

Tisha Ba'av Hargah 2012

Finding God in the Wilderness

Hiking the Appalachian Trail—once before Tisha B'Av—taught me the essence of observance by Jonathan Zimmerman

I first hiked on the Appalachian Trail at the age of 13, on a three-day trek in the Poconos with Camp Ramah. Our packs were weighed down with prayer books, kosher cooking utensils, and *kippot*. At camp, the interconnectivity of man, nature, and God seemed as self-evident as the relationship between rain and puddles. And just as everything at camp was somehow more than it was elsewhere, so too was our hike in the woods somehow more than just a hike. It was the most spiritually fulfilling experience of my life, an ecstatic awakening to the beauty and splendor of the natural world, and I knew some day I would return.

Days after I returned from the trip, it was Tisha B'Av at camp. As a new bar mitzvah, I would be experiencing the full “adult” holiday package for the first time at camp: fasting, attending classes and services all day, hearing the stories of sorrow and suffering told and retold. It may sound petty, but soon after the giddy high of our journey on the trail, Tisha B'Av marked the final stretch toward the end of the summer, and my gloomy outlook on the upcoming school year reflected the sad atmosphere all around me. As the liturgy spoke of communal destruction, my pain was entirely self-contained and self-involved: my own problems and worries, nothing larger. The sickly empty feeling in my stomach signaled the emptiness I knew I would soon feel when I had to leave my closest friends in the world and return home; I spent Tisha B'Av climbing into the dark void of my adolescent anxieties, alone. After the sun went down, the energy of camp was flipped back on like a light switch, and I was able to shake the pallor and join the communal celebration. But from then on, Tisha B'Av would mean most to me as the dividing line that demarcated the unwelcome beginning of the end of my personal summer happiness.

This year, I made it back to the Appalachian Trail, twice as old as I was that first time at camp. I returned—on a four-week solo trek from southern Virginia to the border of my home state of Pennsylvania, all alone in the wilderness—because I wanted to give up the burden of my individuality and feel part of something greater: not Judaism, but nature.

Five days into my trip back on the trail, I began experiencing a deepening sensation of loneliness and dread—similar feelings to those I felt on that first Tisha B'Av. Except this time I was actually alone. It didn't help that the weather had been brutal, the water sources had proved unreliable, and the food I packed wasn't sitting well. A day had not yet passed without some incident of either personal failure or abject calamity—a parching stretch of drought followed by a near-hypothermia-inducing monsoon and a terrifying lightning experience rounded out the first weekend—and my body ached constantly. My blisters were growing blisters, my chafe marks looked

like a topographical map of the Rocky Mountains, and my knees had revealed themselves as traitors, completely abandoning me in my time of greatest need.

As I sat down to my lunch that April day—tuna and crunchy peanut butter sandwich, served smushed and dirty—I entertained myself by calculating exactly how long it would take from the moment I called my parents to when I could be watching TV in my underwear with an IV of cookie dough attached to my veins. I might have made that call and left the journey midway if I hadn't happened to open my notebook; out fell an index card I'd stuck inside, on which I had scribbled down, for reference and emergencies, all the important numbers, names, location, and dates along my journey. Picking up the card, I was surprised to find that next to that day's date—between "brother-in-law's birthday" and "pick up food"—I'd written "Holocaust memorial day."

Unsure of what to do with this information, but struck nonetheless by the need to do something, I cursed myself for not having the forethought to bring a candle. As the grandson of a survivor and the fiancé of the education coordinator at the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust, I felt a personal responsibility to show my proper respect for the day. But with nothing concrete to use for commemoration, I decided to dedicate the rest of my thoughts for the day—which, being alone in the wilderness, were the one thing I had in abundance—to the Holocaust. At least this way, I'd be utilizing some of my physical pain—a bruised hip, a bum knee, an aching stomach—to connect, if only in a small way, to the spiritual pain I was meant to feel on that day.

I hobbled into the campsite that night, and found a friendly father and son on vacation from Cologne. Having had only brief interactions with other hikers up to this point, I was eager to converse. As we talked and shared stories, bonded over our love of nature and swapped recommendations of our favorite trails around the world, I noticed a citronella candle sticking out of the father's cooking kit. Though nervous that I would bring a cloud over our happy campsite by having to explain to them what day of the Hebrew calendar it was, I hesitantly asked if I might be able to borrow the candle for the night.

Maybe he had already guessed I was Jewish and was somehow aware of the significance of the day. Or maybe he just thought I had an overwhelming fear of bugs. Either way, he handed me the candle and told me to use it however long I'd like, then turned back to his meal. I lit the candle and closed my eyes.

Though I tried to keep the images of the Holocaust in my mind as long as I could, I found that my thoughts kept carrying me back to my personal predicament. It struck me that, just as I'd done 13 years earlier, I was allowing the pain and discomforts I felt to dictate my spiritual and emotional being. I'd convinced myself that by wallowing in my personal difficulties, I was somehow connecting with the endless tapestry of Jewish suffering, commemorating their pain through my own self-immolation. But the reality was as self-pitying and immature as my previous attempts.

I decided from that point forward, I would spare as little mental or emotional energy as possible on my own difficulties. Instead, I would offer joy to the community of nature around me, emulating the Ramah energy that I loved as a teenager. The world

seemed to change at once, as suddenly the cries of pain and fear from inside were drowned out by the natural beauty resonating all around me.

I knew then that I would complete my journey. When my eyes opened, I soaked in the beauty all around me, as if seeing it for the first time. Then I smiled, turned back to my new friends, and continued our conversation deep into the night. As I sat at the table with these bubbling, energetic Germans, who radiated back at me the joy I felt and recaptured that day, alone yet not alone in the deep wilderness of southern Virginia, far from home and everyone I loved, but loved all the same, it felt only natural.

Potential Discussion Questions:

- What emotions do we feel when we have to leave a place we love being at?
- What emotions do we feel when we personally experience loss or pain?
- What emotions do we feel when others experience loss or pain?
- What does it mean to dedicate your thoughts or actions to the memory of something?
- How can changing our daily routine help us to reflect on a certain idea or memory?
- How can losing something that is important to us, help us to strive for something greater?

