



Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

TODAY'S TORAH

Fast of 17th of Tammuz
June 27, 2021 | Tammuz 17, 5781

The Three Weeks

By: Rabbi Pinchas Giller

On the seventeenth of Tammuz the tablets were broken by Moses when he saw that the Jews had made the golden calf; the daily offering was nullified by the Roman authorities and was never sacrificed again; the city walls of Jerusalem were breached; the general Apostemos (probably Antiochus Epiphanes) publicly burned a Torah scroll; and Manasseh placed an idol in the Sanctuary. (Ta'anit 26a-b).

The incidents that define the seventeenth of Tammuz are not described chronologically. While the breaking of the tablets was certainly the first in time, the second two events occurred during the siege of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. and the last two date to the Hasmonean wars, some two hundred years prior. The observance of a minor fast begins a period, commonly called “the three weeks,” until the ninth of Av, in which Jews traditionally take on ascending degrees of personal discomfort until the twenty-five hour fast that ends the period.

So it is that, in an act of will, the Jews deny themselves a lazy, untroubled summer, itself the birthright and social rhythm of the West. The Jewish summer has qualities of foreboding and anxiety built into it. We conclude the counting of the Omer and barely five weeks later, we have new reason to worry. This fast day is not like the prophylactic fast days of the rest of the year, invoked to shield ourselves from the unwanted attention and random violence of the Christian gaze. To the degree that one takes on the traditions, the discomforts of the three weeks, less bathing, partying, socializing and so forth, cast a pall over the very period when one might have wanted to forget that it is, after all, sometimes hard to be a Jew.

It was a deliberate act to place the commemoration of the Holocaust right after Passover. It was similarly deliberate to place Yom ha-Zikaron, the Israeli Memorial Day, immediately before Yom ha-Atzmaut, Independence Day. While Tisha Be-Av is remembered as the day of Jewish catastrophe, the creation of a morbid and stressful sequence of weeks leading up to it was a deliberate juxtaposition that colors the summer months for Jews, in perpetuity. People feel strongly about something and then their descendants are stuck with it.

Some pious Jews refrain from bathing during this time, and in the days leading up to Tisha be-Av, some others refrain from eating meat or alcohol. In the Orthodox summer camps, there is no “free swim”, only instructional (for getting one’s Red Cross card is, after all, the pursuit of wisdom, a kind of study). And participation is REQUIRED, for reasons of hygiene. In intense Jewish neighborhoods, people are often hot and uncomfortable and quarrels are apt to erupt. The streets of Jerusalem seethe. How many times have I had to mediate a quarrel that broke out during the three weeks, only to have the whole affair recede after Tisha be-Av? I can’t count.

For all that the Jews love their summer camps and bungalow colonies, there is no escape from history. There is no Endless Summer, no untroubled California romance when time stands still and the cares of the world melt away. Even the summer months contain the seeds of penitence and renunciation, foreboding, worry and a hint of sadness. Social life in the Roman Empire was not so unlike our lives today, more similar to our lives than the grim feudalism of the Middle Ages that would succeed it. So, the Rabbis built some stresses into their summer rhythm. There are beautiful synagogue floors in the Galilee dating from fifty, a hundred, two hundred years after the destruction of the Temple and the Jewish revolt. They depict a rich, expressive and sensual life for those congregants. And so, consciously, the tradition removed the Jews of the time from gratification, mitigated their sensuality, imposed limitations, for the purposes, seemingly, of some reflection. Because, you know, bad things did happen, and we had better not forget.



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