

TISHA B'AV —*the Ninth of the month of Av*— is one of four Jewish fast days mentioned by Zechariah (8:19) which mourn the catastrophic destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Tisha B'Av is a major fast day with the restrictions matching the fast of Yom Kippur.

According to the *Mishnah* (Ta'anit 4:6) Tisha B'Av has traditionally been associated with the destruction of both Temples—by the Babylonians (586 BCE) and again by the Romans (70 CE). Midrash also associates other catastrophic events in Jewish history with the date, the Ninth of Av. The incident related to the unfavorable report of the spies sent by Moses to Canaan, the people's subsequent complaint to God, and God's condemnation of the generation that came out of Egypt to die in the wilderness, never to enter the land, is said to have occurred on the Ninth of Av (Numbers. Chs. 13–14). The razing of the city of Jerusalem (70 CE) and the failure of the Bar Kockhba revolt (135 CE) have also been accounted to the Ninth of Av.

Over time Tisha B'Av has come a day to commemorate many more calamities in Jewish history. These include: the expulsion of Jews from England (by edict of Edward I, 1290), the expulsion of Jews from Spain (1492), the beginning of World War I (on the eve of Tisha B'Av, 1914) and the European unrest and accompanied rise in anti-semitic sentiment over the following decades which resulted in the holocaust, and the beginning of the mass deportation of Jews from the Warsaw ghetto to Treblinka on the eve of Tisha B'Av, 1942.

TISHA B'AV IS A MAJOR FAST DAY

Observance of Tisha B'Av includes a full (25 hour) fast which, like the fast of Yom Kippur, is extended to encompass, not only food and drink, but to include self-denial in the pleasurable aspects of life (bathing, sexual relations, adornment etc.) The importance of the Tisha B'Av fast is noted in the Talmud, "He who eats or drinks on the Ninth of Av must be considered as guilty as one who has eaten on Yom Kippur" (*Ta'an.* 30b). If Tisha B'Av falls on a Sabbath Day the observance is moved to the following day (Sunday) so that the Sabbath is not compromised by mourning and the full fast of Tisha B'Av is observed.

SYNAGOGUE SERVICES ON TISHA B'AV

In the synagogue, the cover (*parokhet*) of the ark where the Torah scrolls are kept is removed. The Sephardic custom, where the ark normally has no curtain, is to cover the scrolls with a black cloth. During the *ma'ariv* service (at sundown at the beginning of Tisha B'Av) the synagogue is very dimly lit to increase the sense of "darkness" experienced by Israel that is recalled at Tisha B'Av. The synagogue services include: the melodious chanting of the *Book of Lamentations*; the reciting of *kinot*—poetic elegies, *piyyutim* that recall and recount the destruction of the Temple and the sins of the people; the Kaddish (omitting the line which calls on God to "accept our pleas" [*titkabeil*]) and the *haftarah* (Jer. 8:13-9:23). Some Sephardic communities also read the *Book of Job* at Tisha B'Av.

R. Simeon b. Gamaliel says,

"Anyone who eats or drinks on the Ninth of Av is as if he ate and drank on the Day of Atonement."

R. Akiba says,

"Anyone who does work on the Ninth of Av will never see in his work any sign of blessing."

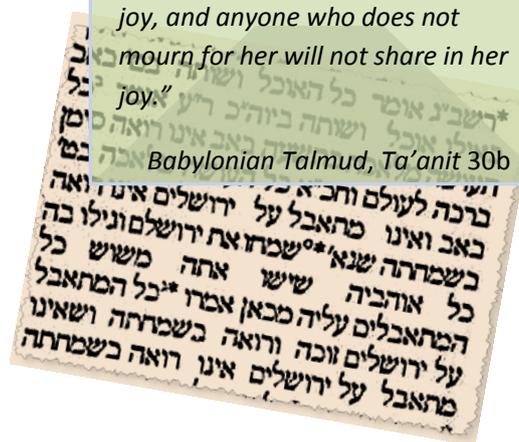
And the Sages say,

"Anyone who does work on the Ninth of Av and does not mourn for Jerusalem will not share in her joy, as it is said, Rejoice ye with Jerusalem, and be glad with her, all ye that love her; rejoice for joy with her, all ye that mourn for her [Isa. 66:10]."

From this originates what the Rabbis have said,

"Everyone who mourns for Jerusalem merits to share in her joy, and anyone who does not mourn for her will not share in her joy."

Babylonian Talmud, Ta'anit 30b



Neither *tefillin* nor *tallit* are worn on the morning of Tisha B'Av and the congregation will sit on low stools. Both practices symbolize a status of mourning. The Talmud teaches that, at Tisha B'Av, Israel should observe mourning rites as for the death of next-of-kin (*Ta'an.* 30a). Even the study of Torah is prohibited since Torah equates with Joy. However, the Study of the *haftarah* from *Jeremiah* and of the Talmudic tractates relating to destruction is permitted.

The *haftarah* for Tisha B'Av (from *Jeremiah*) is eloquent in its expressions of desolation and destruction that will result from sin. Deceit and dishonesty that destroys social harmony and, at a religious and spiritual level, denies the Torah and its precepts, and worship and religious observance.

TISHA B'AV—A FOCUS ON REBIRTH AND MESSIANIC HOPE

Many Jews feel that Tisha B'Av is an important because its thrust enables a focus on rebirth and renewal of religious and ethical life which links the experiences of the past with the universal aspects of messianic hope. This messianic hope is hinted at during the Tisha B'Av services when the penultimate verse of Lamentations is repeated aloud by the congregation, "Take us back, Oh LORD, to Yourself, and let us come back; renew our days of old" (Lam. 5:21).

There is a tradition that the Messiah will be born on Tisha B'Av—in this way the notion that redemption will rise up out of the ashes of desolation and destruction becomes a source of hope for the future. The donning of *tefillin* and *tallit* during the afternoon service, the recitation of the full *Kaddish* without omissions, the restoration of the *parokhet* to the Ark, and the custom of sweeping out the house (in case the Messiah should come) and, in some communities, the practice that women dress up, are indications of the hopeful mood on which Tisha B'Av ends.

TISHA B'AV IN THE LITURGICAL CYCLE

In the liturgical cycle Tisha B'Av is the culmination of *The Three Weeks*, a period of mourning which begins with *The Fast of the Seventeenth of Tammuz*. These three weeks of mourning are marked by days of avoidance of pleasurable activities or joyful celebrations which intensify on the First of Av and during the ensuing days. These "Nine Days" [i.e., the 1st–9th Av] are characterized by abstinence from wine and meat (except for the Sabbath.) Special *haftarot* are read on the three *Shabbatot* (Sabbaths) of The Three Weeks which are associated with themes of destruction and desolation. The Sabbath immediately before Tisha B'Av is called *Shabbat Chazon* (Sabbath of Vision) after the first words of the *haftarah*, The Vision [of Isaiah...] (Isa. 1:1). Following Tisha B'Av there begins a series of seven weeks which have a theme of comfort. The special *haftarot* for this period express this theme of consolation beginning with the Sabbath immediately following Tisha B'Av which is called *Shabbat Nachamu* from the opening words of the *haftarah* from Isaiah (40:1), "Comfort, Oh comfort My people..." Thus the liturgical cycle moves gently into the month of Elul and preparations for *t'shuvah* (repentance) as Rosh HaShanah and the Days of Awe approach.

There have been ongoing discussions regarding the traditional associations of Tisha B'Av with the calamitous events in evolving Jewish history which have been the result of innocent circumstance.

Traditionally the connection between desolation and loss, and the historical losses of Zion and the Temple were interpreted (e.g., Jeremiah) as Divine punishment for Israel's apostasy and moral, ethical and social failures. Does this aspect of Tisha B'Av compromise the innocence of suffering which has been experienced in other Jewish tragedies remembered at Tisha B'Av? Is it possible to say that victims of Pogroms and the Shoah (Holocaust) were responsible for their own suffering?

Many communities recall these recent catastrophic events at Tisha B'Av because they are occasions of unprecedented community sadness and mourning. However, it is felt by some that the mourning of the Shoah at Tisha B'Av tends to distort the theological foundations of Tisha B'Av and that the tragedy of the Shoah is better remembered and mourned on other days (e.g., *Yom HaShoah*, 27 Nisan.)

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