Tisha b’Av: Reconstructing Mashiach (the Messiah)

On the 9th of the Hebrew month of Av, we observe Tisha b’Av.  The exoteric idea of Tisha b’Av is to commemorate the destruction of the two temples in Jerusalem, in 586 BCE and 70 CE, as well as other tragedies in Jewish history. As such, it is the day of deepest communal mourning on the Jewish calendar. Along with Yom Kippur, it is the only full 25 hour food/water fast. It is also important to remember that Tisha b’Av can be seen as the very beginning of the High Holyday season, which culminates around two and a half months later with Simchat Torah.

We have a provocative teaching from the Jerusalem Talmud (Brachot 2:4) that Tisha b’Av is the day of the birth of *mashiach*/the messiah. This moves me to think that while we have holy days for lots of other core concerns in Judaism--freedom, repairing our actions, Torah, light, abundant harvest, Tisha b’Av is kind of holy day for mashiach. Or, I would say, messianic consciousness.

What might this mean? It’s important to remember that we don’t need to be locked into thinking of mashiach as an individual person. Jewish history is littered with an immense amount of wasted time and dashed hopes which were pinned on individuals, (always men) who were thought to be mashiach. It’s time to drop that paradigm.

Instead, we can see mashiach as an archetype that each of us have within us. Reb Nachman of Breslov teaches that the way we participate in the mashiach archetype is to draw into ourselves the greatest degree of compassion (*rachamim*) that we possibly can. (*Likkutei Moharan* 2). He envisions mashiach drawing this compassion down from the hidden-most recesses of Divinity.

Traditional Jewish understandings of mashiach saw “him” as a king who would fight wars to return the Jewish people to their land. There’s more than a bit of violence to this traditional view. For Reb Nachman, instead of fighting any kind of literal war, mashiach’s main “weapon” is prayer. As my long-time teacher Rabbi Miles Krassen put it, “the wars of mashiach are not real wars, but exertions in the power of prayer.”

I have this image of the heart of mashiach filled with overflowing, pure compassion that is then offered and expressed as prayer. It’s a beautiful reconstruction of the idea of mashiach, one that makes it more possible for us to get our hearts behind this idea.

Drawing forth deeper compassion then is to participate in the unfolding of messianic consciousness. This is usually not a huge act, it is simply seeking to draw compassion into any situation we find ourselves in, particularly a difficult one.

Or in slightly different language, in her powerful book Sacred Therapy, spiritual teacher Estelle Frankel describes how in Hasidic teachings, mashiach “came to be seen not just as an actual savior of humanity but also as a power within each soul that can bring about healing and transformation. The messianic spark, or *nekudat mashiach*, as it is known in Hebrew, is what enables each of us to transform the difficult circumstances of our lives into something meaningful and holy. It is awakened whenever we discover the divine force of healing moving through our lives at the darkest of moments.”

A focus on reconstructing Tisha b’Av to focus on compassion and healing strikes me as a fitting reason to see this day as the beginning of the High Holy Day season. On this Tisha B’av, may we allow ourselves to feel some of the grief that we are all rightly carrying, yet may we also realize we are each an integral part of the unfolding messianic process, and may we be inspired to play a conscious role in that process, drawing compassion from the deepest source we can access, and offering it up as heartfelt prayer in the service of communal and planetary healing.

In blessing/*bi’vracha*,

Rabbi Josh