

The daughters of Tzelaf'chad and Tu B'Av

We are in the middle of the most somber period in the Jewish calendar -- the three weeks from the Fast of Tammuz to Tish'a b'Av. The Fast of Tammuz commemorates the breach of the walls of Jerusalem, and Tisha b'Av commemorates the destruction of the Temple and many other calamities in Jewish history. It is a period of mourning. All forms of rejoicing are prohibited, including weddings. Today, I want to talk to you about the light at the end of that dark tunnel.

This is prompted by this week's Torah portion, Matot-Mass'ei. It includes the story of the five unmarried daughters of Tzelaf'chad. Their father died, and they had no brothers to inherit his land. So they went to Moses and asked him to be allowed to inherit it. Moses was about to say, "Sure, no problem, I am an egalitarian at heart". But the leaders of the daughters' tribe, Manasseh, argued that, if the daughters wanted to inherit, they HAD to marry within their tribe, because the leaders did not want the land to end up in the tribes of the husbands. Moses consulted with God, and God decided the daughters would BOTH inherit the land AND marry within their tribe. Note carefully the language in the Torah:

6. This is the word that the Lord has commanded regarding Tzelaf'chad's daughters. Let them marry whomever they please, but they shall marry only to the family of their father's tribe.
7. Thus, the inheritance of the children of Israel will not be transferred from tribe to tribe, for each person from the children of Israel will remain attached to the inheritance of his father's tribe.
8. Every daughter from the tribes of the children of Israel who inherits property, shall marry a member of her father's tribe, so each one of the children of Israel shall inherit the property of his forefathers.
9. And no inheritance will be transferred from one tribe to another tribe, for each person of the tribes of the children of Israel shall remain attached to his own inheritance."
10. As the Lord had commanded Moses, so did Tzelaf'chad's daughters do.
11. Mahlah, Tirzah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Noah married their cousins.

(Numbers, 36:6-11)

Now, note that intermarriage among the tribes was always allowed. The restriction applied only to marriageable women who owned land. But, even though the words seem very clear, the people were not happy with that restriction. So within a generation the law was annulled! How can you do that? With the power of reinterpretation. The leaders decreed (as explained in the Talmud) that the law applied only to Tzelaf'chad's daughters. Why? Because it is prefaced with the words: "This is the word that the Lord has commanded *regarding Tzelaf'chad's daughters*". But wait: Later it says: "*Every* daughter from the tribes of the children of Israel who inherits property, shall marry a member of her father's tribe". OK, they said, but it means that the law applies to that generation only!

The Talmud gushed about that decision in superlative terms. The Mishna says:

Rabbi Shim'on ben Gamliel said: There never were in Israel greater holidays [yamim tovim] than Tu b'Av and Yom Kippur. (Ta'anit 26b)

The Gemara comments:

I can understand Yom Kippur, because it is a day of forgiveness and pardon, and on it the second Tablets of the Law were given; but what happened on Tu b'Av?

-Rav Yehudah said in the name of Shmuel: It is the day on which permission was granted to the tribes [of Israel] to intermarry [without restriction].

This is how the tradition of Tu b'Av was born, "the greatest day of joy in the Jewish calendar". It is the Jewish Valentine Day. An extremely popular day for weddings, coming as it does after the three-week mourning period. My oldest son, Michael, was married on Tu b'Av last year. It is THE day for finding your bashert, your predestined soul mate.

Let us continue to read the Mishna (Ta'anit 26b):

Rabbi Shim'on ben Gamliel said: There never were in Israel greater holidays [yamim tovim] than Tu b'Av and Yom Kippur. On these days the daughters of Jerusalem used to walk out in white garments, which they borrowed in order not to put to shame any one who had none... The daughters of Jerusalem came out and danced in the vineyards exclaiming at the same time, "Young man, lift up your eyes and see what you choose

for yourself. Do not set your eyes on beauty, but set your eyes on [good] family." 'Grace is deceitful, and beauty is vain; but a woman who fears God, she shall be praised' (Proverbs 31:30).

Tu b'Av was particularly popular during the Second Temple period. It marked the beginning of the grape harvest. According to the Book of Nehemiah, it also celebrated the wood-offering brought in the temple. (Nehemiah 10:35; Josephus, Bellum Judaicum 2:17)

The rabbis officially added Tu b'Av to the modern Jewish calendar. The only religious observance is the omission of Tachannun, a penitentiary prayer recited after morning and afternoon services (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 131:6). Since it is a joyous day, we dispense with penitentiary prayers. It is a regular workday. If a funeral must take place, eulogies are not read aloud.

The holiday has been rejuvenated since the founding of the State of Israel. In Israel, it is the custom, whether you are religious or not, to go to music and dance festivals, and send cards and flowers to your significant other. Girls from Shiloh, north of Jerusalem, dance today in the same vineyards mentioned in the Mishna, while Hassidic musicians play in the background.

Also, Tu b'Av comes at a time of year when the nights begin to grow longer after the summer solstice. Our Sages said, "The night was created for study." So this is a time when we must study Torah ever harder.

You can guess from its name that it comes on a full moon. Jewish months are lunar, 'Tu b'Av' means 'the fifteenth of Av', that is, the middle of the month, and the middle of the month is when the moon is full. A perfect setting for kissing your better half.

Just as the Talmud and later commentators associated many Jewish tragedies with Tish'a b'Av, other than the fall of the first Temple, so they associated many happy occasions with Tu b'Av, other than unrestricted permission to marry into another tribe of Israel. For example, in chronological order (Ta'anit 30-31):

-On Tu b'Av, The tribe of Benjamin was allowed to intermarry with the other tribes. That privilege had been suspended after the incident of the Concubine of Giv'ah, as related in the Book of Judges. (Judges 19-21).

The reasoning was similar to the one I mentioned earlier and is related in the same section of the Talmud. The Book of Judges says:

'None of us shall give his daughter to Benjamin for a wife.' (Judges 21:1)

Rav said in the Talmud: The phrase "none of us" was interpreted to refer to us only, but not to our children.

-On Tu b'Av, the last of the Israelites that had left Egypt died. This meant that their descendants could finally enter the Promised Land. They had not been allowed to do so as long as the generation of the Exodus was still alive. That generation was tainted by the Golden Calf, the sin of the Spies, a slave mentality, and too much 'oldthink'. At that point, the Talmud adds, God began to talk to the people again.

-On Tu b'Av, King Hosea of the Northern Kingdom finally allowed his people to freely make pilgrimages to Jerusalem, in the Southern Kingdom, after two centuries of restrictions.

-On Tu b'Av, the Romans allowed the victims of the massacre of Betar to be buried. Betar was the last stand of the Bar Kochba revolt, in the year 135. That's where Bar Kochba himself died. The Talmud adds that the bodies had not decomposed, even though they had been exposed to the elements for over a year. On that Tu B'Av, a fourth blessing was added by Rabban Gamliel the Elder to the Birkat HaMazon, the Grace After Meals, which we still recite today.

Remember, the first three blessings are:

- Birkat hazan -- the blessing for food

- Birkat haaretz -- the blessing for the Land

- Birkat Yerushalayim -- the blessing for Jerusalem

They are mandated by the Torah. The new one, the fourth, is birkat hatov ve-hemetiv, the blessing for God's goodness. It calls God "Hamelech ha-tov vеха-metiv lakol -- the good king who bestows good to everybody". The Talmud explains: "who is good" because He prevented the bodies from decaying, "who bestows good" because we were allowed to bury them (Berachot 48b). This is an absolute must in the Jewish tradition. When new Jewish communities are formed

throughout the world, their first priority is to consecrate a Jewish cemetery.

-Tu b'Av marked the end of the season for cutting wood for the main altar in the Temple. That was because from that point on the sun's rays become too weak to dry the wood fast enough. If it doesn't dry fast enough, it becomes infested with woodworms and becomes unfit for the altar. They celebrated by cutting an axe, and called it The Day of the Breaking of the Axe! They sure loved to celebrate in those days.

But when you ponder all the reasons I just gave you, it does not leap at you that Tu b'Av should be "the most joyous day on the Jewish calendar". Until you finally realize what ties all these reasons together: Tu b'Av is when you are finally allowed to do things you were not allowed to do before. (This, of course, is what a wedding is supposed to mark!) And that may be the greatest joy of all.

Tu b'Av, 17 days from now. May this coming Tu b'Av be a prelude to many more days of festivities and rejoicing, weddings and happy celebrations, for you, for us, and for all Israel, and let us say: Amen.

Shabbat shalom.