

**Weekly Jewish Wisdom:
Reject Despair**
By Dr. Erica Brown

“Because I remember, I despair. Because I remember I have the duty to reject despair.”
Elie Wiesel

This past Tuesday, we began a somber period on the Jewish calendar: the three weeks, which are also called in Hebrew “*bein ha-mitzarim*” – between the straits. Book-ended by a minor fast and a major fast, the 17th of Tammuz and the 9th of Av – these weeks mark the beginning of the ancient destruction of Jerusalem and its siege. It is a time to remember and pay homage to a difficult past. The 9th of Av, in particular, is a solemn day on which we recall all travesties of Jewish history through poetry and prayer.

Why don't more American Jews observe these powerful days of memory? We are a part of the culture in which we live, and Americans have neither a long historical memory as a relatively young country nor has the youthful American spirit of moving forward encouraged its citizens to look backward with awe, respect and gratitude. Just think about the way that Memorial Day is typically observed in this country. Barbeques, the opening of public pools and sale days are much more in evidence than visits to cemeteries and meditations on the immense loss suffered by Americans at war.

We also live in a time where we are enormously interested in happiness. Just type in “books on happiness” into Amazon and see what you come up with (by my count, it's close to 17,000). Wow. We guard our happiness closely, and don't want to mar it with sad thoughts. According to the Buddhist thinker, Sharon Salzberg, in her book *Loving-kindness*:

...we feel obliged to defend our happiness because it seems so fragile, unstable. As though our happiness needed constant protection, we deny the very possibility of suffering; we cut ourselves off from facing it in ourselves and in others because we fear that it will undermine or destroy our good fortune.

But suffering humanizes us. Ignoring suffering dehumanizes us. I don't want that homeless person to ruin my good mood by looking at him, so I turn away and with that turning, I let go of my social responsibility to him. Our attunement to suffering makes us more compassionate. It also helps us appreciate where we come from and all that it took to get us here.

That is why memory is so central to the Jewish experience. Jews are memory beings. Each of us holds within us a long personal and communal history dating back to the days of Abraham. Each step we take is over 4,000 years old. It is hard to move in that vast, complex universe without a sense of how history informs our very identity. . Elie Wiesel describes his own commitment to memory as a responsibility to the past: “I decided to devote my life to telling the story because I felt that having survived I owe something to the dead. and anyone who does not remember betrays them again.”

We don't diminish our happiness when we spend a day or a few weeks meditating on the tragedies of history from which we emerged. We become more grateful beings

who hold on tightly to our blessed lives because we can. Looking back helps us look forward with a greater degree of emotional maturity and also helps us reject the despair that Wiesel mentions above. Although our recollection of the past stirs memories we might rather keep at a distance, our own identities need a reminder of darkness to appreciate light. When we review our past, we reject despair because we can sum it up in one word: hope.

Shabbat Shalom