

Epstein took his life hours before Tisha B’av: Was this a coincidence or was it a veiled message?

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Jeffrey Epstein's cell after his suicide.
Courtesy of U.S. Dept. of Justice/Wikimedia Commons

In recent weeks, legislators have been raising questions about Jeffrey Epstein’s child-sex trafficking empire, wanting to know who were his clients? The media, likewise, has been awash with stories of conspiracies and cover ups following the Justice Department’s statement that Epstein did not keep a client list. However, there is a much more important story that should not be overlooked, especially for those in the Jewish community.

As a Jewish woman who has devoted her life to writing about child sexual abuse in the academic literature and for the popular press, I was deeply troubled by the horror Epstein visited upon innocent under-aged girls, which included rape, sodomy and forced performance of perverse sexual acts. Yet, when reading the headline stories of Epstein’s suicide, I found myself troubled by his ending of his life. He was a Jew, and I couldn’t push that out of my mind no matter how hard I tried.

Nor could I dismiss the eerie coincidence that he took his life about 12 hours before the onset of Tisha B’av, the saddest day on the Jewish calendar when we commemorate the destruction of the Holy Temple by following the rituals of mourning and committing to a 24-hour fast. Perhaps most eerie is that one of the reasons for the destruction of the Holy Temple, particularly the First Temple, was that the Jewish community had descended into sexual depravity, along with murder and idolatry. Epstein, taking his life hours before the start of Tisha B’av makes it especially hard to escape the fact that his existence on earth was ironically defined by the same sexual depravity that had brought about the desecration of the Holy Temple.

I had a brief encounter with Jeffrey Epstein myself. It was sometime in the 90s when I was at my parents’ home in Brooklyn. My father was a prominent rabbi whose synagogue, The Jewish Center of Brighton Beach (where Nicolas Cage would later be filmed in “Lord of War”), was a stone’s throw from where Jeffrey Epstein grew up in the Seagate section of Brooklyn. My father would often be called upon to privately counsel those facing the difficulties of public life.

One day I recall how the phone rang at the Brooklyn home. I took the call. It was Jeffrey Epstein on the line asking to speak to “the rabbi” about a “highly personal matter.” Epstein was noticeably upset. I could see my father was visibly shaken after the call and I knew something was wrong. My father never uttered a word because of confidentiality, which all members of the clergy must uphold.

When I read the headline news reports of Jeffrey Epstein having strangled himself with his bedsheets at the Manhattan jail where he was awaiting trial on child-sex trafficking charges, I realized that this detestable child-sex trafficker who had reached out to my father for rabbinic guidance so many years prior might have actually taken his life to spare the Jewish community from a shanda, or scandal.

Having taken his life just hours before the start of Tisha B’av makes it hard to escape the fact that Epstein’s suicide might have arguably — and in the most twisted way — been a “sacrificial” act, a way of effacing his memory so that he would not bring down the Jewish people. Strangling himself may have been his attempt to smite the enemy from within. And that would have been his last message as a Jew at the center of a shanda. **JN**

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