

Fasting and things

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The “Three weeks” start with the Fast of Tammuz and they end with Tisha B’Av, the Ninth of Av. No weddings, no parties or public festivities and for some, no music, T.V. or radio. It all depends on how far you want to go, because the main source of Jewish Law, the Shulchan Aruch, is rather minimalist. The author actually only refers to the week in which Tisha B’Av falls as a period of mourning, but adds that from Rosh Chodesh we begin to reduce in matters of joy. It is later that Rabbi Moses Isserles, “the Ramah”, added, “It is our custom not to have weddings from the 17th of Tammuz until the 9th of Av.” And that’s it! Haven’t things changed since then?

According to our Talmudic sources the Fast of Tammuz is the anniversary of Moses breaking the tablets of stone, when the Temple service was suspended by the Babylonians, the destruction of the walls of Jerusalem by the Romans and someone called Apostumus, who experts have great difficulty identifying historically, burned the Torah and put a statue up in the Temple. The “Three Weeks” of mourning culminate on the Ninth of Av (Tisha B’Av) this year on July 27th (the anniversary of the destruction of both Temples and Jerusalem).

We have in our tradition a lot of “periods of mourning” and fast days. Perhaps not as many as the Catholics, and we don’t have Lent, but in medieval times we seemed to want to imitate them. The Monday, Thursday and Monday fasts (BaHaB) after the weeklong major festivals were indeed introduced to counteract levity and the danger of having had too much fun. Somewhere in Medieval Europe we seem to have adopted a great deal of the Christian ascetic and flagellatory tradition. Of course, we suffered so much in medieval Europe this is hardly surprising, any more than the trend to extend services and spend more time in synagogue than at home. Home, after all, will have been a stinking, overcrowded hovel, and the synagogue the only decent building and the safest (relatively). Of course, then people wanted to spend as much time there as possible. It always struck me that fast days only reiterated what Alan Dershowitz called “The Oy Vay” view of Jewish history.

Just as we can look at history and see the calamities, so too we can look at history and see the things worth rejoicing about. After all, according to the prophet Zecharia (8.19), “God says the fasts of the fourth (month) the fifth, the seventh and the tenth will become for the House of Judah, joy and gladness, happy festivals.” These were the rabbinic fasts introduced to commemorate destruction during the First Temple.

Sadly, as we know, the destruction of the Second Temple only served to reinforce these fasts. Two thousand years of exile have given us much to mourn. You might argue that we are still endangered and under assault. Anti-Semitism prospers. Israel’s legitimacy is challenged. Innocents are dying. But you could also argue that we have never been stronger, never been in more control of our destiny, never been allied so closely to the strongest power in the world. After all it is no small thing that after two thousand years we

have our own State to take up the cudgels for and to provide a safe haven for Jews wherever they are. Yes we need to keep on remembering the tragedies.

Actually, there is a strong argument for making Tisha B'Av a Holocaust memorial day. The rabbis always tried to add onto existing days rather than create new ones. This is why they actually "arranged" that the destruction of both temples be commemorated on the same day even though we know that they were many weeks apart. I think the seriousness of Tisha B'Av and its fasting would add a great deal to honor the victims of the Holocaust and give it more importance in our tradition. The fact is that the Charedi world (and some other communities), unofficially, actually does this.

But why don't we also take the positive things that have happened to us into consideration more? Isn't it time to return to the sort of level of mourning that was good enough for the Talmud and Rabbi Yosef Karo and confine our mourning to the week of Tisha B'Av alone? Jerusalem has not yet returned to its ideal state and this is reason enough to still mourn. But shouldn't we recognize that we have gained so much by reducing the excesses of the "Three Weeks"?

I know full well that once a custom has taken root it acquires the effect of a law. No one is going to allow weddings during the three weeks regardless of what the Talmud says. But this does not apply to private extra strictnesses such as bathing for hygiene as opposed to Roman relaxation. Neither, in my view, does it apply to listening to serious music in the privacy of one's home. Usually bans on music are related to "public celebrations" or "parties of friends".

My father was not a great fan of fasting. He told me that in his Yeshiva, Mir in Eastern Europe, the students who found it difficult to fast were told that it was more important to concentrate on study. Of course, this was only on what we call the Minor Fasts. But the idea was that if fasting was simply an endurance test that left you incapable of anything constructive then perhaps there were more valuable things to do with a day. He represented a more relaxed approach to life. And he got this from his teachers.

Today we are terrified of being flexible and laid back. Judaism has become something of an endurance test or an initiation into a select society. Ours is not an ascetic tradition, though there have been attempts to turn into one. There's a famous story about a student asking for his rebbe's approval by telling him that he eats rough grain, rolls in the snow, wears hair shirts, and lashes himself every day. The rebbe looked out of the window and pointed to a horse. "He eats oats, rolls in the snow, wears hair next to his skin and gets lashes. Are you any better than him?"

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