

From Sadness to Gladness

Thought for the Day

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This is a time of the Jewish year I always find very interesting both because of the contrasting emotions it raises, and because of how they bridge religion and secular history.

It can be easy to dismiss religion as based on unsupported fairy stories, but in fact foundational events are often well attested by external, indeed hostile, sources. So just last week, Jewish communities marked the most sombre day of the year with 24 hours of mourning rituals and fasting, to commemorate the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Babylonians, and then, after it was rebuilt, by the Romans exactly 1953 years ago. This was well after the era of the Hebrew Bible – in fact the Second Temple was redesigned by the same King Herod who gets a rather bad press in the Christian New Testament. A generation later, the Talmud names Titus, Vespasian, and Nero – well known from secular Roman history – as the generals who besieged and destroyed the Temple and the city of Jerusalem, even changing its name and ploughing over the ruins, and scattering its inhabitants throughout the Roman Empire.

The Talmud also gives us other vivid descriptions of Jewish life in the Temple era. In perhaps the earliest known example of speed dating, the unmarried women of Jerusalem would go out to meet prospective spouses; in a spirit of egalitarianism, all dressed in plain white clothes borrowed from their friends, so they would each be judged on their personal qualities and not by the quality of their wardrobe or their wealth.

So yesterday, less than a week after we mourned the destruction of the site and the society where these match-making customs flourished, we commemorated their anniversary with a minor festival. That's definitely moving in the right direction, and so may we always advance from sadness to gladness.

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