

Guide to *Bein Ham'tzarim*

The Three Weeks Between Shiva Asar
B'Tammuz and Tisha B'Av

Congregation Beth Abraham-Jacob

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Chazal tell us in the Talmud, Taanit 30b:

כל המתאבל על ירושלים - זוכה ורואה בשמחתה. ושאינו מתאבל על ירושלים - אינו רואה בשמחתה.
“Whoever mourns for Jerusalem merits to see its joy, and whoever does not mourn Jerusalem,
will not see it joy.”

The destruction of the holy city of Jerusalem and our holy Temple was, according to Chazal, the beginning and root of all the calamities that befell the Jewish people throughout our long exile.

We mourn not just the loss of the physical building, but also the loss of the meeting place with HaShem in this world. The mourning that is observed during the period of Bein HaM'tzarim (lit. “Between the Straights”), the time between Shiva Asar B'Tammuz and Tisha B'Av, is incumbent upon all of us until the Beit HaMikdash is rebuilt, may it be speedily within our days.

The following is meant to serve as a guide. Please contact Rabbi Kean at b.h.kean@gmail.com with any questions.

I. Introduction

There are four different parts of *Bein HaM'tzarim*, each with different laws:

1. The Fast of *Shiva Asar B'Tammuz* (this year, June 27, from 4:06 AM to 9:16 PM).
2. “The Three Weeks” – the days *Shiva Asar B'Tammuz* and *Tisha B'Av*, when some of customs of mourning begin.
3. “The Nine Days” or “The Week of *Tisha B'Av*” – Beginning of Rosh Chodesh Av (this year, July 10) more intense customs of mourning are observed. For Sefardim, many of these customs are only observed during the week in which *Tisha B'Av* takes place (this year, Sefardim will not observe these customs because *Tisha B'Av* is on a Sunday).
4. The Fast of *Tisha B'Av* (this year, July 17-18). Some observances begin before the onset of the fast on the 17th and some mourning continues the day after, July 19.

The laws for *Tisha B'Av* will be sent later, closer to *Tisha B'Av*.

II. The Fast of *Shiva Asar B'Tammuz* (July 9)

- ❖ According to the Mishnah, five tragedies befell the Jewish people on *Shiva Asar B'Tammuz*:
 1. Moshe Rabbeinu broke the first set of *Luchot* upon seeing the sin of the Golden Calf.
 2. The *Korban Tamid* (the daily sacrifice) was stopped because the Jews ran out of animals to offer during the Roman siege (which lasted three years).
 3. The city walls were breached by Romans – this is the main tragedy commemorated (during the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem, the city walls were also breached in the month of Tammuz).
 4. Apostomos the Roman general burned a Torah scroll.
 5. An idol was placed in the Temple (either during the Babylonian siege, or the Roman siege, according to two different accounts in the Jerusalem Talmud).
- ❖ The fast begins at *alot hashachar* (4:06 AM) and ends at *tzeit hakochavim* (9:16 PM).
- ❖ Only eating and drinking are prohibited. Other activities, which are prohibited on *Tisha B'Av* and on *Yom Kippur*, are permitted on *Shiva Asar B'Tammuz*.

- ❖ Those who are ill or women who are pregnant or nursing may be exempt from fasting. Please reach out to me for more details.
- ❖ While strictly speaking, it is permissible to bathe in hot water, many avoid it. Lukewarm water may certainly be used.
- ❖ On Shiva Assar B'Tammuz, one should not get a haircut, make purchases that bring happiness, listen to music, or engage in other activities prohibited during the Nine Days or the Week of *Tisha B'Av* (see below).

III. The Three Weeks

The following activities are **prohibited** during the Three Weeks to demonstrate our mourning for the destruction of the *Beit Hamikdash*:

- ❖ **Dancing, or performing and listening to music.** Many contemporary *poskim* are lenient about recorded music, especially that is sad (or not joyous) in tone. This may be relied on to listen to music for concentration during routine activities, like studying or exercising. Concerts should still be avoided, even if sad music is performed. Exceptions can be made for professional Jewish musicians to perform at events for non-Jews who rely on the income that they would receive for their livelihood until Rosh Chodesh Av or for music teachers and their students until the week that *Tisha B'Av* falls in. In the latter case, many are stringent to only teach sad music, or to take their break from teaching during this time.
- ❖ **Hosting or attending festive gatherings or parties.** The only gatherings that should take place are educational gatherings, minimal business dealings, gatherings to address communal needs, and other necessities.
- ❖ **Having a wedding** (both getting married and attending a wedding).
- ❖ **Wearing new clothes or eating a “new food” so that one does not recite the *bracha* of “*shehechyanu*.”**
- ❖ **Getting a haircut.** Some Sefardim allow haircuts until the week of *Tisha B'Av*. Classically, shaving is also prohibited, and while many rabbis continue to prohibit shaving, many allow men to shave (either daily or every Friday before Shabbat) because this is not considered an activity that brings joy but is rather part of basic grooming. **The more lenient position may be relied upon without hesitation.** Even according to those who are strict, the following exceptions apply: Women may still remove hair from the face or the body; A man may trim his mustache if it interferes with eating or drinking; Before Rosh Chodesh Av for business purposes.

IV. The Nine Days and the Week of *Tisha B'Av* (*Shavua She-Chal Bo Tisha B'Av*)

In addition to those activities prohibited during the Three Weeks, additional activities are prohibited during the nine days leading up to *Tisha B'Av*, starting on Rosh Chodesh Av (July 10) as a sign of more intense mourning. Many *Sefardim* observe some of these prohibitions for all the Nine Days, but delay starting some of the customs of mourning to the Sunday before *Tisha B'Av*. Because *Tisha B'Av* is a Sunday this year, *Sefardim* will not observe these customs at all. Everyone should follow their family's custom, if known.

- ❖ **It is forbidden to purchase objects for pleasure that will be available after the *Tisha B'Av*.** This applies to *Sefardim* beginning on **Rosh Chodesh Av**.

- ❖ **It is forbidden to build or decorate the home for pleasure.** Emergency repairs, such as fixing a leak or an air conditioner, are permitted. This applies to *Sefardim* beginning on **Rosh Chodesh Av**.
- ❖ **It is forbidden to eat meat or drink wine or grape juice** because these foods bring increased joy and pleasure. For *Sefardim*, this only applies to the **week of Tisha B'Av**, and as such does not apply this year. Eating meat and drinking wine is permitted on Shabbat, or at a meal to celebrate a specific *mitzvah*, like a *siyyum* on a tractate of *Gemara*. The custom is to use beer or tea instead of wine or grape juice for *Havdalah*, though strictly speaking, wine or grape juice may be used and consumed by the adult (grape juice is preferred over wine). If beer or tea are used, the *bracha* for grape juice, *borei p'ri hagafen*, is replaced with the *bracha* for other beverages, *shehakol nihyeh bidvaro*. Foods cooked with meat may not be eaten because they taste like meat, but foods cooked with wine or wine vinegar may be consumed because they generally do not have a strong wine flavor. Meat and wine may be consumed if it is necessary for medical purposes. A woman who recently gave birth or a person with an extremely limited diet (like someone who cannot eat dairy) may be allowed to eat meat, or at least chicken. Please contact Rabbi Kean if one of these situations applies to you.
- ❖ **Freshly laundered outer garments are not worn, and laundry is not done.** For *Sefardim*, this only applies to the **week of Tisha B'Av** and does not apply this year. This prohibition applies to towels and tablecloths as well. Garments like undershirts, undergarments, and socks may be worn even if they are freshly laundered, but they should still be laundered before the Nine Days, not during the Nine Days. Freshly laundered outer garments that one wishes to wear during the Nine Days should be worn for a short period of time before Rosh Chodesh Av. Some allow freshly laundered garments to be worn during the Nine Days if they are soiled by placing them on a floor that is at least a little dirty before wearing them. Freshly laundered outer garments are worn on Shabbat. Garments are not given to a non-Jewish cleaner during this time.
- ❖ **Bathing and swimming for pleasure is not done.** Though classically all bathing was prohibited, because the prohibition is about avoiding *pleasure*, not *basic hygiene*, showering is allowed during the Nine Days in our era where regular showering is a part of basic hygiene. Some shower a little bit less frequently than they are accustomed to (i.e. every other day instead of every day), or use cooler water than what they are accustomed to, or shorten the length of their shower.

Thus say the LORD of hosts: The fast of the fourth month, and the fast of the fifth, and the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth, shall be to the house of Judah joy and gladness, and cheerful seasons; therefore love truth and peace.

May the Beit HaMikdash be rebuilt speedily and may our fasts be transformed into festivals.

Rabbi Ben & Miriam Kean