

Why Another Fast?

On Sunday is the fast of the Seventeenth of Tammuz. It is a minor fast that lasts from dawn to dusk and ushers in a period of mourning that leads up to the 9th of Av when we commemorate the loss of two Temples. These *Three Weeks* of mourning are an Ashkenazi custom. They are not mentioned in the Talmud and most Sephardim only start mourning in the month of Av.

Like two other minor fasts, Gedaliah and the 10th of Tevet, it commemorates disasters we have brought upon ourselves. Unlike other cultures, we do not blame others. No excuses, no scapegoats, no fifth columnists. Only our own mistakes.

According to the Mishnah in *Taanit*, five really bad things happened to the Jewish people on the Seventeenth of Tammuz. Moses broke the two tablets of stone on Mount Sinai after the people made the Golden Calf. The twice-daily *Tamid* offering in the Temple could not be brought because the Babylonian siege cut off supplies and (in 586 BCE) the city of Jerusalem was destroyed, Apostomus burned a Torah scroll and an idol was placed in the Temple.

On every one of these reasons, the rabbis and the sources disagree. Either as to the date or the people involved. About the Tablets of Stone, why was a date not specified in the Bible? Was this the fast referred to by Zechariah as the Fast of the Fourth Month (8.19)? As for the dates of the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem, the Babylonian Talmud (*Taanit* 28b) places them in the First Temple era, while dating the breach of Jerusalem to the Second Temple period. Yet the First Temple breach, according to Jeremiah (39.2,52.6–7), was on the 9th of Tammuz. The Jerusalem Talmud (*Taanit* IV, 5) says that the breach of Jerusalem in the First Temple occurred on 17th Tammuz as well but the text in Jeremiah is explained by saying that the Biblical record was “distorted”, apparently due to the troubled times. The prophets Zechariah, Haggai, and Ezekiel all disagree on dates too.

Then there was Apostomus. Experts argue as to whether his name was Greek or Roman, or even Hebrew. Some say he was a Syrian Greek at 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 Bar Cochba uprisings in the second century, a Roman soldier called Stephanos, burnt a Torah on the Temple site before the city was razed. The Talmud refers to Chanina ben Teradion 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 as happening not in Jerusalem but near Lydda. The Mishnah referred to putting an idol in the sanctuary. But who and when? Was it the Judean pagan king Menashe? Or was it the image of the idol in the Temple of which Daniel speaks or the statue of Zeus Olympus set up by Antiochus

If there is no agreement, are we fasting because of these events? Or is there

some other reason? 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. Just think of the different ways in our times there are of looking at historical events and present conflicts. No two newspapers seem to see current events in the same way.

If history is unreliable, why are we fasting over doubtful facts? The prophets themselves seem not to have been great fans of fasting when it is for purely historical reasons. 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." He must have thought of them as being of limited significance. He certainly did not say this of *Yom Kipur*.

The Talmud attributed the catastrophe of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple to internal Jewish failures, both moral and political. Could the seventeenth of Tammuz along with the Tenth of Tevet and the Fast of Gedaliah have been instituted to teach us that the writing was on the wall, we just refused to see it? This is such a repeated occurrence throughout Jewish History. Perhaps that the message needed to be constantly reinforced? We were warned! This message will have been relevant throughout the years of our exile and just as relevant nowadays in internal politics of Diaspora Jewry and of course Israel?

There is no logic to fasting for historical reasons. *Yom Kipur* is the only fast for purely spiritual ones. On the contrary, it strikes me as a rather primitive idea that one should make oneself suffer in the hope that the Almighty is more likely to listen to our pain. 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 horsehair clothes. Though some Medieval mystics did. Yet we seem hell-bent on imitating them.

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 *Sukot* and *Pesach*. Officially it's because of excessive indulgence during the festivals with too much feasting. Something our waistbands 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.

Fasts were very popular once upon a time. Probably because very often most people did not have much to eat and going without food for a day or two was quite common. But in our over-indulgent society, people often eat three big meals a day and obesity has become the greatest source of ill health. 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. And on a spiritual level, fasting is designed to get us to break our routines to think about how we as individuals and as a people, can do better! It is not just a physical

thing like dieting.

We do have a lot to reflect on and even fast about. So many Jews 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.

I will fast with greater commitment than ever before because I am much more troubled this year. Wherever I look, I see a rise in anti-Semitism, violence against Jews, bias and hatred suffusing academia, the media, and the internet, and the inexorable drift of the Democrats into an anti-Israel party, all of which I could handle if I thought it would bring peace, but it won't. It will only prolong the conflict.

Rolling a series of events together on one occasion reinforces the continuous stream of failures and divisions throughout history. 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 also helps our waistlines and our physical well-being, so much the better.