

IN COMPASSION & COMPANIONSHIP

Reflections for Tisha B'Av
and the Three Weeks

COMPILED AND EDITED BY



INTRODUCTION

מִשְׁנַכְנֵס אֶב מִמְעֵטִין בְּשִׁמְחָה.

When the month of Av begins, we decrease our joy.

– Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Taanit 26b

The Talmud instructs us to decrease our joy as the month of Av begins, to commemorate the destruction of the Temples and other events that occurred on the ninth of Av. Over time, some Jewish communities extended this mourning period from nine days to three weeks, beginning on the 17th of Tammuz, a minor fast day, and ending on Tisha B'Av, a major fast day.

*For those able to fast without danger, it is a mitzvah to fast.
For those facing danger from fasting, it is a mitzvah to eat.*

For those who generally feel joyful, limits on certain activities (defined as joyous by Jewish law) can be a meaningful way to mourn the destruction of the Temples and the *sinat chinam* (limitless hatred) that tore (and tears) us apart.

But what does it feel like to be told to feel less joy or to restrict specific activities that might bring us joy when we are already dealing with illness, trauma or grief? How does it feel to be told to feel more sad when we are already crying?



For some of us, the themes of the Three Weeks and Tisha B'av may be inaccessible or may touch upon moments of pain or loss in our own lives. We may want to connect to this time in the Jewish calendar, but be unable to connect through a lens that focuses on decreasing joy, intense mourning and graphic language (particularly in the book of *Eichah*, read on Tisha B'Av).

In this compendium, we offer supportive words from a diverse selection of writers, offering different options to frame and connect to Tisha B'Av and the Three Weeks. If this time of year is challenging for you, please know that we see you. You are not alone.

We sit with you in compassion and companionship.





ABOUT A MITZVAH TO EAT

A Mitzvah to Eat is a pluralistic social network and online resource hub for Jews who need accommodations for Jewish practices. We are building a more connected and compassionate Jewish community that illuminates sparks of holiness within acts of self-preservation.

Find us on our [website](#), [Facebook](#), and [Instagram](#).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Grief, Weddings; Open First by Rabbi Jen Gubitz	5
The Love Starts with You by Rabbi Ari Hart	11
From Horror to Compassion by Rabbi Marianne Novak	13
A Poem for Tisha B'av by Rabbi Emily Aronson	17

Prayers for those needing to eat on a Jewish fast day

English Version	19
Created by A Mitzvah to Eat	
Hebrew Version of the Prayer	20



Grief, Weddings; Open First

By Rabbi Jen Gubitz

Originally published on July 14, 2021, in Lilith Magazine.

*“Someone I loved once gave me a box full of darkness.
It took me years to understand that this too, was a gift.”*

— Mary Oliver

Despite the label’s demand, the brown U-Haul box remained taped up, stacked up, and out of sight. After years ensconced in our rental apartment that became a true haven during the pandemic, our landlords were selling and we had to leave. Our first home together was now packed up, loaded up, and off we went. The new home was only one mile away, but it felt like the diaspora. Unpacking was slow and despite each of us being *people of the book*, our books remained ensconced in a wall of boxes.

And then suddenly on our way out of town, I felt a yearning. I could not leave the house until I’d opened *that* box, hoping to find within a particular book my dear friend Sara assured was a gift to the heart, which I had purchased in the pandemic seemingly ages ago, then left unread at my bedside, then packed away in a moving box labeled: “Death, Weddings; Open First.” And I simply could not leave without finding it.

This was a July 4th jaunt out of town after months of personal tumult—the walls of life as we knew it falling down around us: shifted wedding plans, a painful and drawn-out conclusion of a beloved job, family health issues, fertility treatments, the move,



unpacking... a collective uprooting that still weighed heavily on our hearts. On a weekend devoted to celebrating our nation's independence, perhaps we hoped fireworks might muffle the wailing cries of global grief, national bereavement, communal sorrow, and individual suffering from months of isolation, loss and fear. The fissures of our society truly revealed, the heat of climate change boiling, a racial justice reckoning, a rise in antisemitism, and so, so much loneliness—we sought respite from the reverberations of collective catastrophe.

So I needed *that* book because freedom means to read—unfettered— at an Airbnb in the Berkshires for as long as you want. I ran inside, cut the heavy-duty packing tape with scissors and... it wasn't there. I panicked, ran to another wall of books and sure enough, in this fortification of book boxes each labeled to describe the books within- and maybe my inner life—was a second box, similarly labeled "Grief, Weddings; Open First."

Then I tucked "The Way of Solomon" by Rami Shapiro in my bag, we buckled our rescue dog Joey in the back seat and drove off. And for a moment, this past year, with its pain and joy, the packing, the unpacking, the resettling, the recreating home—and the heaviest question of "What do we do when things fall apart?"—was in the rearview mirror as the waters of Stockbridge Bowl beckoned.

**

What do we do when things fall apart? I imagine my friend Matt, whose final moments with his dying mother were on Facetime, as



she made the shape of a heart with her hands and left this world with love. I imagine the young adults I served in that beloved job, whose goals and dreams were delayed, who sought partners or professional growth, but instead sat for days on end in their homes, with only the nurture of Netflix to accompany the silence. I think of my parents rejoicing with bride and groom on Zoom because it wasn't safe to travel. I think of the new parents who labored alone in the hospital and whose family waited months to meet new babies. I think of the students and teachers, the essential workers and the full-time parents, the elderly and the toddlers – most of whom languished as the walls of society came crumbling down around us, and we humans became a danger to one another. So, *what do we do when things fall apart?* How do we recover? And will we ever recover?

The Book of Lamentations, classically read on the observance of Tisha B'av, asks these same questions. "Alas! How? *Eicha...*" the author weeps, lamenting the bitterness and desolation in the wake of destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. The loss of the Temple in Jerusalem was a destruction of the "world as we knew it" not once, but two times. Tremendous grief ensued, still rooted in the hearts of many today, as our ancestors sought to rebuild their lives. But as history and hindsight remind, these periods of destruction led to tremendous innovation. It began first with grieving, longing, and wailing; and in time (well, centuries) this tragedy led to a process of conversation and storytelling. Whether exiled by the waters of Babylon or remaining in the Land of Israel, academies of scholarship began to write down their stories, conversations, questions and ideas... starting with their grief as cried out in Lamentations. And eventually, over



centuries, the literary innovation of the Talmud, the documentation of oral Judaism, emerged.

Even though our central place of gathering was now gone, our ideas, our stories, our thoughts, our questions – remained.

So, too, living in the diaspora without a holy Jerusalem Temple to bring sacrificial offerings, Rabbinic Judaism emerged in the form of prayer, practice, and obligation one to another. We learned we couldn't be fully Jewish alone – rather we need a quorum of ten to bring holiness and wholeness into our midst. We learned how to be Jewish in a world that was not, exploring our relationship to Otherness, to difference and diversity. And we leaned into being those people of the book. Even though our central place of gathering was now gone, our ideas, our stories, our thoughts, our questions – remained. The world as we knew it was no longer, and many worlds, many lives ended, but perseverance, creativity and growth ensued.

So what do we do when things fall apart? And how do we recover? Will we ever recover? I don't know. I hope we do, but I have no idea how long it will take. But I think it starts with crying.

We need to cry. And then we need to cry some more, calling out ancient words of grief from Lamentations: "*Eicha!*" Alas! Or the words from Ecclesiastes, "*Hevel Hevalim: All is futile!*" As we cry, we will tell stories of remembrance – to reencounter the traumatic experience and to lift up the memories of lives lost. We will sing songs, or find poetry, or art, or movement, or silence – to express our heart's inner longings, our grief, but also joy. Perhaps



in time we will have a day devoted solely to remembering the pandemic and each and every individual who died in it. Just as we return each year to days of sorrow such as Tisha B'av, we will always carry our grief with us. But in time it will transform.

Amidst the fall of the second temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E., we find the powerful story of Yochanan ben Zakkai. He escaped Jerusalem in a coffin en route to establish a new center for Jewish life in *Yavneh*, the root word for which means “to build.” Even in the wake of great *hurban*, tragedy and disaster, he and our ancestors sought ways to build and rebuild.

Sometimes the walls of life come falling down around us: but in time we pick up the pieces to rebuild. We pack and unpack the boxes of our lives, casting away what no longer serves us, while keeping with us enduring learnings of the story of a resilient people. As exhibited in both the tiniest fractals of creation and the greatest moments of modern innovation, from death eventually comes life, mourning turns to dancing over and over again until wholeness and peace reign.

That weekend, it rained on and off in the Berkshires. We saw friends, enjoyed meals, celebrated Shabbat and our nation's independence at Tanglewood. Although I'm sure it's worth the read, I never even pulled that book out of my bag but am grateful for the comfort it brought. The wall of boxes that reminds us of all the joys and sorrows, of the laughter and so many tears of this past year are slowly finding their new home. “Grief, Weddings; Open First”—such is the art of living throughout the ages for the *people of the book*.



Rabbi Jen Gubitz is a rabbi in Boston and the founder of Modern JewISH Couples, an Indiana Hoosier at heart, and the co-host of the OMfG Podcast: Jewish Wisdom for Unprecedented Times.



The Love Starts with You

By Rabbi Ari Hart

We've heard the Tisha B'Av teaching: *Sinat Chinam*, baseless hate, destroys. It destroyed the Temple. It destroys us today.

Rav Kook reminds us that *Ahavat Chinam*, boundless love, is the opposing force that rebuilds.

How do we practice this?

The Torah speaks of love. It tells us: Love your neighbor as you love yourself.

Perhaps this is a prescription: extend your love outwards - do not stop at yourself. Share your love widely.

But what if it is a description?

What if it is a reminder that our ability to love others is founded on our ability to love ourselves. If we do not love ourselves, we will never be able to love our neighbors. If we cannot freely love ourselves, we will never freely love others. There is no *ahavat chinam* for my neighbor if there is no *ahavat chinam* for me.

Some of us are challenged by too much self love that crowds out our compassion for others.

And some of us are challenged by not enough self love that limits our ability to shine our love outward into the world.



If limited, constricted love of self is your challenge, perhaps you might use the Three Weeks to build up love for yourself: self love without condition and clause, Self love based on the knowledge that you are awesomely and wondrously made (Tehillim 139:14).

Perhaps your practice could be to focus each day on loving a different aspect of yourself. Start the rebuilding small; an action you are proud of, a trait you admire in yourself, a memory that lifts you up. Build the love from there, day by day. The Temple was built one brick at a time.

Once your boundless love of self is strengthened, then you may find your capacity for boundless love of others strengthened as well. May we all merit to spread love this year that is founded on the most fundamental love of all: love for ourselves.

Ari Hart is the rabbi of Skokie Valley Agudath Jacob, a thriving, welcoming modern orthodox shul in Skokie, Illinois.



From Horror to Compassion

By Rabbi Marianne Novak

Content Warning: This piece contains loss that connects to a graphic line of Eichah, the Book of Lamentations.

When I moved to Skokie over 27 years ago, I joined a neighborhood group that on Tisha B'av had a mixed (men and women) reading of *Megillat Eichah*, the Book of Lamentations, coupled with traditional davening (praying). The group's intrepid leader - as of late, a very busy pediatric infectious disease doctor - also added interpretative readings, videos and poetry.

I volunteered to read *Perek Bet*, chapter two, of Eichah, which has the horrifying line describing the siege upon Jerusalem: (2:20)

רָאָה ה' וְהִבִּיטָה לְמִי עוֹלָלָת כָּה
אִם־תֹּאכְלֶנָּה נָשִׁים פְּרִים עֲלֵי טַפָּחִים
אִם־יִהְרַג בְּמִקְדָּשׁ אֲדוֹנָי כֹּהֵן וְנָבִיא:

See, O LORD, and behold,
To whom You have done this!
Alas, women eat their own fruit,
Their new-born babes!
Alas, priest and prophet are slain
In the Sanctuary of the Lord!

It's a stark reminder of the particular horror mothers experience in times of war and distress. The mothers here did not cause such horror, yet the guilt over the loss of their children in such a



horrible manner is everlasting.

Every time I lained (chanted) this verse— the first time after the birth of my first child - my voice would catch and I would have to focus harder in order to finish the last few lines of the chapter.

The visceral, and initially bodily, connection for parents and children (especially if you choose to nurse your child), is all encompassing and unlike any other. No matter the cause, if there is harm to their child or loss of their child, many parents feel responsible. They may feel that their one job was to keep their child out of harm and at least alive, and that they have failed. How much added despair did those mothers in Jerusalem experience in addition to their own deprivation and degradation?

When reading this line, if I wasn't already in the 'Three Weeks/Tisha B'av mindset', by the time I struggled to chant that line, I certainly was.

But then my middle daughter died.

And then I didn't need any extra meditation or focus to make me lament. I could now lament with a snap of a finger.

When I chanted that Perek (chapter) again, my voice didn't catch with sadness or horror. My voice rang with stark recognition. And my focus moved from extreme sadness and loss to one of compassion, empathy and love.

When observing this trying time on our Jewish calendar, some



people may need to focus on loss, death and destruction to fall in sync with the feeling of the Three Weeks and Tisha B'av. But if you recognize the horror and loss in your own life, there is no requirement to connect so much that you retraumatize yourself.

My lens is now focused on comforting those who have also lost children and trying to do the work both internally and externally to ensure that the complete breakdown of society that precipitated the awful siege and destruction of society doesn't keep happening.

We sadly have enough in our world at present to keep us busy with this endeavor. And as always, be gentle with yourself so that compassion is possible.

May we merit the day when we receive a complete redemption and this commemoration will be no longer.

Rabbi Marianne Novak received her semikha, rabbinic ordination, from Yeshivat Maharat in 2019. She served her rabbinic internships at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, and Congregation Netivot Shalom in Teaneck, New Jersey. Rabbi Novak has been on the faculty of the Melton School of Adult Jewish Learning for over 25 years and has served as gabbait and Bat Mitzvah tutor for the Skokie Women's Tefillah Group. She has served as Scholar-in-Residence and lecturer at various congregations. She received her B.A. cum laude from Barnard



College and has a JD from the School of Law of Washington University in St. Louis. This fall, Rabbi Novak joined the Judaic studies staff at Akiva-Schechter Jewish Day School. Additionally, she is an educator with the Jewish Learning Collab and has recently joined the Hadassah Foundation Board. She lives in Skokie, IL with her family.



A Poem for Tisha B'av

By Rabbi Emily Aronson

You say on Purim that I should be happy
That I should don a mask
And laugh and shout
And drink

You say on Tisha B'Av that I should fill my heart with sorrow
That anguish should consume my day
That I should cry and mourn
And fast

You say these are the 'real' ways to celebrate
To be in community
To be a Jew

But I am real.
My body is real.
My illness is real.
And only I can know my body's limits,
It's strength and beauty too,
The way it fights to pump blood through my veins,
To send signals across systems,
To allow me to awake anew each day.



So while you lean into anguish and affliction,
While you abstain from food and drink
I will nourish my body and my soul
So that I may honor myself and the Creator
Who formed me in Their Image
Knowing that your observance is real
But so is mine.

You say that I should feel a certain way on these holy days.
Today I choose to banish 'I should'
And embrace 'I am.'

Rabbi Emily Aronson (she/her) was ordained from HUC-JIR in 2021. She recently launched Chronic Congregation (@chronic_congregation), a project focused on the intersection of Judaism, Disability, and Chronic Illness. She is the Reform Campus Rabbi at the Bronfman Center for Jewish Student Life at New York University. She previously served as Interim Dean of Students at HUC-NY. Rabbi Aronson attended the Jewish Theological Seminary and Columbia University, earning B.A.s in Jewish Thought and Ethnicity and Race Studies.



A Prayer for Eating on a Jewish Fast Day

Created by A Mitzvah to Eat

Dear God,

As I prepare to eat on this fast day, please help me feel close to You.

As I nourish my body, heart, mind, and soul, may comfort envelop me.

May I connect to the meaning of the day in ways that support me.

May I find a community who will hold me where I am.

For who I am.

May the words of my heart reach Your loving and compassionate presence.

May I find peace and holiness through eating, through connecting, through You.



Hebrew: A Prayer for Eating on a Jewish Fast Day

Translated into Hebrew by Rabba Dr. Anat Sharbat

אלי

בעמדי לאכול ביום צום הזה, אבקש להרגיש קרבתך.
בעת שאני מזינה את גופי ובריאותי הנפשית
יהי רצון שתעטוף אותי נחמה.

כולי תפילה לחיבור משמעותי עם ענייני היום -
באופן שיתמוך בי.
כולי בקשה שאמצא קהילה שתחזיק ותקבל אותי כפי שאני, באשר אני, בצלם
אלוהים שנבראתי.

כולי תפילה שמילים אלו המגיעות
מעומק ליבי ונשמתי
יפגשו באל הרחום וחנון,
בשכינה שאוהבת כל ברואיה.
ויהי רצון שאמצא שלוה וקדושה דרך אכילתי,
דרך רצוני להידבק בך, דרכך.

