

Fast Days

The most solemn time in the Jewish year falls in the summertime when we mark the destruction of the two Jerusalem temples and the exile of the Jewish people from their homeland. A period of three weeks is devoted to commemorating these tragic events, beginning with the fast of *Shivah Asar b'Tammuz*, meaning “the seventeenth day of (the Hebrew month) Tammuz,” and culminating with *Tisha b'Av*, or “the ninth day of Av,” the saddest day on the Jewish calendar.

The fast of *Shivah Asar b'Tammuz* was instituted to commemorate the first breach of the Jerusalem walls during the Babylonian siege in 586 B.C.E. According to tradition, it also marks a number of other tragedies that befell the Jewish people after that day, including the halting of the daily temple sacrifices at the time of the Babylonian invasion, the burning of Torah scrolls, and the erection of idols in the temple during the Roman incursion. It is also the day on which Moses broke the first set of tablets.

The fast begins at dawn and ends at nightfall. No food or water may be consumed. *Shivah Asar b'Tammuz* initiates a

three-week period of mourning, during which time we gradually increase the intensity of our feelings of sadness. Throughout the entire three weeks, we do not conduct celebrations such as weddings, nor do we wear new clothes or have our hair cut. During the last nine days, we also desist from eating meat, drinking wine, and bathing for pleasure. (Bathing for hygienic purposes is, of course, permitted.) As usual, on Shabbat all laws of mourning are suspended. The rabbis introduced these and other such customs in order to set us in a proper mournful mood and to prepare us for the day of *Tisha b'Av*.

The fast of *Tisha b'Av* culminates the three-week period of mourning. It is the blackest, most sorrowful day in the Jewish year. Although it, too, marks a number of tragedies that have befallen the Jewish people throughout history, it was instituted mainly to commemorate the fatal coincidence of the destruction of the two Jerusalem temples, one in 586 B.C.E. and the other in 70 C.E. For it was on the ninth day of the month of Av that each was razed. Unlike the fast of Yom Kippur, which is one of repentance, that of *Tisha b'Av* is one of mourning and sadness.

Among the other Jewish tragedies that have taken place on that day are these: God decided not to allow the generation of the Exodus to enter the Promised Land; Bar Kochba's revolt was brought to an end and the city of Betar was captured (135 C.E.); sacred Jewish books were burned in Paris (1242); and, more recently, Jews were deported from the Warsaw ghetto to the Treblinka concentration camps (1942).

The various laws and customs of the fast day, such as the prohibitions against working, shaving, wearing leather shoes, and sitting on regular chairs are similar to those of a bereaved mourner (see chapter 5). They attempt to create within us the same kind of solemn mood experienced by someone mourning the death of a close family member. We are to vicariously feel the depth of grief and sadness that has marked this day throughout history. For we, too, are mourners on *Tisha b'Av*; we, too, “let tears stream down like a torrent day and night”

over the fall of Jerusalem, the “daughter of Zion” (Lam. 2:18).

Because of its importance, the fast of Tisha b’Av, like that of Yom Kippur, begins at sundown and concludes twenty-five hours later at nightfall on the following day. The synagogue is dimly lit and the congregation is plunged into mourning. The curtains covering the ark are removed, symbolizing that the Torah, too, is in mourning. The congregation sits on the floor or on low stools like mourners, and the *Megillat Aichah*, or “Scroll of Lamentations,” bemoaning the sacking of Jerusalem and the fall of the first temple, is chanted. *Kinot*, or “dirges,” lamenting the various episodes of Jewish suffering that occurred on this day are recited. Included in the kinot are poems recalling the destruction of the Jerusalem temples, the martyrdom of Jews throughout the centuries, and the slaughter of entire Jewish communities during the time of the Crusades. Today it is also customary to add special dirges in remembrance of those Jews killed in the Holocaust.

Yet even this, the saddest day of the Jewish year, is injected with a note of hope and optimism. In the afternoon we rise from our lowly mourning stools and recall the tradition that the Messiah will be born on Tisha b’Av and that in messianic times this mournful fast day will be transformed into one of great joy and celebration. We attest that redemption will sprout forth from the very depths of suffering and despair. For the same reason, we refer to the Sabbath following Tisha b’Av as *Shabbat Nachamu*, or “Sabbath of Consolation,” since the prophetic portion beginning with the words “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God” (Isa. 40:1-26) is read in synagogue. For the next seven consecutive Sabbaths until Rosh Hashanah, other prophetic selections of consolation are read as a reminder that despite the adversities and affliction marking Jewish history, God’s covenant with his people, Israel, remains in effect; his promise of redemption will yet be fulfilled: “The LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion upon you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you” (Deut. 30:3). We are inspired by such prophetic read-

ings and encouraged never to despair from salvation, for “there is hope for your future, says the LORD, and your children shall come back to their own country” (Jer. 31:17).

In our own day, we have witnessed the fulfillment of some of these divine promises. Israel has been restored! Jews from all corners of the earth have begun to return to their ancestral homeland, *Eretz Yisrael!* Indeed, God will not desert his people!