
Selected Laws and Customs of Tishah B'Av

1. The Fast of the Seventeenth of Tammuz

The seventeenth of Tammuz marks the beginning of the destruction of Jerusalem when the Romans breached the walls of the city (Mishna Ta'anit 4:6). The rabbis mention other calamities believed to have occurred on that date, including the breaking of the Tablets by Moses.

The fast begins at sunrise and concludes after sunset of the same day.

2. The Three Weeks

The days between the seventeenth of Tammuz and the ninth of Av are considered days of great sadness for they witnessed the breaching of the walls and the final destruction of the Temple. In rabbinic literature it is known as *bein ha-metzarim* "between the troublesome times." It is also often called "the three weeks".

Weddings and other joyous celebrations should not take place during this period according to the Shulhan Arukh (O.H. 551:2)

A further element of mourning is added during "the nine days" between the first and the ninth of Av. Although customs vary between Ashkenazim and Sephardim many pious individuals refrain from eating meat or drinking wine except on Shabbat or on other festive events such as a *pidyon ha-ben*. Haircuts are not taken during the whole three weeks according to many sources.

3. Tishah B'Av

The fast of Tishah B'Av begins the night before and the last meal is known as the *se'udah mafseket* or "boundary meal" between eating and fasting.

Historically the meal was compared to that which was served to mourners after a funeral, and so eggs are served. The eggs were often dipped in ashes. Today we try to retain the mood, however, keeping the meal modest and simple.

As a sign of mourning leather shoes are not worn on Tishah B'Av. In accordance with a tradition originating with Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg (1215 - 1293) the *talit* and *tefilin* are not worn at the morning service. The *tefilin* are termed *pe'er* or "ornaments" and are,

therefore, inappropriate for such a sad moment. However, at Minhah during the afternoon the *talit* and *tefilin* are worn.

On Tishah B'Av, it is the custom to chant the service in a quiet monotone, avoiding the use of traditional *nusah* (melody of the service). Furthermore, congregants should not greet each other, as that would imply happiness and joy.

If the ninth of Av falls on Shabbat it is postponed until Sunday. If Tishah B'Av should occur on Saturday night, an abbreviated *havdalah* (the *b'rakhah* over fire) is recited following the *Kaddish Shalem* in *Ma'ariv*. At the conclusion of Tishah B'Av on a Sunday night, the *b'rakhah* over wine and *Ha-mavdil* are recited.

Tishah B'Av is subject to the same limitations as Yom Kippur and thus one should refrain from food, bathing, wearing leather shoes and conjugal relations. In addition, because of the joy it affords, the Sages forbade all study of sacred literature with the exception of books that fit the mood of the day (such as the Book of Job and parts of the Book of Jeremiah and of the Talmud and midrash that tell of the destruction of Jerusalem). A mourner who is sitting shivah may go to the synagogue both evening and morning.

Just as the weeks preceding Tishah B'Av are marked by a sorrowful mood, so the weeks following encourage a feeling of hope, comfort and consolation.

3. Note on Scriptural Readings

During the morning service we read from Deuteronomy 4:25-40 and three people are called up. The last reads the haftarah, Jeremiah 8:13-9:23, which is chanted to the tune of *Eikhah* except for the last two sentences, which are sung in the regular way.

At *Minhah* the Torah is taken out and three people are called. The third also reads the *haftarah*. Like other fasts the Torah reading is Exodus 32:11-14; 34:1-10. A common custom is for certain verses to be chanted first by the congregation and then repeated by the reader, all done in the High Holiday *trope*. The *haftarah* is Isaiah 55:6-56:8, chanted with regular *haftarah trope*.

Based on the *Guide to Jewish Religious Practice* by Isaac Klein, JTS, New York, 1979