

## Experiencing Tisha B'Av at the British Museum<sup>1</sup>

### *Some notes for a visit with a focus on Tisha B'Av*

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In thinking of Tisha B'Av, I usually go back and look at history since it is within the pages of history that I find my place in the world. I cannot truly understand the ways of God; who can? What I can do is to make as much sense as possible of what is happening today by putting it within the context of history.

I love history. It informs everything I feel and think about being Jewish. As I tell everyone, history is my way in, it is the way I approach what it means to be Jewish. Although the day of Tisha B'Av is sad, I had a hard time disguising my excitement when I planned a day out with my husband in anticipation of Tisha B'Av to investigate the treasures in The British Museum that relate to a small, but significant story that is first related by the Bible in the second book of Kings, the siege of Lachish (chapter 18 - <http://mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt09b18.htm> - see more details below). The trip to the museum was my research into where in London can you find an expression of Tisha B'Av that is tangible and visual.



*Me outside of the museum*

The first step is to tell you about the siege of Lachish, the engravings from the Assyrian emperor Sennacherib's palace and then how this remote event, not just in terms of history, but in terms of time, relates to the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av. I want to focus most on what we can take away from the story of Lachish 2300 years later.

I have never visited the site of the ancient city of Lachish, but during the many years that we lived in Israel, we often drove past the modern city nearby. In fact, so might many of you if you have ever driven on road 6 from Tel Aviv to Beersheva, you too have driven past the city of Lachish. What you may have noticed amidst the cries of 'are we there yet?' and worries of your car overheating, is the fertile land, the farms growing, rape seed and cotton on either side of the highway.

We have archaeological evidence that the land that our forefathers walked on looked much the same. The first clue in the British Museum to this green and pleasant land, is in the Lachish sculpture which has a background etched into the stone. The background looks like a diamond pattern. The pattern

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is meant to represent vegetation, a large number of trees of different varieties are also strewn about the scene.

This scene seems foreign to the modern viewer. Why would someone commission such an extensive mural, one that encircled a large and important chamber in the Palace of King Sennacherib in Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria. The answer is a simple one; it was a form of communication. In the ancient world, where newspapers did not exist, and principalities were small, each with its own king, the only way any king could maintain power was to showcase his own achievements. These achievements are found inscribed and etched, carved and moulded into the walls of all the palaces, obelisks and tablets of the time. The sculptures told of battles, nations sent into exile and others relocated in their place. People sent into slavery, while enemy walls were breached and the survivors beheaded. How else would people know that they must fear the king?



*A detail of the Lachish relief at the British Museum*

Walking through the Assyrian rooms at The British Museum, you can see so much of the Assyrian history including much aggression. Had we not all been somewhat desensitised by the violence that we see in the media, whether real or fictional, the scenes on the mural would be truly terrifying. If you look very closely, you may even be able to pick out scenes from the Biblical books of the Prophets with the Judeans amongst the slaves and mercenaries. The typical distinguishing sign of a Judean man is the head covering with ear flaps, as well as short beards and hair. A few wear fringed garments.

The room that inspired me most was the Lachish room. Lachish, the second largest city in a rebellious Judah was captured by Sennacherib in the year 701 BCE. The sculpture there records the story of the capture of the city. It moves from left to right and Sennacherib is enthroned in the centre. The city is identified as Lakisu, recognised as the biblical Lachish.

At the time that this amazing archaeological piece was found, Darwinism was gaining widespread importance. The United Kingdom, a country with an established Church and a Christian ethos was the centre of the debate between science and religion. The religious side of the argument were thrilled with the Lachish find.

In the story of Lachish as told in chapter 18 of Kings II, we read of Sennacherib's perpetrations to besiege Jerusalem, and of Hezekiah's anticipatory preparations in making provisions for a long siege. In the next chapter, we hear how the forces of Sennacherib surrounded Lachish. From a parallel account in Chronicles II chapter 32 (<http://mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt25b32.htm>), we see that we were on the losing side in the battle that ensued. My guide said it was the first time that archaeological

evidence upheld a story of the bible. The thought was that if the story of Lachish could be proved by archaeology it must mean that the rest of the Bible is true as well.

On the walls of the Lachish room, we see whole rows of sieges and battles against the walls of the city, we see prisoners being led out of the city, while others are still fighting on the battlements up above. There are people being tortured, others are paying homage.

The battle of Lachish happened over one hundred years before the destruction of the First Temple (586 BCE). That Lachish was a city south of Jerusalem might seem irrelevant to the ninth of Av. In fact the city of Jerusalem, its temple and our religion seem to barely register in the ancient world. Consider that in a Polytheistic society, our belief in one God was considered unevolved and a bit backward. The superpowers of the time, Assyria, Egypt and Babylon had no issue with how we worshiped. Our biggest crime in their eyes was being geographically undesirably located, smack along the military and trading routes from south west (Egypt) to north (Assyria and Babylon).

Ancient times it seems were no easier on the Jews then modern times. Allow me to put forward a theory. As we walked through the British Museum I considered this. Instead of sarcophagus, massive gates, bulls with the heads of humans that dwarfed us, there were coins and jewellery from countless civilizations that have come, ruled, faded and have now disappeared. As our small group were excited to find out, every small artefact that we saw somehow related to our Jewish past.

I'm a Jew who is fortunate enough to be able to trace my lineage as far as one can go. I'm the link to the past that proves who we are, no need to use a stone to do so. But more than that, is it possible that it is not despite of our persecution that we exist, rather that it is because of it? That the persecution, even from before there was a reason for it, is perhaps what strengthened us along the way?

That to me is the message of The British Museum and Tisha B'Av. We are here, and we have been for a very long time. The artefacts are great in proving - if proof is need - that the stories are real, but it is our personal testimony that is the most important part of our survival.

