

## Some teachings from Tractate Taanit

Tractate *Taanit* deals with fasts. They were frequently ordained by the ancient rabbis if rain was late in coming. Rain meant the difference between food and famine. The first thing God promises if we follow the commandments is rain:

If you shall follow diligently my commandments which I command you this day, love the Lord your God, and serve him with all your heart and with all your soul, then I will give you the rain of your land in its due season, the first rain and the latter rain, that you may gather in your grain, and your wine, and your oil. [Deut 11:13-14]

This is not done much anymore. Torah does not mandate it.

### Is fasting to get something from God a good idea?

Not all agreed:

Samuel said: He who fasts is called a sinner...

Rabbi Eleazar says: He is called holy...

Resh Lakish says: He is called pious...

Rabbi Shesheth said: The young yeshiva student who fasts [is not meritorious]...

There is no public fast in [the Jewish community of] Babylonia except for Tish'a b'Av. [Taanit 11a-b]

### Students are “distinguished” for purposes of fasting!

Mishna:

If the 17th of Marcheshvan came and no rain fell, the distinguished individuals begin to fast three [dawn-to-dusk] fasts... If the new moon of Kislev came and [still] no rain fell, the Bet Din orders the [entire] community to fast three [dawn-to-dusk] fasts. [Taanit 10a]

Gemara:

The Sages taught in a baraita: “A person must not say: ‘I am only a student, and therefore I am not worthy to consider myself a distinguished individual [and therefore I should not fast].’ Rather, all students of the Sages are considered distinguished.” [Taanit 10b]

## **Prayer is more effective if recited by many**

Rabbi Ammi said: A man's prayer is answered only if [it is sincere].  
[But Rav Shmuel says that God accepts insincere prayer.] ...  
There is no contradiction. The first refers to individual [prayer] and the other to community [prayer]. [Ta'anit 8a]

Is it because concentration is more intense? Mind over matter?

## **Pray for one thing at a time**

In the days of Rabbi Samuel bar Nahmani there was a famine and a deadly plague.

People asked: "What shall we do? Shall we pray for [the removal] of the two? That is not possible. [We do not pray for two things at a time.] Let us then pray for [the removal of] the plague and we will endure the famine."

Thereupon Rabbi Samuel b. Nahmani said to them: "Let us rather pray [for the removal of] the famine, because when the All-Merciful gives plenty, He gives it for the living, [not for the dead] as it is said [in the Book of Psalms]: "You open Your hand and give to each living thing according to his need"."  
[Ps. 145:16]

How do we know that we do not pray for two things [at the same time]?  
-Because it is written [in Ezra]:

So we fasted and petitioned our God concerning "this" [in the singular]. [Ezra 8:23]

This indicates that there were other things to pray for.

-In the Land of Israel, it was reported in the name of Rabbi Haggai that it could [also] be deduced from this verse:

And to request mercy from the God of heaven concerning this secret. [Dan. 2:18]

This implies that there were other things too [to pray for].  
[Ta'anit 8b]

## **Studying about sacrifices is the same as bringing them**

Abraham then [said to God]: "Master of the Universe! [The sacrifices] are effective while the Temple is standing, but, when the Temple will no longer be, what will become of them?"

[God] replied: ... "Whenever they read the order of the sacrifices in the Torah, I will deem it as if they had offered them before me, and I will grant them pardon for all their iniquities." [Ta'anit 27b]

## **Don't show off your blessings**

And Jacob said to his sons:

Why do you make yourselves conspicuous? [Gen. 42:1]

Rabbi Eleazar said: Jacob thereby conveyed to his sons: "Do not show yourselves when you are satiated, whether before [the children of] Esau or before [the children of] Ishmael [who are suffering from famine], so that they should not become jealous of you." [Ta'anit 10b]

## **Share in the distress of the community**

Another [Baraita] taught: When the community is in trouble let no one say, "I will go to my house and I will eat and drink and all will be well with me" ... But rather one should share in the distress of the community.

Indeed, we find that Moses, our teacher, shared in the distress of the community [during the battle with Amalek], as it is said [in the Torah]:

But the hands of Moses were heavy, and they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it. [Ex. 17:12]

Did Moses not have a mattress or a pillow to sit on? This is what Moses [meant to convey]: Since Israel is steeped in distress, I will share their distress. He who shares in the distress of the community will merit to behold its consolation.

[Ta'anit 11a]

## **Girls must stay pretty until they marry!**

A girl who has reached adolescence may not make herself unsightly during the days of mourning for her father [so as not to reduce her chances of marrying]... [She is allowed] to paint her eyelids and dye her hair. [Ta'anit 13b]