

The Three Weeks - "Bein HaMitzarim" - "Days of Woe" - 5778

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Starting from the fast of the 17th of Tammuz (this year observed on Sunday, July 1), through the end of *Tish'a B'av* (this year observed on Sunday, July 22), stretch three weeks of semi-mourning.

The 17th of Tammuz is a dawn to dusk fast. You may eat up until 4:07 AM and may resume eating at 9:03 PM. If you go to sleep Saturday evening, but have in mind to wake up early to eat, you may do so—up until 4:07 AM. During the fast, eating and drinking are prohibited, but if you are ill or pregnant do not fast!

The fast commemorates the breaching of the walls of Jerusalem in the Roman period (70 CE), which led to the destruction of Jerusalem three weeks later and four other sad events: the smashing of the first tablets of the covenant, after Moses saw the golden calf; the end of the daily sacrifice in the time of the first Temple (because of starvation); the public burning of a Torah scroll by evil Apostemus; and the placing of an idol in the Temple.

We recite special *Selichot* prayers for the 17th of Tammuz in the morning, and there is Torah reading as well. At *mincha*, we add Torah reading as well as the beautiful Haftorah for fast days. During *shacharit*, the special fast-day *beracha* of “*Aneinu*” is only recited in shul during the chazan’s repetition of the *Amida*. At *mincha*, everyone adds it to his or her own *Amida* prayer (even if they are praying alone), but only the chazan says it as a separate *beracha*. These details are explained ad. loc. in any siddur.

On the 17th of Tammuz, a period of semi-mourning begins that will last for the next three weeks. No haircuts are permitted (even on *Rosh Chodesh*) and shaving is permitted only if you need to look neat (for work, etc.). Sefardic custom allows shaving until the nine days before the 9th of Av (some allow it even until the week of *Tish'a B'av*). Many of the students of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik encourage men to shave on Friday in order to look nice for Shabbat. We also avoid major purchases, which would excite us enough to say the “*sbebechyanu*” blessing. If something is on sale, and you would lose out by not buying it, you can buy it (even during the nine days), but don't wear it, or play it, or drive it until after *Tish'a B'av*. Swimming is prohibited from *Rosh Chodesh Av* (Friday, July 13)—again, Sefardic traditions may vary.

Rav Joseph Dov Soloveitchik has explained that this period of national mourning mirrors the laws of personal mourning (such as for a parent). Thus, as a matter of custom, joyous public gatherings (*simchat m'reut*) are prohibited. If you like going to movies because it is a fun social outlet, you should avoid them during the three weeks. If, on the other hand, there is a public commemoration for something, or a serious film, which you feel is important for you to see, you may definitely attend because it is not specifically a *simcha*. Weddings, which represent the greatest moment of joy, are prohibited during the three weeks. Please contact me regarding attending a wedding during this period.

The mourning intensifies as we get closer to the 9th of Av. From *Rosh Chodesh Av* (Friday, July 13), eating meat or chicken and drinking wine or grape juice are all prohibited. Most Sefardic Jews begin these restrictions from the 2nd of Av. Swimming or any pleasurable immersion in water is prohibited—when showering, use lukewarm water instead of hot water. Also, you should not take clothes to the cleaners during the Nine Days, and you should only wash your own clothes if you absolutely have to. You should not wear a freshly cleaned suit or dress—except on Shabbat. Undergarments and the clothing of small children can be washed during the nine days.

Shabbat is the big exception to all this mourning. We are happy, we can eat meat and drink wine if that makes us happy, and we dress in the cleanest and nicest clothes we have. We follow the lead of the Gaon of Vilna who taught that there is never outward mourning on Shabbat.

The Nine Days

The Nine Days begin with *Rosh Chodesh Av*—Friday, July 13. This is the time when we increase our focus on tragic events throughout Jewish history

a) During the Nine Days, one should abstain from eating meat or drinking wine, including grape juice, except for Shabbat when there are no restrictions.

- b) The Havdalah wine following Shabbat of the Nine Days should not be drunk, but rather a child should drink a small amount. If there is no child around, an adult should drink a small amount. This applies to those who use grape juice as well for Havdalah.
- c) One should avoid situations where one might be obligated in saying *shebechiyannu* during the Nine Days, even on Shabbat.
- d) One should not go swimming during the Nine Days for pleasure. If one must swim for health reasons one may continue. As in our society, bathing and showering is done for cleanliness and not pleasure, one is permitted to take a regular shower in a normal fashion (if one can make it lukewarm rather than hot this is advisable), while not extending it at great length for simple pleasure. Children are allowed to swim during the Nine Days.
- e.) Given our hygienic habits and culture, there is no contemporary prohibition during the Nine Days in wearing freshly laundered clothing such as underwear, undershirts, polo shirts, regular pants and shirts (dress or otherwise) which we change daily. One should not wear a newly dry-cleaned suit or blazer or dress pants during the Nine Days except on Shabbat. One should try to have enough of the clothing that one will use before the Nine Days but if one cannot (especially with young children), one is allowed to launder all clothing that one is allowed to wear.

9th of Av

The final meal that one eats prior to the onset of the fast is eaten in seclusion—members of a household can each retreat to separate corners of the home. There is a custom to eat a simple meal of burnt toast and a hardboiled egg. You can eat more filling foods earlier in the day to fortify oneself for the fast. Because 9th of Av this year is delayed until after Shabbat, there is no customary "last meal" before the onset of the fast that should be eaten in seclusion.

The fast begins at sunset – 8:20 PM.

Tish'a B'av has the same prohibitions as Yom Kippur:

- A. No eating or drinking.
- B. No bathing.
- C. No anointing with oil.
- D. No leather shoes.
- E. No marital relations or intimate contact.

Additionally, on *Tish'a B'av*, we limit the Torah that we study. Since learning Torah brings us joy, we only study material that relates to the somber mood of the day. Because *Tish'a B'av* parallels *shiva*—the most intense period of mourning—we also have the custom to sit low to the floor for the first half of the day. Many people also have the custom of sleeping on the floor or lessening their comfort during sleep by using one pillow less than they normally do.

Greetings:

We do not greet people on *Tish'a B'av* as is the practice of mourners. If someone greets us, we can return the greeting.

Morning Preparations:

On the morning of *Tish'a B'av* we may not wash our hands and face in the normal manner. Rather, just as on Yom Kippur, we wash *negel vaser* (morning washing of the hands) only up to our knuckles. We may use the residual water on our fingers to wipe away sediment from our eyes. The *bracha* of *al netilat yada'im* is said.

Talit and Tefilin:

Men do not wear talit or tefilin during *shacharit* on *Tish'a B'av* to show our intense mourning. Tefilin is referred to as *pe'er*—an element of the Jewish people's glory. We do not display our glory during our most intense time of mourning. Rather, we delay wearing tefilin until *mincha* when the intensity of our mourning is less severe. The talit katan is worn without a *bracha*.

Liturgical Additions:

At night, we recite the Book of Eicha (Lamentations) in which the prophet Jeremiah describes the destruction of Jerusalem. As part of the evening and morning services we recite *kinot*—liturgical poems lamenting the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem. Because *Tish'a B'av* is the day on which we commemorate the many tragedies that have

befallen the Jewish people, we also recite *kinot* for other calamities including the Crusades, the expulsion of Jews from Spain, and the Holocaust. During the *mincha amidah*, along with the addition of *aneinu*, which is recited on all fast days, a special addition of *nachem* is included in the blessing of *boneh Yerushalayim*. There are some contemporary scholars who feel that this paragraph—which describes Jerusalem in ruins—is no longer appropriate, given the fact that we have been blessed with the State of Israel with Jerusalem as its capital. Alternative versions of the paragraph have been proposed and are recited by some individuals and congregations.

We do not recite tachanun on *Tish'a B'av*. When Meshiach comes, *Tish'a B'av* will become a day of great celebration, and the prophet Jeremiah refers to *Tish'a B'av* as “*moed*” —a holiday. Additionally, there is some consolation at the heart of *Tish'a B'av* since the day recognizes that God’s wrath and anger at the Jewish people was directed towards the building of the Temple and not upon the Jewish people more directly.