

Tisha B'Av / Ninth of Av

By Adam Scheer

The fast day of Tisha B'Av (Ninth of Av) commemorates the *churban* (destruction) of *bayit rishon* and *bayit sheini* (the first and second Temples that stood in Jerusalem and were destroyed in the year 586 BCE and 70 CE respectively). The name for this fast day is in fact the Hebrew date for which the fast is called, a date that corresponds to the exact day on the Hebrew calendar, 656 years apart, on which both Temples were destroyed. The specific dates on the secular calendar for this holiday each year can be found by consulting a Jewish calendar; it typically occurs in late July or early August; for the exact date this year consult www.hebcal.com. In years that Shabbat corresponds to Tisha B'Av, the fast is commemorated on the day following Shabbat.

Tisha B'Av stands alone for the profound sadness that it marks for Jews around the world. In addition to commemorating the destruction of the two holy Temples in Jerusalem, Tisha B'Av has come to be associated with other calamities that have befallen the Jewish people as well, including the twelve spies' return from their mission, the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70, and the end of the revolt led by Bar Kochbah against the Romans. In post Talmudic times, at least three other tragic events in Jewish history are associated with Tisha B'Av including the Jews' expulsion from England in 1290, the Jews' expulsion from Spain in 1492 and the mass deportation of Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto in 1942.

The Tisha B'Av evening service generally begins with the reading of Psalm 137, "By the rivers of Babylon there we sat, yea, we also wept..." And while the evening service that follows is generally the same as that followed during the course of the year, the reader endeavors to chant in prayers in a sorrowful tone.

Two significant unique attributes of the Tisha B'Av evening service are the practice of reading a *kinah* (a dirge or lamentation) and the practice of reading Megillat Eichah (the Book of Lamentations). A *kinah* is uniquely expressive of the mood of the evening, usually with a unique melody. The reading from Eichah, with its graphic descriptions of the miseries that have fallen on the city and people of Jerusalem, reinforces the melancholy character of our experience on Tisha B'Av. The special trope system developed exclusively for the chanting of Eichah is most melancholy and adds to our collective sense of mourning. In addition, this special "sad" trope system is used for selected verses in the Haftarah for Shabbat Hazon, which precedes Tisha B'Av.

We commemorate Tisha B'Av with a fast that has some practices in common with those that we know from Yom Kippur. Like Yom Kippur, Tisha B'Av is a 25-hour fast and, barring personal health issues, we are generally prohibited from:

- eating and drinking
- washing
- applying creams
- wearing shoes with leather soles
- engaging in sexual relations

One critical difference between Tisha B'Av and Yom Kippur, however, is that the Rabbis did not prescribe any restrictions from working, or other activities that we engage in on an ordinary day, on

Tisha B'Av. That said, in keeping with the solemnity of the day, on Tisha B'Av Jews are encouraged to refrain from celebratory activities (such as weddings and B'nai Mitzvah celebrations), listening to music, attending movies and even Torah study, save the texts associated with the holiday (such as Eichah or the Book of Job) and those associated with mourning practices. At The Jewish Center, we try to avoid greeting each other on Tisha B'Av and when leaving the synagogue, we leave in silence to mark the seriousness of the day.

Jews practice a number of other interesting customs around the world:

- Many synagogues have a custom of encouraging congregants to sit on the floor during Tisha B'Av in the same way that mourners sit close to the ground. At The Jewish Center, we follow this custom when reading Eichah.
- Some Jews have a custom of upsetting the normal order of things – where they sit in synagogue and even where they place the accent on certain words in the liturgy - to make the point that everything is changed for the worse on Tisha B'Av.
- In Spanish & Portuguese congregations, which attribute added significance to Tisha B'Av given its association with the Inquisition, before the closing Kinah is read an announcement in Hebrew is made of the number of years which separate us from the destruction of the Temple.

Tisha B'Av has not been immune from controversy over the course of history and some today question its continued place in Jewish tradition. It is assumed that no period of mourning was observed for the destruction of the first Temple, once construction on the Second Temple was initiated. In later years, particularly as the shock of exile and the Second Temple's destruction wore off somewhat, Rabbinic leaders, including Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Nasi, suggested limiting or even eliminating the observance of Tisha B'Av.

In recent times, a number of modern thinkers have challenged the continued relevance of Tisha B'Av, particularly in light of establishment of the modern State of Israel and the belief of some that modern Jews should not pray for the restoration of the sacrificial rituals associated with the ancient Temple. While acknowledging the complexity which modern experience brings to Tisha B'Av observance in the present era, the Law Committee of the Conservative movement and other modern Jewish authorities continue to reinforce the importance of Tisha B'Av given its unique role in offering Jews an opportunity to reflect more broadly on many of the profound tragedies associated with our shared experience.