

Tammuz practice:

The Three Weeks: shedding old forms by Rabbi T'mimah Ickovits

One of the things which challenges me about this time on the Jewish calendar is that sadness and mourning seem to be encouraged. There is a tendency to dwell in pain, as if the pain and discomfort were the final goal.

These (northern-hemisphere) summer months are a time of transition. These Three Weeks mark the siege of Jerusalem leading to the destruction of the Temple. At this season, many years ago, Judaism began to morph from a Temple-based tradition to what we today know as Rabbinic Judaism.

In that destruction, Jewish practice released its old form, since that form was not sustainable. The movement from form to fluid, from ebb to flow, is the movement of ongoing life. The early rabbis modeled for us the practice of releasing a form which no longer serves.

Releasing patterns which are no longer useful creates space. Spaciousness, in turn, can invite new insights, wisdom and joy. When we make this an annual practice of discernment, we allow layers of transformation to unfold over a lifetime.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak wrote, "Who ever wants to live should kill himself." Dying, in this context, means being willing to give up form — to release patterns and practices which do not support life and love. This kind of "death" leads to rebirth.

Form is a necessary part of life, and is often linked with ego. Our beloved teacher Reb Zalman, of blessed memory, taught, "Ego is a great manager and a lousy boss." We need ego, as we need form, but we also need to be open to change. Changing form is difficult. This process can manifest in big ways (losing a job) or small ways (fasting.)

It is deep spiritual work to discern the difference between forms which serve, and forms which have become comfortable habits but no longer serve.

For example: my parents were Shoah survivors. My teacher Emilie Conrad, of blessed memory, taught that people often trade pleasure for survival. My parents' focus was survival, and that's what they passed on to me.

Safety was a major issue for them, understandably. They developed a thick layer of security around all they did. It was appropriate for them. For many years I followed in their footsteps, not realizing that constantly checking and rechecking security was filtering goodness and joy out of my life. Those habits were a form which no longer served me.

During the Three Weeks, we can practice letting go of forms which no longer serve.

The Three Weeks end with the fast of Tisha B'Av. A few days later comes Tu b'Av, the 15th of the month of Av, a full moon celebration when tradition leads us to look for new joy. The time of dissolve leads to reformatting. This is *teshuvah*, the annual return to source which we practice especially in Elul in preparation for the Days of Awe. Many Hasidim begin thinking seriously about *teshuvah* on Tu B'Av.

Other ancient cultures gave us the image of *ouroboros*, the snake with its tail in its mouth. The Jewish holiday cycle is like this, too. The beginning is already embedded before the end.

Releasing habits which no longer serve offers an opportunity. We can choose to change. We can choose to be better receivers of Holy Presence and joy. This is the gift of this season.

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