

The Seventeenth of Tammuz

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Five really bad things happened to the Jewish people on the Seventeenth of Tammuz. Which is why we fast then from dawn to dusk. This year the seventeenth is on Shabbat, but we fast on Sunday. Shabbat is reserved for happy days.

What happened? According to the Mishnah, Moses broke the two tablets of stone on Mount Sinai after the people made the Golden Calf. The daily sacrifice called the *tamid* could not be offered up because the Babylonian siege cut off supplies to the Temple in 586 BCE. The walls of Jerusalem were breached. A Roman (or Greek) military leader Apostomus burned a Sefer Torah. An idol was placed in the Temple (either by the Babylonians or by the Roman Emperor Titus).

On every one of these reasons, the rabbis and the sources disagree. Either as to the date or the people involved. For example, the Babylonian Talmud places the second and fifth tragedies in the First Temple period. But the breach of Jerusalem's wall came in the Second Temple period. The First Temple breach, according to Jeremiah, was on the 9th of Tammuz. And the prophets Zechariah, Haggai and Ezekiel all disagree on dates too.

As for who Apostomos was, some say he was a Syrian Greek of the time of the Hasmonean revolt. Or the renegade Jewish priest Alcimus. Josephus denies he was the Roman procurator Cumanus as some claimed, because Cumanus reacted to any Roman desecration by siding with the Jews. Josephus offers another candidate. During the campaigns of the Emperor Hadrian against the Jews (during and after the Bar Cochba uprisings in the second century) a Roman soldier called Stephanos, burnt a Torah on the Temple site before the city was razed. He says the scribes recorded his name incorrectly. The Talmud refers to Chanania ben Teraydon being burnt alive wrapped in a Torah in Jerusalem and Apostomus might have been the man who lit the fire. The Jerusalem Talmud refers to the atrocities including the burning, not Jerusalem but near Lydda.

There are similar disagreements over placing an idol in the Temple. The Jerusalem Talmud puts it in the reign of the idolatrous Judean King Menashe. Others claim it was Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century BCE. Some blame the Emperor Caligula or Hadrian again. They did not like Hadrian very much. And others say setting up of an idol in the sanctuary should refer to the dedication of a temple of Zeus on the consecrated ground of the Temple. To complicate matters even more, the Mishnah referred to above, conflates the burning of the Law with putting an idol in the sanctuary.

Are we really fasting because of these events? It is obvious that history is a very unreliable basis for determining what actually happened and when. Humans record things in very different ways and indeed see events differently. As we know, history is often written by the victors. Besides,

trying to reconstruct something hundreds or thousands of years after the events is not very reliable. History is simply the record of historians that sometimes coincide, but more likely do not. Just think of the different ways in our times of looking at historical events or indeed the present conflicts. No two newspapers seem to see current events in the same way.

So, if history is unreliable, why are we fasting over doubtful facts? Not only but the prophets themselves seem not to have been great fans of fasting when it is for purely historical treasons. Zechariah says (8:19) "Thus says God, the fast of the fourth month, the fast of the fifth, the fast of the seventh and the fast of the Tenth will all be turned into days of festivities for the House of Judah, days of gladness and festivity."

Fasts were very popular once upon a time. Probably because very often people did not have much to eat in general and going without food for a day or two was quite common. Unlike our over indulgent society where people often eat three big meals a day and obesity has become the greatest source of ill health.

There is a whole tractate of the Talmud dedicated to fasting whenever anything bad happens or the rains fail. The Talmud and later codes of laws talk about fasting after a bad dream or for the anniversary of someone's death. And in many communities people fast on Mondays, Thursdays and Mondays after Sucot and Pesach. Officially it's because of excessive indulgence on the festivals from too much feasting. Something our waist bands tell us in no uncertain terms. This custom seems to have been borrowed from Islam, where such Monday and Thursday fasts were and are common in certain quarters.

There is no logic to fasting for religious religions (Yom Kipur is the exception). Fasting in general strikes me as a rather primitive idea, that one should punish one's body or make oneself suffer in the hope that the Almighty is more likely to listen to our pain if we all suffer a bit. Self-denial, mortification of the body plays a greater role in Christianity and Islam than in our religion. We don't go around whipping ourselves or wearing horse hair clothes. Though some Medieval mystics did. Yet we seem hell bent on imitating them.

Tradition is tradition and I do not advocate revolution. And yet. Fasting has now become very fashionable. Three days, two days or one, taking water only. It's the latest fad in high powered techie life.

Fasting is designed to achieve two things. To get us to break our routines in order to think about how we as individuals and as a people, can do better!

We do have a lot to fast about. So many Jews have abandoned Judaism. So many are turning their backs on their tradition and their people. And those within the bounds of Jewish life are at each other's throats over religion and politics. Much of it is our fault for not presenting a better impression. For not being more welcoming. For not educating our children enough in Jewish life and for being unnecessarily strict.

Perhaps we fast not so much to commemorate the events of the past but rather

the disagreements we keep on having amongst ourselves in the present that in effect weaken us! Rolling a series of events together reinforces the continuous stream of failures and divisions. We are quick to delight in our victories and successes. And that's as it should be. But when it comes to our failures perhaps it does require a fast, a little pain to bring us to our senses. And if it helps our waist lines and our well-being, why not?