

***Tu B'Av* – A Lot more than Jewish Valentine's Day**

An E-Shiur from the Conservative Yeshiva, Jerusalem

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Tisha B'Av, the 9th of the month of Av, is the saddest day in the Jewish calendar. The Mishna in *Ta'anit* details five calamities that befell our ancestors on that date (**Source #1**), most prominent, of course, the destruction (*hurban*) of the two Temples, the First in 586 BCE by the Babylonians, and the Second in 70 CE by the Romans. History and tradition have added other tragedies, including the expulsion of the Jews from England, France and Spain in the Middle Ages, the beginning of World War I, and several key, and tragic, dates during World War II. No wonder that *Tisha B'Av* has been called the "black fast" of the Jewish calendar; *on a day so sad who can eat?*

So it is interesting that an "anonymous" date less than a week later, *Tu B'Av* (the 15th of Av), was designated as early as the Mishna as one of "the two most joyous days" of the Jewish year, together with Yom Kippur, a pairing in and of itself most intriguing (**Source #2**). The Gemara explains the joy of Yom Kippur quite easily; it was the date on which God forgave the people for the sin of the Golden Calf (**Source #3**). But what is *Tu B'Av*, which the Mishna even mentions *first*?

Though not based in the Bible *Tu B'Av* is mentioned in one of the earliest Tannaitic sources, *Megillat Ta'anit*. The "Megilla of Fasting" lists some 35 happy events of various kinds, from the days of Ezra and Nehemiah through the Second Temple period, on which fasting was prohibited, and, if there was particular joy, also eulogies at funerals. *Tu B'Av* is listed there – "the time of wood for the Priests," an obscure reference to an ancient custom of bringing wood to the Temple (**Source #4**). After the *Hurban* in 70 *Megillat Ta'anit*, with its clear focus on and affinity for the Temple, was less compelling. The rabbis in the Talmud debated its halakhic applicability into the Amoraic era (**Source #5**).

While *Tu B'Av* did not survive the transition after the *Hurban* and Bar Kochba Revolt (135 CE) the way Hanukah and Purim did, it also did not lapse completely like the other dates in *Megillat Ta'anit*. The Talmud presents a list of six reasons to explain the "joy" that makes *Tu B'Av* so special (**Source #6**). These are given by Amoraim of the 4th and 5th centuries (CE). The number and variety suggest that there was no clearly accepted explanation for the survival of *Tu B'Av*. * It appears that the Rabbis were trying to

**In a sense there is a parallel to the many reasons given in Rabbinic literature for the destruction of Jerusalem, especially the series by eight rabbis in Talmud Shabbat 119b, each reflecting some fault or problem within the community, as likely at the time and place of the speaker as in Jerusalem in the first century.*

make *Tu B'Av* a closure, a healing for the traumas not only of *Tisha B'Av*, still fresh in the Jewish consciousness, but also for those of 17th *Tammuz*, three weeks before, to which *Tisha B'Av* is connected both textually (**Source 1**, above) and contextually (historically), as shown here.

17 th of Tammuz	9 th of Av	15 th of Av (<i>Tu B'Av</i>)
1 Tablets broken	1 Decree 40 years in Desert	1 Tribes permitted to marry each other
2 Daily offerings ceased	2 1 st Churban (586 BCE)	2 Tribe of Benjamin allowed to marry
3 City wall breached	3 2 nd Churban (70 CE)	3 Deaths in the Desert ceased
4 Scroll of law burned	4 Betar Destroyed (135 CE)	4 Barriers to entering Jerusalem removed
5 Idol set up in Sanctuary	5 Jerusalem razed (135 CE)	5 Permission to bury the dead of Betar
		6 The last day wood chopped for Temple

The first two events deal with the removal of restrictions on marriage amongst the Children of Israel in the Bible. The first was a consequence of the successful protest of Zelophehad's daughters in Numbers 27, where God changed the laws of inheritance to allow daughters to receive the family land if there were no male heirs. In Numbers 36 the leaders of the tribe of Menashe protested that the "Zelophehad amendment" could result in their tribe losing land to others, and so the law was amended again, requiring women inheriting the family land to marry only within their tribe. On *Tu B'Av*, at a time and place we have no record of, this restriction was lifted. Tribal barriers have been "removed" as hindrances to marriage; the Sages have pushed the "tipping point" towards "Jewish peoplehood."**

The men of the tribe of Benjamin had been forbidden to marry women from the other tribes (Judges 21) following the outrageous rape and murder of the *Pilegish B'Givah*, the concubine who stopped with her "husband" for the night in the town Gibeah in Benjamin (Judges 19). Using similar rabbinic interpretation of verses as with Zelophehad's daughters, the Sages decreed that that ban was no longer in force, as of *Tu B'Av*, again a measure aimed at removing social barriers and increasing unity.

The third event was the termination of death in the wilderness, in the fortieth year, of those still alive from the generation which had left Egypt (**Source #7**). This signaled God's forgiveness for the incident of the spies (Numbers 14), cancelling the punishment that had been decreed on *Tisha B'Av*.*** The Gemara takes this even further: "So long as the generation of the wilderness continued to die (annually for 40 years), there was no divine communication to Moses" (Ta'anit 30b). *Tu B'Av* not only healed the relationship between God and Bnei Yisrael, but also that between God and Moses.

**This is not unlike the transition of the United States from a confederation of relatively independent colonies in 1776 to a federal, more centrally governed, union in 1789.

*** Marriage and forgiveness are connected to *Yom Kippur* as well (Sources #2 and #3). Some say the *Mincha Torah* reading on *Yom Kippur* was picked to remind the young men and women looking for a *shidduch* that very afternoon with whom they may and may not marry. And of course, the second set of Tablets given Moshe on *Yom Kippur* replaced the first set which was broken on 17th *Tammuz* (Source #3).



The fourth event was the removal of barriers erected by Jeroboam, the first king of the ten tribes of Israel (which had seceded from what had been Solomon's kingdom), to prevent people going to worship at the Temple in Jerusalem, which was within the territory of Judah (the southern kingdom of two tribes). The Rabbis assign this action by Hoshea ben Elah, the last king of Israel before it was conquered by Assyria - promoting unity and providing access to the Temple - to *Tu B'Av*, apparently with no real source or tradition we know of.

The fifth event ascribed to *Tu B'Av* is the permission from the Roman governor allowing the Jews to bury those who had died at Betar during the Bar Kochba revolt (132 -135 CE), cancelling Hadrian's decree forbidding their internment. This is connected directly to two of the five tragedies the Mishna lists for *Tisha B'Av*, the capture of Betar and the destruction of Jerusalem. Rabbinic legend ascribes the last *bracha* of the *Birkat HaMazon*, "He is good and does good," to this incident (**Source #8A**), an indication of how terrible were the results of that failed revolt.

Last but not least, *Tu B'Av* is the last day trees were chopped down to provide wood for the Temple. The Gemara (**Source #8B**) says that the sun is no longer so strong (the days are getting "shorter"), and does not adequately dry newly-cut wood. Wood that might still have worms inside was not suitable for burning on the Altar (Mishna Midot 2:5). The Talmud concludes, felicitously, that shorter working days provide more time for the study Torah, though it also reminds us of Hillel's warning (Avot 1:13) that one who does not study Torah shortens his own life.

Thus, the list of six events given for *Tu B'Av* break into three pairs – two celebrating the removal of barriers dividing the Jewish community, two providing some degree of *nechama*, comfort, for two terrible death-filled events in our history, and two providing nostalgic references to the time when the Temple stood in Jerusalem and Jews from all over would come to worship there. It is probably no coincidence that the list ends with the wood of the Temple, a reminder of that obscure reference in *Megillat Ta'anit*, "the time of wood for the Priests," where, as for *Tu B'Av*, it all began.

