

Drasha/Sermon: The Essence of the '3 Weeks' * 2013/5773
Rabbi Ze'ev Smason, NHBZ

Most people in the world are day people; they get their best work done in the late morning hours. But some people work best late at night, like Anton Rubenstein. Mornings were like poison to this famous Russian pianist: he found it very difficult to get up early. But sometimes he had to get up early to meet the schedule of a concert tour, and it was Mrs. Rubenstein's job to help him do this. In the early years of their marriage she tried all kinds of alarm clocks. She tried pushing him out of bed. But nothing worked. The pianist would either fall back asleep, or be so sluggish that he'd miss his appointment, anyway.

After years of experimenting, she managed to find a way to wake him up in the morning. He had spent his life refining his sensitivity to music, to the point that he could hear the slightest flaw in a piece. Mrs. Rubenstein found that the easiest way to get her husband up was to go to the piano and begin playing scales -- but only seven of the eight notes. After she had played the faulty scale a few times, Anton would be out of bed at the piano, wide awake, itching to finish the scale properly.

We all have problems with motivation from time to time. The trick is to find something that will get us moving. Certain things grate on our nerves, sensibilities, and lifestyles. And one of the most difficult periods of the Jewish calendar is almost upon us: The 3 Weeks.

Of all the milestones and holidays that are celebrated or commemorated by the Jewish calendar, no time period is more neglected than that of the '3 Weeks'. This period of mid-summer anxiety is virtually unknown outside of the observant Jewish community. Some recognize the term 'Tisha B'Av', the 9th day of the month of Av, and it registers as a Jewish fast day. The broader time period -- if recognized at all -- is only for the 'very religious.'

Even among those who observe the 3 Weeks, many consider it -- to be quite honest -- as an inconvenient and meaningless obligation. It is looked at as something to slog through, as required religious suffering.

Why is the 3 Weeks the poor stepchild of the Jewish calendar? Let me suggest three reasons.

First: Raise your hand if you enjoy fasting. Do you know many people who are into suffering? Many or most of the observances surrounding the 3 Weeks involve discomfort and deprivation -- not an easy sell with most crowds.

Second: The 3 Weeks fall in the middle of summer, putting a damper on the usual summer fun of outdoor activities and much-needed vacations. In the minds of many, the 3 Weeks becomes a spoiler. It makes demands at a time of year which is usually demand-free with school out and lighter workloads. The adoption of a strict set of guidelines in the middle of summer is often thought of -- if rarely articulated -- as an invasion of personal enjoyment.

Third: The oft-stated reason for the 3 Weeks is to commemorate the destruction of our two Holy Temples. It has been 2000 years since we've experienced Jewish life with the Temple, the Mikdash. How can we possibly relate to and feel sadness for the loss of a 2000 year-old building? How can we mourn a loss that we've never personally experienced -- much less one two millennia ago in history? An apparent lack of contemporary relevance makes the mourning and deprivation of the 3 Weeks hard to bear.

The following story can introduce us to an understanding what the 3 Weeks is about.

A father who had been laid off from his job had been watching expenses closely for months. But he'd made a promise to his two sons - twins - that he'd take them to a nearby amusement park to celebrate their 10th birthday.

When the day came -- the boy's actual birthday -- the father withdrew some money from his savings, and he took his two sons on the bus to the amusement park. When they reached the front gate, he saw a sign: "General admission: (ages 10 and up) \$10. Children under 10: \$5."

If he'd come a day earlier, the father realized, he could have saved \$10 - \$5 for each of his twin sons. But with a sigh he led the boys up to the ticket window and said, "Three general admission tickets, please."

The woman in the booth looked them over and smiled.
"How old are you boys?"

"I'm 10 years old today," said one son.

"So am I," said the other. "We're twins!"

The woman leaned forward. "You know," she whispered to the father, "you could have asked for two 'Under 10' tickets, and I never would have known."

"Yeah," said the father, "but they would have known."

If you never had a relationship with your father, there's something important missing you're missing from your life. The same is likely even more true for a mother. But we can not and should not underestimate the importance of a father in the life of a child.

A number of years ago a book titled *Fatherless America* appeared. The author posits that many ills of today's society can be traced directly to the fact that half of American children presently grow up without a father. These children include; those who never had a father at home or whose father left early in their lives, as well as those whose fathers are incarcerated or absent due to military service.

What is it like to grow up without a father?

It is no doubt difficult growing up without a father when some or many of your friends themselves are blessed with a father. To a certain degree a fatherless child may not know what he or she is missing, but likely has a basic understanding of the fatherly role from observing the father-child relationship in other families.

However, when no one you know or who is around you has a father, a particular difficulty exists; with no role model near or far of what a father should be, a child may be almost completely oblivious to the place a father has in the normal development of a child.

This is what the 3 Weeks is about.

During the 3 Weeks the essence of our mourning isn't focused on the loss of the Temples, per se. Rather, we mourn the loss of a complete relationship with our Father in heaven. In classic Jewish sources G-d is frequently referred to as our Father; *Avinu Malkaynu*, *Av HaRachamim*, etc. On both a national and personal level, the Holy Temples were tools that facilitated an intimate relationship with our Father, the Almighty. For almost 2000 years, we and our parents have been absent such a relationship.

Just what is it that we are missing?

The most vital tool for a successful life is wisdom. When King Solomon was offered a 'blank check' from Hashem to make one request, the wisest of all men asked for wisdom. The first item we request in the *Shmoneh Esray* (our daily prayers, recited thrice daily) is wisdom and understanding.

Without wisdom, we are like the blind groping in the dark. How shall I raise my children? Where should I live? What should I do with my life? What is the meaning of the messages -- good and the bad -- that I encounter daily? What do the events in Israel and in the world mean? What is G-d trying to tell me?

Much of the contentiousness around us can be attributed to a deficiency in insight and wisdom. To our sorrow the disputes in our beloved Israel do not abate; Women of the Wall, draft of yeshiva students, the religious/secular divide. And closer to home, the imminent formation of a new St. Louis Modern Orthodox High School while another similar school exists is evidence of strong division and disagreement within our community.

We should yearn for the degree of wisdom that was available when, long ago, we had a closer relationship with Hashem.

A second piece missing from our relationship with our Heavenly Father is emotional closeness. Many of us have had the experience of a close relative or beloved friend move far way, perhaps to a different country. We can still stay in touch by letter, phone, and Skype -- but still, things are different.

The warmth and intimacy of a face-to-face encounter can't be replaced electronically or by the written word. There is no substitution for a gentle touch, firm embrace, or a hand lovingly placed upon a child's head when a Shabbos bracha (blessing) is given. And though today we can communicate with loved ones from a distance of thousands of miles, there's something unique about face-to-face conversations.

At a recent family Shabbos dinner, a certain well-publicized past misdeed in the Smason family was being discussed. The question then was raised: How did Dad punish the miscreants? One of the (now repentant) participants shared the following hitherto unknown insight: "Dad didn't get really angry, but he said, 'In life and with each person with whom you're close, you have a bank account called *Trust*; as a result of your recent actions, you've just made a huge withdrawal from your account.' Our child in that conversation indicated that through the impact of parental reaction, a similar misdeed was not committed again.

Conversational moments such as those -- and that type of closeness -- is a facet of a relationship with the Almighty that we should long for.

As stated at the outset, the 3 Weeks is a difficult period of time for many reasons. We tend to measure ourselves by outward displays of mourning -- the unshaven beard, the unironed clothes -- but our hearts and minds remain untouched. The halachic restrictions of this period help us structure our worlds to minimize joy, but they can't force sadness. The deprivations mandated at this time sometimes loom so large that they might block out the deeper content.

What today's remarks have centered upon is the need to focus on the essential task of the season: creating genuine sorrow over the unmeasurable loss of our Jewish spiritual center -- an impaired relationship with the Almighty through the loss of wisdom and closeness we once had.

There is, however, good news; While the Gates of Prayer at times are narrowed or even closed, Jewish tradition teaches that the Gates of Tears always remain open. If we approach Hashem with a heartfelt prayer for wisdom and closeness -- regardless of the time of year -- our request will not be denied. If at this time of year we utilize the outward displays of mourning to prompt a cry to the Almighty for understanding, clarity, and a closer relationship to Him, we won't be ignored or denied.

Don't allow yourself to be distanced from your Father. Call out to Him, and He will answer.

**** Adapted in part from 'In the Narrow Places' by Dr. Erica Brown***