

Sunday, 3 Tamuz, 5768

## TAMUZ – THE END OF TRAGEDY

from Harav Yitzchak Ginsburgh

the month of Tamuz begins on Friday, July 4<sup>th</sup> and ends on Friday,  
August 4<sup>th</sup> (inclusive)

### Tamuz – Time for Transformation

The names of all the months in the Hebrew calendar are originally from Babylon. The Jewish people adopted these Babylonian names during the 70 year exile in Babylon. Yet, of all the Babylonian names adopted, Tamuz stands out as peculiar: it is the name of an actual Babylonian deity and idol. Why would our sages allow the adoption of the name of idolatry into the holiness of Judaism?

The short answer is that our role is not only to combat idolatry by defacing it, because the psychological motivation that draws people to idolatry is not cured that way. Instead, in the long run, we have to transform the negative psychological proclivities that lead to idolatry and transform them into positive ones.<sup>1</sup> It seems therefore, that the sages' choice of the false god of the Tamuz provides us with a case study of the problem of idolatry and its solution. The month of Tamuz is thus the time of year best suited for understanding and practicing the process of transformation (or, *ithapcha* as it is called in Chassidut) in the psyche.

As we will see, the Tamuz is a parasite that lives off of the human tendency to self-pity and our sense of the tragic—two sentiments that are intrinsically linked to this time of the year.

### The Birth of Tragedy

None other than Maimonides (who was also one of the greatest scholars of ancient idolatry, as he himself attests) brings us the story of the Tamuz.<sup>2</sup> Tamuz was a false prophet in ancient Mesopotamia who was tortured to death by a certain king. After his death, his followers concocted a tale that on the night of his death all the gods came to crown him, and then flew away the next morning. The story was turned into a play, with Tamuz playing the role of the tragic hero. This play was so popular that the



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prophet Ezekiel tells us that there were regular showings at one of the entrances to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem where the women of Jerusalem would watch the play and weep.

Rashi explains that Tamuz is the name of the first of the summer months<sup>3</sup> because in Aramaic it literally means “heat.” He also notes that the Tamuz idol that was placed in or near the Holy Temple was fabricated with eyes made of lead. When heated up, the idol’s eyes would shed tears of lead, which would run down its face.

The tragic story of the prophet, the tear-jerking play, and the crying idol all lend to the air of pity and tragedy surrounding the Tamuz. But, this pity was not heartfelt. It was a cheap manipulation of the emotions and, more than anything else catered to people’s need to identify with the misfortune of others in order to alleviate their own feelings of self-pity. The tragedy of Tamuz’s life was shared by those who felt that there own lives were just one long tragic affair.

Though today, the Tamuz as a form of idolatry is a long forgotten tale, but the sentiments of pity and tragedy that it fed upon are still as ubiquitous as they were 2500 years ago. First, it is easy to see the Tamuz as the precursor to the Greek tragedy, which to this day remains in good standing in the eyes of Western culture and a liberal education. But the similarity between the shallow manipulations of the Tamuz cult and the modern-day popularity (even worship) of stars whose lives are pictured as tragic is too strong to overlook. The pity and tears shed for a figure such as Elvis, or Jim Morrison, or River Phoenix are the same as those shed for Tamuz. It is the identification with the tragedy in these modern-day icons’ lives that inspires so many people to treat them as idols and to continue the cult of tragic hero-worship.

Not least among these cults is Christianity itself, which formed a religion around the tragedy of a single Jew’s life. For nearly two thousand years Christianity has fostered its followers with a morbid and bleak picture of God and of life.

Unfortunately, even if a person does not find himself attracted to Elvis or Christianity, the sense of despair and tragedy may still be present in their psyche. Many people today suffer from the view of life as a tragedy, a view that fosters a tragic self-image. The individual that leads a tragic existence in his or her own eyes continually seeks and even expects the pity of others. When this does not happen, that person is invariably forced into self-pity and even eventually to self-worship, having chiseled out the form of Tamuz in his or her own psyche.

## The Healing Gaze

What can we do to free ourselves from the cult of life as a tragedy? The first step is to see it for what it is—a form of shallow idolatry that cultivates a shallow approach to life’s true sorrows and pain. As the sages teach us, when a person experiences pain or sorrow it is a call from God above for soul-searching and a change in direction.

The life-as-a-tragedy stance can be taken only when trust and faith in God's goodness and loving-kindness has been cast away. Once these are gone, worship of the tragic becomes possible. In fact, one of the names used in the Bible for idols is simply "sadness."

Recognizing that depression and loss of faith in life are forms of idolatry help bring home the Biblical statement that to follow God means to "Choose life!"<sup>4</sup> But to choose life, one needs to be able to see the goodness in life. This second step involves our outlook on ourselves and on others.

The sense of the month of Tamuz is: sight. This means that the month of Tamuz is the best month of the year to learn to exercise our sight in the most positive way possible. Rectified sight involves both shying away from that which is negative (an ability associated in Kabbalah with our left eye) and training ourselves to see things in a positive light (associated with our right eye). In essence, both aspects are included in the right eye, which means that we should seek to see only the good points in others.

What stops us from being able to see the good in others is, almost always, envy. The sages teach us that envy breeds lust and pride.<sup>5</sup> If you look upon others with envy, not only are you unable to see the good in them, but you are actually increasing your own lusts and cravings for those things that are the opposite of life. In turn, greater lust leads to greater envy and the cycle constantly becomes more vicious. To heal yourself you need an expert eye doctor. According to Chassidut, the first expert eye doctor was Moses, who healed the spiritual sight of the entire Jewish people with his own qualities of selflessness and unconditional love for all Jews.<sup>6</sup>

A person who has healed his sense of sight in this sense gains the power to heal others with his gaze. The story is told of the greatest lover of the Jewish people in recent generations, Rebbe Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, who would pray with eyes wide open facing the street and the corner and goers. His critics charged him with immodesty, but he would not change his ways. The inner meaning of his puzzling conduct was that his kind and encouraging gaze whilst clinging to God in prayer (not concentrating at all on those outside) was enough to change people for the better.

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, one of Rebbe Levi Yitzchak's great contemporaries found this idea in the verse: "A bit more and the wicked will be no more; for you will gaze at his place, and he will be gone." Rebbe Nachman explained that by these words, King David meant that by ignoring the wickedness in a person and by searching for the good in him or her, one's gaze has the power to annul evil.

This is the Jewish response to life-as-a-tragedy stance.

## The Jewish (Un)tragedy

The 17<sup>th</sup> day of Tamuz marks the beginning of a period of three weeks of mourning over the destruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Yet, it would be incorrect to associate our national state of mourning with a feeling of tragedy at a national level.

It is unfortunate that some Jews have cultivated a culture of national tragedy, not over the destruction of the Temple per se, but mostly over what they perceive as the tragic history of the Jewish people. It is even more unfortunate that this sense of Jews as tragic figures provided (and for many, continues to provide) the bedrock for the legitimacy claimed by Zionist leaders for the return of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel. Truly, the sole and eternal legitimacy for our claim to our land is stated in the Bible very clearly: God's oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God gave the Land of Israel to His chosen people for all eternity. To choose to perceive ourselves as the heroes of tragedy leads in the end to self-loathing and a loss of self-confidence—two of the most negative forces at work today in Israel, creating a culture that identifies with our enemies and their goals. In addition, as noted earlier, perceiving one's existence as tragic creates an expectation of pity and compassion from others. It goes without saying that this causes other nations to shy away from us.

Without a doubt, we the Jewish people have experienced tremendous hardship and pain throughout our history—more so perhaps than other nations. But Jewish history is anything but tragic. It is the history of hope and faith and of moral uprightness in the face of primitively immoral despots and religions, most of which have disappeared from the world. Jewish history is the ultimate anti-tragedy. It is the story of mankind's search for the possibility of sanctifying our corporeal existence here on earth.

Walking through the ruins of the second Temple, and faced with the pain of the oncoming exile, most of the sages wept; but not Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Akiva, the Moses of his generation, met the disaster with a restrained joy. When asked the reason for his unexpected response, he explained that the prophets had foretold of many difficult periods in the history of our nation, and of good periods, leading in the end to the ultimate good of the true and complete redemption. He continued, "Now that I have seen that the negative has come to pass, I am certain that so will the good!"

Rabbi Akiva epitomizes the Jewish faith and confidence in the immanence of goodness and holiness, even in the face of tremendous adversity. He passed this quality on to his student Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai who founded the mystical Judaic tradition in his book the *Zohar* (literally, "Radiance"). Throughout the ages, the ability to see with rectified sight has been passed down through the Jewish people and specifically in the writings of Kabbalah and then Chassidut.

May this month of Tamuz be the month in which we undertake to see the world as did all our holy teachers. By transforming our sight, we will merit to see God usher in the era of the true and complete redemption.

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<sup>1</sup>. Put another way, pure monotheistic faith, which means a steadfast belief that nothing but the Almighty is the Master of all that is and all that happens, is the sign of a healthy, and positively charged character. The more a person tends to attribute events or situations to anything but One God, the more that person is suffering from some psychological imbalance or even malady.

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- <sup>2</sup>. *Guide for the Perplexed* 3:29.
  - <sup>3</sup>. After which all three summer months (Tamuz, Av, and Elul) are named (*tekufat Tamuz*)
  - <sup>4</sup>. Deuteronomy 30:19.
  - <sup>5</sup>. *Avot* 4:21.
  - <sup>6</sup>. Moses himself is the archetypal soul of victory, which terminates the right axis of the *sefirot*. Above victory is loving-kindness whose motivational force is love and above that wisdom, whose motivational force is selflessness. Thus, healing one's gaze is dependent upon strengthening one's right-side faculties. The corollary of this is that a healthy, positive-seeing gaze leads to a healthy stance of confidence (the inner motivation of victory) in God, in oneself, and in life.