

Memory and Resilience

Thought for the Day

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For Jewish people, this is a gloomy time of year as we mark the destruction of the ancient Temples in Jerusalem with a 25-hour fast. As a people, we have a long memory – we've been celebrating Pesach, Passover, as our national Independence Day for more than three millennia, and for more than two and a half thousand years we've mourned the conquest of Israel by the Babylonians with this series of fasts. That's why the Talmud developed as a record of the arguments about how to keep the religion alive in exile without the central focus of the Temple.

But as the biblical Book of Ezra – and later, the Christian New Testament – describe, some exiles returned and rebuilt the Temple, only for that too to be destroyed. This time it was the Romans, just a few years before they invaded Scotland with similar tactics – replacing the native population with exiles from elsewhere and supplanting the local way of life. Possibly because it was a key hub of their Empire rather than the very edge, the Romans tried harder to obliterate the Jews than the Scots – even changing the names: Judea became Palestina, and Jerusalem was flattened and renamed Aelia Capitolina.

What they could not obliterate was memory. The Jewish community dispersed to small towns; Temple worship became synagogue worship; and above all Judaism survived in people's heads – in the study of Torah and Talmud, and the observance of traditions and liturgy – where it lives to this day.

So we can still be positive. The Talmud describes how a group of rabbis wept when they saw the ruins, but one, Rabbi Akiva, laughed, saying the destruction was just a stage in the prophecy that Jerusalem would rise again.

Clouds have silver linings, setbacks can be opportunities, and human resilience can help us rebuild even in the darkest times.