

# Tisha b'Av: A Call to our Conscience

Rabbi Joshua Waxman

*For these things do I weep, my eyes flow with tears: Far from me is any comforter who might revive my spirit; My children are forlorn...*

These heartrending words, written more than 2500 years ago by the prophet Jeremiah in the Book of Lamentations (1:16) record the despair of the Israelites after the destruction of our Temple, which we mark this year on July 22 with the observance of Tisha b'Av. But for anyone who has followed the news in recent weeks, they sound uncannily like they are describing the voices of those being rounded up at our southern border, desperate refugees who are being treated like criminals.

While some of those who arrive sneak across the border to live in this country without authorization, the vast majority of recent arrivals – often families or young women with children – are presenting themselves under international law for asylum, fleeing ruthless criminal gangs and dangerous drug cartels in their home countries of Honduras and Guatemala, or escaping vicious abuse and domestic violence. All of this is to say nothing of the refugees who are denied entry before they get anywhere near our shores, like those fleeing the brutal persecution and ethnic cleansing of the Syrian civil war.

*For these things do I weep:* We have all seen the footage of crying children being separated from their parents – a practice which has thankfully been ended for newly arriving families but which still affects hundreds of children being held separately from their families under the previous policy, and incoming families who will face lengthy terms of detention (including children) in wretched conditions until they wait for a judge to decide on their asylum status.

We see their tears and their desperate hope for refuge and we weep as well, because their experience is our own. "You shall not wrong the stranger nor oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Exodus 22:20) And we were strangers in Russia, and Poland, and North Africa, and Germany, and so many other places where Jews were reviled, oppressed, and expelled – or worse. So many places where the world was silent as Jewish communities were targeted and Jewish families were ripped apart. This is why the Torah tells us thirty-six times – more than any other commandment – that we are to love the stranger, care for the stranger, not allow the stranger in our midst to be oppressed or mistreated.

Given both our tradition's teachings and our people's historic experience, I believe it is imperative that the Jewish community raise its voice in support of those who come to this country seeking asylum, shelter, and a better life for their families. We cannot stand silent while families are kept apart, while those seeking asylum are locked up indefinitely in detention centers awaiting hearings, while vicious and hateful rhetoric is directed against those who simply seek a better life for their families, and where thousands of people are being deported back to countries to face the same violence and despair that caused them to escape in the first place.

*For these things do I weep:* Next week we will observe Tisha b'Av, the day of mourning which commemorates the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Jeremiah declares that this cataclysm was the result of our own transgressions: "Gone is the joy of our hearts; our dancing has turned into mourning. The crown has fallen from our head; Woe to us that we have sinned." (5:15-16). And so Tisha b'Av becomes a time not only of remembering, but also of reflecting on how our actions – and inactions – fall short of what God demands from us.

On the morning of Tisha b'Av – Sunday, July 22 at 11:00 my congregation will be meeting outside the local ICE Enforcement and Removal field office at 2<sup>nd</sup> and Chestnut to chant Jeremiah's ancient words. The Book of Lamentations chronicles our people's despair in ancient times but also speaks powerfully to the experiences of all those who are marginalized, who know the desperation and

hopelessness of having their lives uprooted by forces beyond their control. We will read, we will chant, we will pray, and we will peacefully protest the treatment of those seeking refuge in this country. We will embrace our spiritual and ethical duty to love the stranger and our refusal to be complicit through silence. We would be honored to welcome any who wish to join us in our observance that morning and we look forward to taking a stand in support of those who are helpless as we remember our own historical experience of displacement and disenfranchisement.

*For these things do I weep, my eyes flow with tears: Far from me is any comforter who might revive my spirit.* Through our words, our actions, and our presence, we can seek to be that comforter, and hope to revive the spirit of those seeking refuge, and of a nation that strives to be righteous.

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