

Summertime: Meaningful Jewish Mourning

Summer means different things to different people. Kids enjoy their vacation from school; parents don't. Some of us take vacations. Others enjoy the cool summer evenings at home with family and friends. But, no matter how we spend the summer, the Jewish calendar reminds us that it has historically been a difficult period in for the Jewish people.

Historically, we have suffered terrible losses during the month of Av. On the ninth of Av, after seeing the people worship the Golden Calf, Moshe destroyed the לוחות הברית – the Tablets of the Covenant. On this day, invading armies destroyed both בתי מקדש – Holy Temples. So, we commemorate this important time period by observing a period of mourning in number of ways.

The Three Weeks (17th of Tammuz – Rosh Chodesh Av, July 6th – 29th)

In their attack on Jerusalem, the Romans breached the walls of the city on the 17th of Tammuz. As that breach marked the beginning of the end of the Jewish kingdom, the rabbis instituted a public fast on that day. While the true period of mourning begins in the month of Av, Jews have accepted the custom to begin mourning on the 17th of Tammuz. We refrain from making weddings, parties and other joyous celebrations. In addition, we refrain from taking haircuts for the entire three week period.

<i>17th of Tammuz Tuesday, July 6th</i>	
Fast begins	4:51am
Shacharis	6:45am
Women's Parshah	1:30pm
Minchah	8:45pm
Fast Ends	9:57pm

The Nine Days (1st of Av – 9th of Av, July 19th – July 27th)

The nine days mark the classical mourning period for the destruction of the Temples. In the words of the גמרא, “when Av enters, we reduce our joy.” This entails refraining from purchasing significant new items, such as expensive clothes or anything that would require making a שהזיינו, conducting home improvement projects, such as painting or remodeling, and even engaging in avoidable litigation. It's just not a good time to start new projects.

When we refrain from common practices of comfort, we demonstrate our mourning for the destruction of Jerusalem in yet another way. Therefore, we don't wear freshly laundered or pressed clothing during the Nine Days (so wear your clean clothes at least one time beforehand – underwear not included). We don't bathe for pleasure, so we don't go swimming in a pool or lake. When we bathe and shower, to ensure that we're only showering to get clean, we only take quick, lukewarm or cold showers. It's not about being dirty; it's about refraining from activities that make us feel good. Therefore, we also don't eat meat or drink wine on weekdays (we don't mourn on Shabbos) during the Nine Days.

Erev Tisha B'av (July 26th)

In order to prepare for the long fast, it's a good idea to drink plenty of water throughout the day. We call the final meal before Tisha B'av the סעודה המפסקת – concluding meal. Because this meal takes on many elements of mourning, before this final meal, we eat a full, normal meal to prepare ourselves for the fast, finishing a short time before the onset of Tisha B'av. (It's a good idea to eat a meal rich in starch.) Following that meal, we wash again, and eat bread and hard-boiled eggs, both dipped in ashes, while sitting on the ground. We eat this meal as individuals, and not together as a family, so we don't bentch together.

Tisha B'av (July 26th – Tuesday, July 27th)

Chazal designated Tisha B'av as the Jewish day to remember all the calamities that have befallen the Jewish people throughout history. We mark the day by reading Megillat Eichah, Kinos (Lamentations), and focusing on tragedies that have devastated us for so many years, from the destruction of the Temples, to the Crusades and massacres of the Middle Ages, up to and including the Holocaust of European Jewry and Arab terrorism in the Middle East. On Tisha B'av we refrain a number of different behaviors:

1. Eating and drinking, from sunset on Erev Tisha B'av until nightfall of Tisha B'av
2. Washing and bathing, except for hand-washing in the morning and cleaning soiled hands
3. Wearing leather shoes (canvas sneakers are fine)
4. Marital relations
5. Study of Torah (other than the calamitous and sad aspects that we learn on Tisha B'av)
6. Anointing oneself (Actually, I've never seen anyone pour oil over himself, but they used to do it during the times of the Talmud, and apparently, it feels good. So don't do it. Please DO use deodorant.)
7. If you can take the day off and focus on the sad nature of the day, do it. It's a very good thing to do, and will better sensitize you to the meaning of the day.

We also sit on the ground (or on low chairs) for the first half of the day, until *chatzos* – midday.

One of the most difficult aspects of Tisha B'av is the challenge of making it meaningful. Somehow, after shul in the morning we find ourselves engaged in our normal daily activities. How do we make the day meaningful in the mournful spirit that we know Tisha B'av is supposed to be?

It's not a day for shopping or pleasure trips. If you can, read a book or watch a film about the Holocaust. Write letters to victims of terrorism in Israel. Make the day meaningful in a constructive manner. Have your children create a project about the Beis Hamikdash. Don't give them candy or ice cream; tell them that it's a sad day, a fast day, and that they should feel that sadness as well. Have them draw pictures of Moshe breaking the לוחות הברית – the two tablets. Teach your children through your demeanor and the day's activities that this is not a normal day – it's a day of sadness and lamentations to allow us to feel the pain of our fellow Jews.

The Gemara tells us that כל המתאבל על ירושלים זוכה ורואה בשמחתה – anyone who mourns for the destruction of Jerusalem will merit seeing it in its glory. Let's make the Three Weeks, the Nine Days, and Tisha B'av meaningful, in the prayer that God transforms our sincere sadness into joy, gladness and celebration.

<i>Tisha B'av</i> <i>Monday July 26th – Tuesday,</i> <i>July 27th</i>	
Fast begins	8:59pm
Ma'ariv and Eichah	9:10pm
Shacharis and Kinos	8:00am
Chatzos (midday)	1:39pm
Visit to HMC	2:00pm
Minchah I	2:30pm
Schindler's List	5:00pm
Minchah II	8:30pm
Fast Ends	9:39pm