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## Today's Torah

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**Fast of 17th Tammuz  
July 9, 2020 - 17 Tammuz 5780**



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### To Fast or Not to Fast? That Is the Question. The Seventeenth of Tammuz

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The fast of the Seventeenth of Tammuz, this year falling on July 9, 2020, is one of four fasts connected to the destruction of the First Temple in 586 B.C.E. and/or the Second Temple in 70 C.E. The first is the tenth of Tevet, usually occurring in January, when the Babylonian general Nebuchadnezzar began the siege of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E (2 Kings 25:1-25). Eighteen months later, on the seventeenth of Tammuz, he broke through the walls of Jerusalem, culminating in the destruction of the First Temple on the Ninth of Av, three weeks later. The fast of Gedaliah, on the third of Tishre (the day after Rosh Hashanah) commemorates the assassination of Gedaliah, the governor of Judea whom Nebuchadnezzar appointed and under whom Jews were beginning to reestablish a Jewish presence there after the destruction of the First Temple (2 Kings 25-26; Jeremiah 41), followed by the remaining Jews there fleeing to Egypt, thus marking the end of Jews living in Israel until allowed to return there by Cyrus, emperor of Persia, in 539 B.C.E.

Of these four fasts, only Tisha B'Av (the ninth of Av) is a full fast, lasting from sunset to sunset, while the other three are "minor fasts," lasting from sunrise to shortly after sunset. The seventeenth of Tammuz also begins the period of three weeks to Tisha B'Av, a period of semi-mourning during which weddings and other festive events are generally not scheduled and some refrain from getting haircuts or shaving during that period.

According to the Mishnah (Ta'anit 4:5), five calamities befell the Jewish people on the seventeenth of Tammuz. The Babylonian Talmud (Ta'anit 28b) says that two of them happened during the First Temple period: the daily morning and evening offerings in the name of the community (the *tamid shel shahar* and the *tamid shel bein ha-aryanim*) ceased to be brought on the 17th of Tammuz in 586 B.C.E., and the Babylonians erected an idol in the Temple on that day.

The 17th of Tammuz is exactly forty days after Shavu'ot. This led the Talmud to assert that another much earlier calamity that occurred on the 17th of Tammuz was that Moses broke the two tablets of stone on this day. The Jewish tradition (although not the Torah itself) maintains that God proclaimed the Decalogue (the Ten Commandments) on Shavu'ot, after which Moses spent forty days on Mount Sinai. When he descended and found that the Israelites had built the Golden Calf, he broke the tablets.

The fourth calamity said to happen on this day is that during the Roman siege of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., the city walls were breached, leading to the destruction of the Second Temple on the 9th of Av. Finally, fifth, prior to Bar Kokhba's revolt in 132-135 C.E., Roman military leader Apostomus burned a Torah scroll, prompting the revolt that ended in disaster.

What should we make of all this? One answer is simply to accept it and fast on all of these days. There is certainly no moral objection to doing so, and because one may work on these minor fast days and on Tisha B'Av, there is no economic burden either (except for restaurants, of course).

One of my Talmud teachers, Professor Saul Lieberman, z"l, arguably the greatest Talmud scholar in the middle of the twentieth century because he thoroughly knew not only Talmud and all of its Jewish commentaries but also Greek and Roman culture and law, told us that in Slabodka, Lithuania, where he was trained in what was then the most prominent of European rabbinic seminaries, they did not fast on the minor fasts. This already began to raise questions in my own mind as to whether I should.

My own practice – and I stress that it is only my own – is based on my feeling that these minor fasts obscure the importance of the establishment of the third Jewish commonwealth in Israel in 1948. That was clearly not the reason why the students in the Slabodka yeshivah did not observe these fasts, for the State of Israel had not been established before World War II, when the yeshivah closed, but it is mine. That is, my Zionism argues that observing these fasts places too much emphasis on the loss of the first and second Jewish commonwealths in the past and recognizes too little the importance of the establishment of the new Jewish commonwealth in Israel. So in addition to Yom Kippur, which is mandated in the Torah and has nothing to do with these fasts motivated by historical events, I observe Tisha B'Av in memory of the past tragedies that our people have suffered in Israel and Ta'anit Esther, the minor fast day before Purim, to remember the tragedies our people have suffered in the Diaspora. I am not the first-born child of my mother, but if I were, I would also observe the fast for first-born males (and now some females) to mark the death of the first born in the story of the Exodus from Egypt.

But I leave it to you: To fast or not to fast on the 17th of Tammuz?

*Committee on Jewish Law and Standards. Author of over 200 articles and 14 books on Jewish thought, law, and ethics, and editor of 14 more books on those topics, his most recent books are For the Love of God and People: A Philosophy of Jewish Law and Modern Conservative Judaism: Evolving Thought and Practice.*

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