life,” I would begin by acknowledging the pain and trauma of the loss involved.

On *Tisha B’Av*, the experience of the First Temple destruction is described with tear-laden words from the Book of Lamentations:

Alas!
Lonely sits the city
Once great with people!
She that was great among nations
Is become like a widow;
The princess among states
Is become a thrall.
Bitterly she weeps in the night,

Her cheek wet with tears.
There is none to comfort her
Of all her friends.
All her allies have betrayed her;
They have become her foes.
Judah has gone into exile
Because of misery and harsh oppression;
When she settled among the nations,
She found no rest;
All her pursuers overtook her
In the narrow places.
Zion's roads are in mourning,
Empty of festival pilgrims;
All her gates are deserted.
Her priests sigh,
Her maidens are unhappy—
She is utterly disconsolate!
Her enemies are now the masters,
Her foes are at ease, . . .
Her infants have gone into captivity
Before the enemy.ⁱⁱⁱ

Academic Bible scholars may dispute the origin of the Book of Lamentations, but our sages put these words into the mouths of the exiled Judeans who were forced out of their homes and their Temple with the Babylonian destruction of 586 B.C.E. In so doing, they emphasized that healing and renewal can only come after the full weight of the tragic loss is acknowledged.

Next, the rabbis of old designated seven Haftarah portions, one to be read each Shabbat morning between *Tisha B'Av* and Rosh Hashanah—beginning, this year, tomorrow morning. These readings are taken from the latter part of the Book of Isaiah, but the first thing we know about the prophet who uttered them is that he wasn't Isaiah! Indeed, we do not know his name, though he might have been the most important person who ever lived.

No, I'm not exaggerating. In the ancient world, kingdoms were often conquered—their temples, destroyed. Judea was a far lesser dominion than Babylonia, which conquered it—and far less powerful than ancient Egypt or Greece, for example. Nevertheless, while we may read **about** the gods of those long-ago civilizations, they are not widely worshiped today. When those empires were conquered, their gods ceased to be worshiped, the overwhelming ancient

theology being that the victorious kingdom must have the strongest god. The prophetic author of the Haftarah readings for these seven weeks, by contrast, taught the exiled Judeans to continue to worship the one God. His theology is that Judea was conquered because its people were sinful, but that God's love for the Children of Israel is unconditional; God is eager to return them to their land to rebuild the Temple.

The overwhelming majority of people in present-day Egypt and Greece worship the God who was venerated in the Jerusalem Temple. Most are Muslims and Christians, not Jews, but they could not have learned of our God had the worship of the God of Israel ceased when the First Temple was destroyed, as was the case of every other god whose temple was demolished in that era.

The prophet's message of hope would be fulfilled, so long as the people remained united and returned to faithfulness, which they did. It worked. Some eighty years later, Cyrus the Persian conquered the Babylonians and invited the Judeans to go home and rebuild their Temple, albeit as vassals to Persia.

The Romans' destruction of the Second Temple sparked a longer-lasting exile. God's unconditional love would continue to be a necessary condition to sustain the people in diaspora, but no longer a sufficient one. The age of prophecy had ended. Now, rabbinic sages would arise to teach the people that they could continue the service of the one God through study and observance of Torah. The rabbis taught that prayer in the synagogue, wherever the Jewish people would wander, would take the place of sacrificial worship in the Jerusalem Temple.

Rabbi Joy Levitt was part of the 1990 meeting with the Dalai Lama in India. Reflecting on the experience, she wrote, "I had chosen to speak about the synagogue as a response to diaspora fragmentation. I was aware that the Tibetan Buddhists had no such similar institution of communal prayer and study, and felt it important for them to understand this primary diaspora center, which had developed as a response to Jewish exile."^{iv}

Each of us faces moments of loss and trauma in our personal lives. We may also feel that, like ancient Judeans, we are living through a calamitous time in our national lives. We should never expect to heal before we acknowledge and lament our loss. Then, let us find comfort in the amazing history of our people, refusing to die, even when assimilating out of existence was the path of least resistance. We may draw on God's unconditional love and the trust that even exile need not be a permanent condition. We may draw on the resiliency of our people, creatively finding new ways not merely to survive but to thrive—serving God in this sanctuary and everywhere we go, studying Torah and fulfilling its mandate to

make the world a better place, repeatedly establishing new ways to nourish our people and all we touch.

Amen.

ⁱ Cindy Mindell, “The Dalai Lama and the ‘Jewish secret technique,’” *Southern New England Jewish Ledger*, March 30, 2016.

ⁱⁱ Francesca Hampton, “Tibetans in India—A New Generation in Exile,” *Cultural Survival*, June 1985.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lamentations 1:1-5.

^{iv} Joy Levitt, “The Dialog with the Dalai Lama,” *The Reconstructionist*, Fall 1994, p. 62.