THE THREE WEEKS
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The three weeks that begin on the 17th of Tamuz and end on Tisha B’Av are a period of mourning for the Jewish people. It was during this period that both of our Holy Temples were destroyed.

There are two periods within these three weeks. During the period beginning from 17th of Tamuz until the end of the month of Tamuz (a period of twelve days) the mourning is not as intense. The mourning during the final nine days, beginning with the first of Av until Tisha B’Av, is intensified and many additional practices of mourning are added. (This is according to Ashkenazic practice. According to Sefardic practice, the mourning is only intensified during the actual week in which Tisha B’Av falls.)

During the first twelve days the following practices are observed:
• We do not perform weddings.
• We do not make the blessing shehechyanu. We therefore avoid purchasing or wearing new garments which require this blessing during this period.
• We do not shave or get a haircut.
• We do not listen to instrumental music.

During the final nine days we continue to follow these restrictions in addition to which we add the following practices:
• We do not eat meat or drink wine except on Shabbos.
• We do not do construction when its primary purpose is pleasure (such as building a swimming pool) or aesthetic (such as painting).
• We avoid pleasurable bathing during this period.
• We do not launder clothing during this period nor do we wear fresh clothing (except for Shabbos).
• We do not trim our fingernails during this period.

There are many leniencies that can be relied upon with regard to these restrictions in cases of significant difficulty. In any such case, one should consult a competent rabbi.

Shiva Asar B’Tamuz – The Seventeenth of Tamuz

The Seventeenth of Tamuz is the anniversary of several tragic events in Jewish history.
1. The luchot were broken on this day when Moses came down from Sinai and found the Jews worshiping the golden calf.
2. The Tamid (daily) sacrifice was discontinued on this day. (There is some disagreement in the sources as to when this happened (or, more accurately, which interruption of the Tamid service is commemorated on the 17th of Tammuz). Maimonides writes that this occurred prior to the destruction of the first Temple, when Jerusalem was under siege and they were unable to get the necessary sheep. Others say that it occurred prior to the destruction of the second Temple. And some say that this refers to an interruption of the Tamid service that took place at an earlier part of the second Temple period, under Hasmonean rule.)
3. The Romans penetrated the city walls of Jerusalem on this day prior to the destruction of the second Temple.
4. An idol was erected in the Temple on this day. (There is a difference of opinion in the Talmud (Yer. Taanis 4:5) whether this is talking about the first or second Beit HaMikdash.)
5. The Torah was burnt on this day by Apustemus, one of the Greek oppressors.

In memory of these events we are required to fast on this day to inspire ourselves to repentance.

The fast begins at the break of dawn and ends at nightfall. During this time we neither eat nor drink any food
whatsoever, not even water. Even though we are, strictly speaking, permitted to bathe on this fast day (unlike Tisha B’Av and Yom Kippur) the custom is not to bathe on Shiva Asar B’Tamuz.

Pregnant or nursing women, as well as anyone else for whom fasting may be a health problem should consult with a rabbi whether they are permitted to fast. Children below the age of majority (bar or bat mitzvah) do not fast. (In some communities, it is customary for children to begin fasting a short time before they become bar/bat mitzvah.)

It is important to recognize that the primary idea behind a fast is to meditate on the fact that these sufferings came upon us because the sins of our ancestors, sins which we continue to commit, and that we must repent. Someone who fasts but spends the day in frivolous activity has completely missed the point.

The fast of Shiva Asar B’Tamuz marks the beginning of a three-week period of national mourning for the Jews that is completed on Tisha B’Av, the ninth of Av.

THE INTERRUPTION OF THE TAMID SACRIFICE

One of the tragic events of the 17th of Tamuz was the interruption of the korban tamid (the daily offering of two sheep in the Temple). There is some disagreement in the sources as to when this happened (or, more accurately, which interruption of the Tamid service is commemorated on the 17th of Tammuz). Maimonides writes that this occurred prior to the destruction of the first Temple, when Jerusalem was under siege and they were unable to get the necessary sheep. Others say that it occurred prior to the the destruction of the second Temple. And some say that this refers to an interruption of the Tamid service that took place at an earlier part of the second Temple period, under Hasmonean rule.

In order to understand what happened at that time, we will first need to quickly review some history. At the beginning of the second Temple period, when the Jewish people returned to the land of Israel and rebuilt the Temple, they did so under Persian rule. When the Greeks, led by Alexander the Great, conquered the Persian empire, the Jewish commonwealth also came under Greek rule. After some time, the Greeks began to oppress the Jews and attempted to outlaw the observance of Judaism. The Jewish people, under the leadership of the priestly Hasmonean family, revolted against the Greeks. After their miraculous victory (celebrated on Chanukah), the Hasmonean family became the kings of the Jewish commonwealth in the land of Israel. The Hasmonean family ruled for a little more than a century, until they were displaced by Herod (with the support of the Romans).

Although the early Hasmonean leaders were truly righteous and great men, over time their descendants were not always so good. Towards the end of the Hasmonean period, there was a struggle between two Hasmonean brothers, Hyrcanus and Aristobulus (the sons of the previous king, Alexander Jannaeus), over who should be king which eventually led to war. Hyrcanus allied himself with a non-Jewish king and made a siege on Jerusalem. (It was during this siege that the Tamid service was interrupted.) Eventually the famous Roman general, Pompey, got involved, and when all was done, the Romans had become the ruling power in Jerusalem. Thus, the struggle between Hyrcanus and Aristobulus was what first enabled the Romans to assume control over the land of Israel, which ultimately led to the destruction of the Jewish commonwealth and the second Temple.

It is is significant that the initiating event that ultimately led to the destruction of the Temple and the exile of the Jewish people was a struggle between two jealous brothers, for the Talmud (Yoma 9b) tells us that the second Temple was destroyed because of the sin of sinas chinam - unjustified hatred. As Jews, we believe that God directs the events of history, and nothing simply happens on its own. This event was a sign, both to the people of that time and for all generations, of the inseparable connection between our relationship with God - symbolized
by the Temple - and our relationship with our fellow men.

**Tisha B’Av – The Ninth of Av**

On the Ninth of Av it was decreed on our fathers that they would not enter the Land (of Israel) [Bamidbar 14], the Temple was destroyed the first time and the second time, Beitar (the stronghold of the Bar Kochba rebellion) was captured, and the city (of Jerusalem) was plowed under.

Talmud Taanis 4

As the anniversary of the most tragic events in Jewish history, the ninth of Av is the most important day of mourning in the Jewish year. Other than Yom Kippur, it is the only fast day in the year that lasts a full night and day. All other fasts begin in the morning and end that night. Tisha B’Av begins at sundown and continues till the following nightfall. Tisha B’Av carries several additional prohibitions that are not required by the other fasts.

**PROHIBITIONS:**
The following is a list of the basic prohibitions on Tisha B’Av:

- We are forbidden to eat or drink anything for the entire period. (A person who has difficulty fasting for health reasons should consult a rabbi.)
- It is forbidden to wash oneself, even just one finger. The only exception is the required washing upon rising in the morning and after using the bathroom. Even in these cases we may only wash until the knuckles. If one has soiled his hands he is permitted to clean the soiled area only.
- It is forbidden to wear leather shoes. (There is no prohibition against other leather items.)
- Marital relations are forbidden.
- With several exceptions, one may not study Torah on Tisha B’Av because the study of Torah brings joy. The exceptions are the book of Eichah (Lamentations), the book of Job, the “bad” passages in Yirmiyah (omitting the passages of consolation), and various Talmudic and Midrashic passages which deal with the destruction of the first and second Temples and with the laws of mourning. Even in these cases we are not permitted to study in depth.
- We are not permitted to greet each other on Tisha B’Av, even to say good morning. If you encounter someone who is unaware of this law and he greets you, it is best to inform him of the law (in a polite manner) so that he will not resent your non-response. If this is not possible, then one should respond in a low voice and with a somber manner.
- The night of Tisha B’Av and the following day until chatzos hayom (midday) we do not sit in a normal chair. Instead, we sit on the ground or on a low stool.
- It is best to avoid work on Tisha B’Av until chatzos hayom (midday).
- One should not go for pleasurable walks or engage in any other activity that might distract from the mourning.

**THE DAY BEFORE**

Although the fast itself begins at sunset, certain aspects of the mourning of Tisha B’Av begin earlier. From chatzos hayom (midday) of the eighth of Av and on it is best to refrain from Torah study in the same manner that one must on Tisha B’Av itself. However, many authorities are lenient in this matter. Certainly one should not engage in frivolous activity but should prepare himself for the upcoming fast.

It is customary to eat a meal before Mincha (afternoon prayers). This meal carries no restrictions. It is customary to eat well at this meal in preparation for the fast, but care must be taken not to overeat so that one can eat the Seudah HaMafsekes comfortably.
Tachanun is not recited during Mincha.

After the Mincha prayers it is customary to eat the last meal. This meal is called the Seudah HaMafseket (Separating Meal). It is forbidden to eat more than one cooked food at this meal. (This includes any form of cooking even roasted, fried, or pickled.) Meat, wine and fish are forbidden. Intoxicating drinks should be completely avoided.

The meal is eaten sitting on the ground or a low seat. It is customary to eat a hard-boiled egg (which serves as the cooked food). It is also customary to eat a piece of bread dipped into ashes and to declare, “This is the Tisha B’Av meal.”

During the meal, three men should not sit together so that they will not have to recite the Birchas HaMazon (Grace after Meals) as a group (mezuman). If they do eat together they still do not form a group.

When the eve of Tisha B’Av falls out on Shabbat, none of these restrictions apply.

**TISHA B’AV NIGHT**

All of the prohibitions of Tisha B’Av begin at sundown. It is therefore necessary to remove one’s leather shoes shortly before sundown.

It is customary to remove the paroches (curtain) from the Aron Hakodesh (Holy Ark) in the synagogue before Maariv (evening prayers). It is also customary to reduce the lighting in the synagogue. (In many synagogues, it is customary to pray by candlelight on Tisha B’Av night.)

After Maariv is completed, the book of Eichah (Lamentations) is read aloud to the congregation. After Eichah is completed, the congregation recites Kinos, poetic prayers of lamentation.

It is proper for a person to sleep in a less comfortable manner than he is normally accustomed to. If he usually sleeps with two pillows then he should sleep with only one. Some have the custom to sleep on the ground on the night of Tisha B’Av and to rest their head on a stone.

**TISHA B’AV DAY**

At Shacharis (morning prayers) on Tisha B’Av morning, talis and tefillin are not worn. (They are worn during Mincha instead.) The small tzitzit is still worn but no blessing is recited. Tachanun is not recited. The Torah is taken out and the portion of Deuteronomy 4:25-40 is read and the haftarah from Isaiah 8:13 - 9:23.

After the Torah reading the congregation recites Kinos. This should last until a little before chatzos hayom (midday). After Kinos the prayers are completed. Lamnatzeach and the second verse of Uvo L’Tzion (V’Ani Zot Briti…) are omitted. Some do not say Shir Shel Yom now but wait until Mincha.

It is proper for every person to read the book of Eichah again.

After chatzos hayom (midday) it is permissible to sit on an ordinary seat.

At Mincha we don talis and tefillin. The Torah is taken out and the standard portion and haftarah for fast days is read. During the Amida (silent, standing prayer) the following prayer is inserted in the blessing of V’LeYerushalayim Ircha:

HaShem our God, console the mourners of Zion and the mourners of Jerusalem, and the city that is mournful, destroyed, shamed, and desolate. Mournful without her children, destroyed without her residences, shamed without her honor, and desolate without inhabitant. She sits with her head covered, like a barren woman who...
does not give birth. She has been devoured by the legions, and conquered by the worshipers of foreign powers, and they put your people, Israel, to the sword and willingly murdered the devout [servants] of the High One. Therefore Zion cries bitterly, and Jerusalem raises her voice, “My heart! My heart [aches] on the slain! My stomach! My stomach [aches] on the slain!” For You, God, with fire you burned her, and with fire you will rebuild her, as it is said, “And I will be for her, says God, a wall of fire around her, and I will be a glory within her.” (Zechariah 2:9) Blessed are You, God, Who consoles Zion and builds Jerusalem.

THE NIGHT AFTER TISHA B’AV
Tisha B’Av ends at nightfall. Even though the fast ends that night, it is proper to not eat meat or bathe until chatzos hayom (midday) the following day. This is because the Temple continued to burn into the tenth day.

SHABBOS AND TISHA B’AV
When the ninth of Av falls out on Shabbos then the fast is postponed until Sunday. In such a case, while one should still abstain from meat and bathing the following night, one need not do so the next day.

TISHA B’AV - THE PURPOSE OF FASTING

On the Ninth of Av (Tisha B’Av) it was decreed on our ancestors that they would not enter the Land (of Israel), the Temple was destroyed the first and second time, Beitar [the stronghold of the Bar Kochba rebellion] was captured, and the city (of Jerusalem) was plowed under.

Talmud Taanis 4

As the anniversary of the most tragic events in Jewish history, the ninth of Av is the most important day of mourning in the Jewish year. Like all fast days, the basic purpose of Tisha B’Av is for us to meditate upon the tragedies that have come about through our sins and to commit to rectifying those errors. As Maimonides writes (Hil. Taanios 5:1):

There are days when all Israel fasts because of the troubles that occurred on them, in order to arouse the hearts to begin the ways of repentance and to be a reminder of our evil deeds and the deeds of our ancestors that were like our deeds today which brought them and us these troubles. For by remembering these things we are brought to return to the good, as it says (Leviticus 26:40), “And they shall confess their sin and the sin of their ancestors.” The sources enumerate a number of different sins that were the root causes of the destruction, and which should be the primary focus of repentance on these days. These include:

• Unjustified hatred of our fellow Jews (sinas chinam). We must work to feel love towards our fellow Jews, and also for all human beings.
• Murder. We should work on ourselves to respect our fellow man and see in him the image of God that exists in every person. Even publicly shaming another person is likened to murder.
• Idolatry. We must recognize that only God is the cause of good and bad. No person or thing can hurt you or help you unless it is the will of God. Nothing else has any real power in the world. We should focus on developing our relationship with HaShem and to realize that He cares about each and every one of us and hears our prayers.
• Immorality. Not only must we avoid outright acts of immorality, but we must also train ourselves to avoid circumstances and situations that can lead us in that direction.
• Neglect of Torah study. We must recognize that the Torah is God’s direct revelation to us. As such, it is fundamentally different from all other forms of knowledge. From the Torah we learn what our purpose is in this world and how to achieve that purpose. Our attitude towards the Torah must express this recognition. We must not treat the study of Torah like any other form of study.

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