

THE TENTH OF TEVET

Starting the Secular Year Hungry

1.5.15

DON'T RECOMMEND FASTING on New Year's Day. Starvation is not the best cure for a hangover.

But the Jewish calendar isn't known for convenience, and this year, the Fast of the *Tenth of Tevet*—*Tzom Asara B'Tevet* (shorthand, 10 Tevet)—happens to land on January 1.

What a rollicking way to ring in 2015: revisiting the destruction of the First Temple. Hanukkah was the most recent holiday. Tu B'Shvat (the new year of the trees) is next. So, naturally, there should be a fast between celebrations. We Jews purge between parties. And Temple destruction is about as sober as it gets.

It may be difficult for most of us to fathom how important the Temple was. This impressive structure in Jerusalem was not just the symbolic hub of faith; it was where most observance took place. Animals were brought there for sacrifice, its hallowed inner sanctum was soaked with blood from slaughtered offerings. The Temple embodied Judaism. When it was destroyed the first time (586 B.C.E.), the Jews were exiled to Babylon for seventy years. When it was reconstructed and then destroyed a second time (70 C.E.), the Jews had to build a faith without a building, to codify a tradition that would

no longer rely on four walls, high priests, or dead goats. Judaism became more portable; pray where you are. Rabbis became the transmitters of the law and the ambassadors of worship, wherever they happened to be.

So the destruction of each Temple was seminal. Which is why we honor its loss with four separate fasts—Tzom Gedaliah, named for the last Jewish governor, Gedaliah, who was assassinated after the First Temple fell; 10 Tevet, which marks the Babylonian siege of the First Temple; 17 Tammuz, which recalls the day the Romans breached the Second Temple's walls in 70 c.e. and begins three weeks of mourning; and Tisha B'Av, the final and sixth mega-fast, which peaks the mourning and commemorates both Temples' destructions—each of which happened to occur on the same day (the Ninth of Av) about 655 years apart.

It's like a slow-motion action sequence, stretched out over the entire year: the Temple dies and dies again. No other event gets this much holiday-play. (The two other fasts are not Temple-related: Yom Kippur, for atonement; and pre-Purim, for Esther. No Temple hook.)

For this 10 Tevet, my "fasting chum," Jeremy, will join me remotely from across the pond in London (he's visiting his dad), which I tell him is kind of unfair because British daylight is even shorter than ours this time of year, so he'll be suffering for less time.

Even with the fast's brevity in New York, I am agitated; not eating is not my forte. (And I've been cheating a bit on the not-drinking rule. A few sips of water to keep the splitting headache at bay.) My friends are staying with us at our Connecticut lake house, and, after a somewhat raucous New Year's Eve dinner, they're enjoying pancakes and maple syrup in the morning while I'm reading up on King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylonia.

"What's this fast for?" my friend Catherine inquires mouth full.

"Our Temple was destroyed by Babylonians," I say, crankily.

"Ahhhhh." Catherine turns back to her pancake stack, albeit sheepishly: it's hard to eat in front of a fasting friend. But it would be hard for me to make the case that she should be fasting with me. This rite feels like an intellectual exercise more than a visceral return to

expulsion from Jerusalem. And it's no wonder. The Tenth of Tevet gets no star billing. "Except for fully observant Jews," said Rabbi Yo-sef Blau of Yeshiva University, "no one knows anything about it."

That may be an exaggeration, but not by much. Attempts to raise the holiday's profile have met with varying degrees of success, but its original importance is plain:

"And in the ninth year of his reign, on the tenth day of the tenth month, Nebuchadnezzar moved against Jerusalem"—2 Kings 25:1–4.

Blau believes there is a powerful lesson in marking the start of this devastation. We should notice the clouds; they could warn of an approaching tornado. "There's a sense on the Tenth of Tevet that we should always be concerned about what things may lead to, instead of waiting for some tragedy to happen," Blau says. "We should be alert to the early stages of the process. The fact that we fast even for the *beginning* of the destruction, not just for the destruction itself, is probably a reminder that we should be sensitive to dangers even early in the game."

I like that: Heed the signs. Care about the start of something bad, don't wait for it to grow worse. Of course I harken back to Europe in the 1930s. Ten Tevet is perhaps one more reminder that evil seeds propagate faster than we can fathom.

Blau stresses that he's not a catastrophic thinker, nor suggesting we face similar peril today, despite the facts that French Jews are buying homes in Israel (just in case) and anti-Semitism is a growing cancer on college campuses. "I'm not an alarmist saying 'Anti-Semitism is rising and if we don't move to Israel next week, it's all over,'" he says. "It's not because I think Judaism is doomed."

But the disquieting signs are being catalogued by the press—heightened religious bigotry all over the world. Ten Tevet tugs at my conscience: Should I spend this fast day getting involved in something that calls out hatred before it can harm? I scold myself for needing a holiday to goad me. But I'm floundering a bit with 10 Tevet, which doesn't offer a clear to-do list. I get back to my reading.

While my houseguests take midday naps, I learn that this holiday was picked to honor the Holocaust, but the concept fell short. On January 11, 1949, four years after the concentration camps were liberated, the Chief Rabbinate of Israel declared that 10 Tevet would become a day of remembrance for those who had died in the Holocaust without anyone to say the mourner's prayer—Kaddish—for them. This new holiday was dubbed Yom HaKaddish HaKlali, translated as “The General Kaddish Day.”

“There was a feeling of ‘What are we going to do with these *yahrzeits* [the anniversary of someone's death] for all these people we don't know?’” explains Rabbi Ethan Tucker from his office at Mechon Hadar, an independent seminary he cofounded in Manhattan. “I don't know why they picked this fast day as opposed to the others, but I think this particular fast—*Asara B'Tevet* [The Tenth of Tevet]—was a little less burdened with other memory and ritual.”

I'm fascinated by the image of rabbis casting about for underutilized holidays on which to pin a new one. They decided which holidays could afford to shoulder more meaning, and this was one of them. But the newly declared memorial didn't catch on for what Blau describes as two reasons, firstly the invention of Yom HaShoah—“Day of the Holocaust”—created two years later, in 1951, to devote one day to remembrance. That new dedication eclipsed 10 Tevet as the day to honor the six million dead. Yom HaShoah was chosen to coincide with the Warsaw ghetto uprising, which began on the eve of Passover, April 19, 1943. “We didn't want to just mourn those who died; we wanted to talk about the Jews who fought back,” Blau said. “So Yom HaShoah won out.”

Ten Tevet also lost its Holocaust remembrance to Tisha B'Av, which was already well established from biblical times. Tisha B'Av—the last fast of the Jewish year, known as “the saddest day” in the calendar—takes place in late summer, and has evolved to encompass most Jewish tragedies, including the Temples' destruction *and* the Holocaust. So what was 10 Tevet left with? A fast of foreboding, yes, but also a fast for current suffering. And if people *aren't* suffering, we can actually eat.

Excuse me? You mean this fast is optional?

Tucker tells me, 10 Tevet is “actually only obligatory during *a time of persecution*.”

And who decides whether or when we’re in a time of persecution?

“There’s a lot of disagreement,” Tucker acknowledges. “The rabbis ask, ‘Does that mean each person decides? Each community decides? A Jewish court decides?’”

This suggests I could have eaten on New Year’s Day, if I’d found a pro-nosh decider who would declare we’re not currently oppressed.

Tucker sums up the Talmud’s take: if we’re in a time of persecution or suffering (*shemad*), then fasting is obligatory; if it’s a time of peace (*shalom*), fasting is forbidden and these fast days turn into celebrations; it means the Messianic time has arrived.

I think about who is in a time of shemad right now. People living under despots. Trafficked young girls. Hostages. Refugees. The wrongly convicted. And then there is the more personal shemad: a violent marriage, child abuse, illness, addiction, loneliness. But when it comes to Jewish persecution, I would not characterize this time as a time of shemad.

The Talmudic rabbis were divided on whether fasting was required back when there was no Temple and no persecution. More recently, rabbis pegged the arrival of shalom to 1948 with the creation of the State of Israel, arguing that the fasting could then stop. Today, many say that the ongoing strife in Israel can’t be considered shalom, so the fasting should continue.

Tucker is less concerned with parsing whether we’re in a time of peace or persecution. He says *we’re in a time of need*, and therefore this holiday should focus on helping, not about prayer, or whether we can eat.

“If you go back to where these fasts are first talked about, in the book of Zechariah,” Tucker says, “there are two things which are really important: one is that the point of these fast days is not to do some religious act of piety which God needs, but to actually motivate people by turning their attention to be politically and socially active—to make sure the oppressed and the weak in society are not oppressed and are not weak.”

I remember the surprising words of the prophet Isaiah, who condemns an empty fast that is more about self-importance than saving others.

Is this the fast that I desire? A day for people to afflict their bodies . . . lying in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call that a fast? . . . No, this is the fast I desire. . . . To untie the cords of the yoke. To let the oppressed go free . . . to share your bread with the hungry, to take the poor into your home (Isaiah 58:5–7).

Tucker underscores this: turn the spotlight away from yourself. If Yom Kippur is about a fixation on our souls, 10 Tevet should move it to those of others. “These fast days are not about ‘How do I become a better person?’” he says. “They’re about the question, ‘Why are you eating? There is so much work to be done in the world. How could you possibly just take the time to take care of yourself?’”

That might smack of a guilt trip; but his point seems crucial, and I’m challenged by it. Our tradition doesn’t care about whether you’re sated, but about what you *do*. So what am I doing? That question distracts me from my self-deprivation on January 1. I’m focused less on the pancakes I can’t have and more on the good deed I’m compelled to complete before sundown. Since Judaism says that the noblest gestures are made without recognition, I will keep mine to myself (it ultimately involves a donation and signing up to make sandwiches for the homeless).

I spend the bulk of the day reading in the living room with my family, trying not to smell their grilled cheeses at lunchtime, and then finally going to a movie with the houseguests, which is probably sacrilegious, but I need something to pass the time.

Almost forty minutes into *Wild* with Reese Witherspoon—which is slightly relevant, since she has to survive on few rations—I break the fast mid-movie, with a Polly-O String Cheese. I brought it with me, since I knew sundown would happen at 4:39 p.m., while we’re still in the theater. It feels both odd and meaningful to eat it in the

dark, imagining the Jews in my time zone who are also taking their first bite after so many hours. Fasts connect me to strangers.

I can't say I'll be fasting on future 10 Tevets. But I will commit to doing something concrete for someone else, whether or not I'm nursing a New Year's Eve hangover. And Tucker's words will stay in my head:

"What the fast day is really focused on is, how do you get someone to not focus on their own needs but to focus on the needs of the other, the condition of the Jewish people, and to focus on increasing God's presence in the world?" he says. "If you're really focused on that, there's not a lot of time for lunch."