

Beyn HaMitzarim

The Three Weeks from the 17th of Tamuz to Tisha B'Av

Mystical Insights

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From the 17th day of the Hebrew month of Tamuz until the 9th day of the following month Av is a period of national mourning for the Jewish people. Five devastating things that affected all Israel occurred on the 17th of Tamuz. Five catastrophic events that affected all Israel occurred on Tisha (the 9th) of Av.

On the 17th of Tamuz, Moshe Rabbeynu descended from Mt. Sinai after receiving the Tablets of the Commandments. On that day, the people were worshipping the Golden Calf. Moshe shattered the Tablets. The ones that replaced them were not the same as the first. The first Tablets contained a higher form of the Ten Commandments than those revealed on the second Tablets. With the giving of the Torah, we were supposed to have entered the messianic age. Moshe was supposed to have been Mashiah. Yet, we lost this marvelous opportunity. We were thwarted as we were centuries earlier in the Garden of Eden.

Years later, other horrible events occurred exactly on this day. Prior to the destruction of the holy Temple by the Babylonian ancestors of today's Iraq, the continual offering, which maintained the balance between Heaven and Earth, ceased on this day. On this day, years later, during the period of the Greek occupation, a pagan authority destroyed the oldest and most authoritative scroll of the Torah. On this day, that same Greek pagan then proceeded to place a pagan image in the holy Temple. On this day, years later, in their conquest of Israel and the genocide of her people, the walls of Jerusalem were breached. The 17th of Tamuz therefore, has become a day of fasting. From sunrise to sunset, every adult Jew (except nursing mothers and the ill) is to fast, neither eating nor drinking to commemorate all that we have lost on this day.

Three weeks later, on the 9th of Av, even greater catastrophic events occurred. When Moshe Rabbeynu sent out spies to the Promised Land, they came back and brought a bad report, filling the hearts of the people with fear. The entire nation mourned their fate and wanted to return to Egypt. This happened on Tisha B'Av. Years later, both the First and Second Temples were destroyed on this day. Years later, the Roman occupiers destroyed the final Jewish stronghold against them and murdered the entire population of the city, which numbered close to a hundred thousand innocent men, women, and children. This horror happened on Tisha B'Av. One year later, to the day, the Roman Nazi emperor decreed that a pagan temple be established on the holy Temple Mount. Tisha B'Av therefore is the day of days of national mourning for the entire Jewish people. All fast for a full 24-hours on this day. Also forbidden are bathing, adorning, marital intimacy, the wearing of leather shoes and the study of Torah.

There are numerous laws regarding the proper preparations and observances of the Tisha B'Av fast. One should consult with one's local Orthodox Rabbi for full and proper instruction regarding these laws in accordance to one's communal origins.

The history of this time speaks for itself about the tragedies that occurred therein. Yet, we must ask why did so many bad things happen all during the same time of the year and exactly on the same dates? As intelligent adults, we recognize that there is far more than a coincidence here. In order to understand the "why" of the Three Weeks, we must delve into the mysticism of the Torah. The secrets of time are revealed within Torah mysticism. They will provide for us the necessary insights to understand why all these terrible things happened and continue to happen in Tamuz and Av.

As is known each month of the year is dominated by an astrological influence. This was ordained by G-d. Insights into astrology help us to understand the mechanics of the universe. Yet, G-d created more than mere astrological influences. Over each month of the year and over each day of the month there is also the influence of the sefirot. Aside from the sefirot, each day and month also are influenced by one of the four elements: fire, air, water, and earth.

The month of Tamuz is under the astrological sign of Sartan (Cancer). This is itself insignificant until we recognize that Sartan is a water sign. In other words, the element of water, which represents Divine mercy, is the dominant influence for this month. The month of Av (Aryeh, Leo) is under the influence of fire, the element that manifests G-d's severity.

Two other times in the calendar do water signs precede fire signs. In those cases, great things have happened to the Jewish people. Adar and Nisan are times of joy filled with holidays that celebrate redemption. Heshvan is the month when the Third Temple is destined to be dedicated. Kislev celebrates the rededication of the Temple with Hanuka.

Yet, with Tamuz and Av, instead of joy we have sorrow. The reason for this is because just as the sefirot, elements and stars influence time, so more so does human behavior influence it. All things in creation have two sides to them, a side of good, and a side of evil. This is based on the verses in Kohelet made famous by the sixty's rock and roll song 'Turn, Turn Turn.' There is a time to be born and a time to die. A time to kill and a time to heal. Each of these "times" is explained by the Sefer Yetzirah as being related to the individual months of the year. These "times" are the forces underlying astrological influences.

In addition, the days of the month express sefirotic influences. A month is made up of four weeks, each of seven days. Each one of the four weeks of the month manifests one of the letters of G-d's holy Name YHVH. The four letters of G-d's Name also correspond to the sefirot. Yod corresponds to Hokhma and the first week of the month. Hey corresponds to Binah and the second week of the month. Vav corresponds to the six sefirot with Tiferet at their center and corresponds to the third week of the month. The final Hey corresponds to Malkhut and the fourth week of the month.

The seven days of the week correspond to the seven lower sefirot. Day 1, Sunday, corresponds to Hesed. Day 2, Monday, corresponds to Gevurah. Day 3, Tuesday, corresponds to Tiferet. Day 4, Wednesday, corresponds to Netzah. Day 5, Thursday, corresponds to Hod. Day 6, Friday, corresponds to Yesod. Day 7, Shabat, corresponds to Malkhut.

The 17th day of any month, therefore, is the third day of the third week. The third week corresponds to Vav/Tiferet. The third day of the week corresponds also to Tiferet. Thus, it was on the day of the Tiferet of the week of Tiferet under the influence of G-d's mercy (Tamuz) that Moshe brought down the Tablets of the Commandments to the Jewish people. This was the most appropriate time, for the Torah itself emanates from Tiferet. What better time to receive the Torah of Tiferet than on the day and week of Tiferet?

Yet, instead of this day becoming a holiday, it became a day of mourning. Tiferet corresponds to the heart. Yet, Tiferet is also the sefirah of Divine justice. Justice turns in two ways. It exonerates the innocent, but it also punishes the guilty. The hearts of Israel were led astray by the sin of the Golden Calf. In this case, the people were indeed guilty. They had blemished the supernal Tiferet.

From that day of Tiferet onward, the supernal Tiferet was blemished. Until the hearts of the collective Jewish people are purified, the supernal Tiferet will never be able to shine its balanced light of Divine justice. Because of their being unrepentant, collective Israel therefore receives their judgement on the day that they blemished the source of judgement.

The 9th day of any month is the second day of the second week. This corresponds to the Gevurah of Binah. Binah is the Supernal Mother. She is the source of all Divine severity and punishment. The 9th day of Av augments this severity by being a month influenced by fire, the symbol of Divine severity. Thus, the 9th of Av is a sign of multiple severities.

When the children of Israel cried out to G-d because of their fear to move forward to conquer the Promised Land, the nature of the Divine severity of that day flared against them. On this day, instead of blemishing the Tiferet/justice/heart, they blemished an even higher place. On the 9th of Av, the children of Israel blemished the source of severity and caused it to become imbalanced against them. Unlike the 17th of Tamuz, which blemished the heart, the 9th of Av blemished the sefirah Binah, which is the mind, specifically that aspect of mind that connects with the heart.

The mind/heart connection between the 17th of Tamuz and the 9th of Av is also seen in that there are 21 days between them. 21 is the numerical value of the holy Name Ehyeh, the Name that corresponds to (the mohin of) Binah, the realm of the Mind. Thus on the 17th of Tamuz, Israel blemished the supernal Heart (Tiferet) and 21 days later (on the calendar) they blemished the supernal Mind (Binah). There are yet other aspects to this blemish.

The months of the year also correspond to the various spiritual aspects within the two sefirotic Faces (Partzufim) formed by the lower seven sefirot. The two sefirotic faces formed by the lower seven sefirot are Zeir Anpin (ZA) and the Shekhina (Nok). The entire year is split between their influence. The six spring and summer months are influenced by the Female Partzuf, Nok (the Shekhina). The six fall and winter months are influenced by the Male Partzuf, ZA (Zeir Anpin).

Israel embodies the Presence of the Shekhina. Thus when they sinned before G-d, they blemished all the months under the dominion of the Shekhina. Tamuz and Av correspond to the sefirot Netzah and Hod of the Shekhina. Netzah and Hod are the manifestations of the justice of Tiferet. Therefore, when Tiferet was imbalanced, so were its manifestations. Netzah and Hod are also the two sefirot from which comes forth the spirit of prophecy. When the people of Israel blemished the Tiferet in Tamuz and Binah in Av, they thus caused the Netzah and Hod to be disconnected from them. This caused the loss of the spirit of prophecy. The months of Tamuz and Av also correspond to the two "eyes" of the Shekhina. When Israel sinned, it is as if the Shekhina was blinded.

Thus, we see that by our continued bad behavior by not being faithful to the covenant of Sinai we reinforce all the negative aspects in nature to work against the collective Jewish people. The Beyn HaMitzarim three-week period is a time of great spiritual severity for the Jewish people. While an individual Jew may be righteous, he/she is still nonetheless a part of the nation and shares the nation's destiny, be it for good or for evil. Therefore, during this three-week period Torah Law stipulates for us a specific code of practice. These three weeks are not a time for joy. Music should not be listened to. New clothing should not be worn. Marriages are not held at this time. These three weeks are a time of national mourning and retrospection, a time for us each to look within to repair our broken hearts and our faulty minds.

In spite of all that we have learned above, these three weeks are not a time for us to be mourning over the episodes of the past. Practically speaking, we have enough to mourn over our present. We cannot change the past. We cannot undo what has already been done. We can, however, change the future before it happens. We do this by changing our present.

Mourning the past is well and good. However, mourning the present is what is necessary. Changing the present is more than necessary, it is essential. Unless we change our course of action as individual Jews, as a collective nation, renew our covenant with G-d, and obey His commandments, we will inevitably come to experience new tragedies to mourn during these days. These three weeks emanate G-d's judgment upon the Jewish people, therefore, be careful during them. During these three weeks, Murphy's law is here most applicable - if anything can go wrong, it will, and at the worst possible time.

Personally speaking I wish to avoid these and any other future problems or sorrows. Therefore, I share with you this material. Yet, I (we) need something from each of you. I (we) need each of you to join with me (us) to make a difference, to correct the mistakes of the past by not repeating them in the present or in the future.

Mourn the past with all the appropriate Halakhic details, for if you do not do this then you dishonor the past and thus disgrace the Shekhina. Sins of this nature will bring upon us another Holocaust. Yet, when you fast and mourn, also contemplate well how you may improve yourselves by not only being better Jews but also better human beings. Centuries ago, a serious lack of action on our parts led to our national destruction. Today it will only be serious action that will lead to our individual and national survival and salvation.

May G-d bless all those who mourn over the destruction of Jerusalem to see its rebuilding and the restoration of its former glory, and more. Amen.

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