

Play Ball! – Parashat Devarim/Shabbat Hazon

In many ways, the Sons of Israel synagogue in South Bend, Indiana looks pretty much like your typical early 20th century shul. Its white façade bears two Star of David finials and an engraved plaque reading *Chevra B'nai Yisrael*. Inside there is a small women's section in the balcony, a verse from Exodus inscribed on the wall, the congregation's original deed of incorporation framed for all to see. And that's where the similarities end! Where the community's ark once stood is now a series of cash registers; instead of pews and prayer-books there are racks selling t-shirts and commemorative drink holders; the building's outside is emblazoned with the iconic "C" of the Chicago Cubs. You see, Sons of Israel is alternatively known as America's only ballpark synagogue and abuts Four Winds Field where it serves as the gift shop and company store for the minor league feeder team, the South Bend Cubs. Hearing about this unusual amalgam of Jewish culture and Americana a few years ago while living in the Midwest, I decided I had to go see it for myself!

Rumor has it that Solomon Schechter, the great founder of United Synagogue and former President of the Jewish Theological Seminary, once advised a young faculty member, "You can't be a rabbi in the United States without understanding baseball." And while I certainly hope this is not the case – my own knowledge of the sport being fairly pathetic! – I can relate to what Schechter is saying, the idea that being conversant in both Talmud and the language of RBI's marks a person, somehow, as having right balance. As modern Jews, we wish to live fully in both the Jewish and secular realms, to be equally at home in the rarefied world of the beit-midrash as in the genial world of the town square. We expect that our clergy should do the same!

To a large extent, it is this combination of religious particularism joined with the trends of assimilation that accounts for the strange history of Sons of Israel – an Orthodox congregation founded in 1901 by German immigrants in what was then a vibrant section of South Bend. As the neighborhood eventually changed and membership declined, the synagogue switched briefly to affiliate with the Reconstructionist movement in the 1980's. By the turn of the millennium this, too, had proven unsuccessful and the community had just two official members: David Piser, the president, and his uncle Mendel, the treasurer. Considered a historic building, Sons of Israel passed into the hands of Indiana Landmarks and might have stayed there were it not for a Jewish packaging magnate named Andrew Berlin who, in 2011, bought the South Bend minor league team then called the Silver Hawks and began rejuvenating the ballpark immediately adjacent to an old, dilapidated shul. He could have left the building where it was, unused, but instead he decided to restore the sacred space and give it, what he saw as, new life. "The idea of bringing back the region's first synagogue to its former glory appealed to me," says Berlin. Even in its derelict state, "there was something special about the place."

For a moment let's leave Mr. Berlin behind and turn instead to our service this morning where we mark what is known as *Shabbat Hazon*, the Shabbat of Vision, taking its name from the opening words of today's *haftarah* from the Book of Isaiah. Falling on the Shabbat before *Tisha B'Av*, the 9th day of the Hebrew month of Av which we begin to commemorate this evening, *Shabbat Hazon* ushers in some of the fast day's themes of exile, displacement, and ruin as the prophet admonishes our people for having turned away from God's teaching and consequently having brought upon ourselves great misery and punishment. In the Book of *Eicha* (Lamentations) which we read tonight, we mourn the fall of Jerusalem and other tragedies of Jewish history said to have taken place on this day – the destruction of both Temples, the final defeat of Bar Kochba's rebellion at Bethar, the expulsion of the Jews from England and Spain, and much more. On this day of communal mourning we refrain from food and drink, from

wearing leather shoes which represent luxury, from bathing, anointing, and sexual relations, and even from studying Torah – an act considered so innately enjoyable that it is incongruous with the melancholy of the hour.

The observance of *Tisha B'Av* has come into some question over the past many decades and especially since the reunification of Jerusalem in 1967. In light of recent history, there are those who feel that our despair should be mitigated by the fact that we now have the great pleasure of living in a world which contains a State of Israel and even Jewish control over the Western Wall. Tempering the bitterness of our many past losses with the sweet reality of our modern new world, there are those who advocate for doing a half-fast – abstaining from food and drink until *mincha* only – or even those, like my former professor, Dr. Moshe Benovitz, who upholds the traditional full day-fast but specifically makes sure to engage in otherwise pleasurable activities like watching funny movies on Tisha B'Av in order to represent that our sorrow should now be mixed with joy. Our history of sadness has, in significant ways, started to reverse itself!

For me, there remain a number of reasons to maintain the observance of *Tisha B'Av* even in our contemporary world so changed. There is value in remembering tragedies of the past, remote from our experience as they may seem, and in acknowledging how very lucky we are to live in this day and at this time. There is also the great longing that we still feel when it comes to Israel and to Jerusalem – not necessarily for her existence but certainly for her safety, her stability, the peace that has so long eluded her walls. In fact, one of the great themes of *Tisha B'Av* is that of *sinat chinam* – senseless hatred – said to have been the cause of the destruction of the Second Temple. How very much this is still, to our great sorrow, an issue today when it comes to the Middle East and to our world in general.

Finally, it seems to me, there is another trope of this day of mourning – one that brings us back to South Bend and one which I found myself thinking about during my recent trip to Portugal, yet another place with a once flourishing Jewish population that, tragically, is no more. Tisha B’Av is not only about the one holy city of Jerusalem – it’s about all the many other ordinary cities in which Jews once lived and thrived in vibrant community, built businesses and raised families, studied Torah and participated in secular culture, which have now become utterly decimated. Visiting American friends in Portugal while away, I learned that Steven and Paula had recently attended a bris in Albufeira – the very first one to have taken place, according to their rabbi, in over 80 years. When they put up a *mezuzah* on the entryway to their home, not a single one of their neighbors had ever before seen such a thing. And the guide on our walking-tour, when asked, admitted that the average Portuguese person has never met a Jew and knows little of their own government’s history of expulsion. This, in a country where Jews once made up as much as 20% of the population¹ and occupied prominent positions in secular political and economic life. It’s almost as sad as seeing a cash-register where a *Sefer Torah* once stood!

Tisha B’Av is not only about physical exile, even as we remember the destruction of the Temple and the expulsion of our people from so many of the places in which they resided. But it is also about spiritual exile – the extent to which we can never quite, 100% be at home while living outside the land. I will admit that this is not something that I often feel personally, having grown up post-Holocaust and post ‘48, safe and comfortable in the United States with near limitless opportunity. I have been changed, for sure, by watching anti-Semitism roil in Europe and here in the U.S. Still, the idea that America would ever cease to be a hospitable place for Jews to live seems to me a remote possibility.

¹ <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/portugal-virtual-jewish-history-tour>

If one of the dangers of life in the Diaspora, however, is the possibility of prejudice, and hatred the second danger is perhaps its opposite – of being welcomed so fully and deeply that it leads to assimilation and abandonment of that which makes us distinct. This is the risk that often feels most present for me when I think about Jews in America today. We certainly know our baseball, but do we know our Talmud too? Is there something that hits a little too close to home in the metaphor of an old synagogue that is now used for commerce and recreation rather than for worship, for study, and for community building? Are we praying towards Jerusalem or towards Yankee Stadium?

These, to me, are some of the central questions of *Tisha B'Av*, our day of exile and return. We mourn the past, we attempt to learn from it, and we consider where it is has brought us – to a place where we do feel very much at home even in the Diaspora but where that very comfort brings new challenges of its own. On this *Shabbat Hazon*, this Shabbat of Vision, let us each look anew at how we balance being a Jew in America today. Let us see both the blessings and the sacrifices that this unique moment in history has brought us.

Hazon Yeshiyahu ben Amotz asher haza – This is the vision of Isaiah son of Amoz which he prophesied. Wishing everyone a meaningful fast and a day of reflection on what it means to be at home in this country of our exile.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Annie Tucker