

Why Everyone Should Fast on Tuesday  
Rabbi Ariel Rackovsky  
Shaare Tefilla, Vayigash 5780

Three and a half years ago, on a sweltering summer Sunday morning, I arrived home after Shacharis as Jessica was leaving for a day on call at the hospital. It was Shiva Asar BeTammuz, and Jessica gave Shaya the following warning:

*Shaya, today is a fast day. That means that Abba cannot eat anything, so he's going to be VERY hungry and in a REALLY BAD MOOD. So I need you to make everything really easy for him today, ok?*

Shaya looked like he understood, and replied sweetly:

*“Oh, ok. Ima, when will it be a slow day?”*

This Tuesday, we observe the fast of Asarah BeTevet, a fast that tends to get short shrift in the Jewish calendar. It does not usher in or conclude a period of mourning, like Shiva Asar BeTammuz and Tisha B'Av. It is not the day before a holiday, like Taanit Esther, the day after a holiday, like Tzom Gedaliah, or a holiday itself, like Yom Kippur. It falls the week after Chanukah, in the middle of winter, and- in the northern hemisphere- it is *short*. If you live in Stockholm, the fast commences at 7:28 AM, and ends at 4:12 PM! Of course, the opposite is true for our brethren in the Southern

Hemisphere; in Buenos Aires, the fast ends no earlier than 8:47 PM, still early for dinner by Argentinian standards.

The brevity of Asarah Betevet belies its gravity. Not for nothing did the Chief Rabbinate of Israel designate it as a "general kaddish day," the day wherein relatives of victims of the Holocaust say kaddish because their loved ones' yahrtzeits are unknown. So serious is this day that Rabbi David Abudirham, the great Spanish halachist, asserted that that if it ever *did* fall on Shabbos, it would be observed as a fast on that day<sup>1</sup>. This opinion is nearly universally rejected and moot anyway, as the Jewish calendar is structured such that this is impossible. It is, however, the only fast day that can, and occasionally does, fall on a Friday. On the secular calendar, there are some years, like 2019, that do not contain Asarah BeTevet at all, and others, like 2020, that contain it twice. This secular year, Asarah BeTevet will be observed on January 7th, and...wait for it...December 25.

What does this day commemorate, why is it so serious- and why should everyone fast this Tuesday, in particular? I'd like you to join me in a brief text study as we try and understand what the Tenth of Tevet is about.

---

<sup>1</sup> As quoted in Beit Yosef, Orach Chaim 550

On a basic level, Asarah BeTevet is one of the four fasts we observe annually, commemorating the destruction of the Temple. In the book of Zechariah (8:19), they are described by the month in which they fall:

כְּהֵאמָר הַ צְבָקוֹת צוֹם הַרְבִּיעִי וְצוֹם הַחֲמִישִׁי וְצוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי וְצוֹם הָעֲשִׂירִי...

Thus said the LORD of Hosts: The fast of the fourth month, the fast of the fifth month, the fast of the seventh month, and the fast of the tenth month

The fast of the fourth refers to the 17th of Tammuz, the fourth month from Nissan, when the Babylonians breached the walls of the city of Jerusalem and captured it. The fast of the fifth refers to Tisha B'Av, when the first and second Battei Mikdash were destroyed. The fast of the seventh refers to Tzom Gedalia, which always takes place on the third of Tishrei, the seventh month. The fast of Gedaliah mourns the brutal destruction of Jewish hopes for sovereignty in Israel after the destruction of the first temple. The fast of the tenth is the tenth of Tevet, the tenth day of the tenth month. What happened on that day?

In the 25th and final chapter of the second book of Kings, we find an in-depth, day by day account of the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash. The chapter opens with the events of the Tenth of Tevet:

וַיְהִי בַשָּׁנָה הַתְּשִׁיעִית לְמַלְכוֹ בַּחֹדֶשׁ הָעֲשִׂירִי בְּעֶשְׂרֵי לַחֹדֶשׁ כָּאֵל נְבֻכַדְנֶצַּר מֶלֶךְ-בָּבֶל הוּא וְכָל-חֵילוֹ עַל-יְרוּשָׁלַם וַיִּחַן עָלֶיהָ וַיִּבְנוּ עָלֶיהָ דָּיָק סָבִיב:

And in the ninth year of his reign, on the tenth day of the tenth month, Nebuchadnezzar moved against Jerusalem with his whole army. He besieged it; and they built towers against it all around.

וַתָּבֵא הָעִיר בַּמָּצוֹר עַד עֲשֵׂתֵי עֶשְׂרֵה שָׁנָה לְמֶלֶךְ צְדַקְיָהוּ:

The city continued in a state of siege until the eleventh year of King Zedekiah.

I can understand the other three fasts. The conquest of a Yerushalaim, the destruction of both Battei Mikdash, the downfall of any hopes of freedom and self rule- those certainly merit fast days. But the text says that the only thing that happened on the 10th day of Tevet was that the Babylonian armies built some scaffolding. For this we need to fast<sup>2</sup>?

---

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Rivky Stern of Aleph Beta whose informative presentation spurred my thinking in this presentation- see <https://www.alephbeta.org/playlist/the-story-of-asara-btevet>

To get a better picture, we need to look elsewhere in Tanach, to the book of Yechezkel. Remember that Yechezkel is the bridge prophet, who began his prophetic career in the land of Israel and continued in Babylonian exile, where he was during the events of the destruction. In the 24th chapter, Yechezkel receives a prophecy on that very day, the tenth of Tevet:

וַיְהִי דְבַר־יְהוָה אֵלַי בַּשָּׁנָה הַתְּשִׁיעִית בַּחֹדֶשׁ הָעֲשִׂירִי בְּעֶשְׂרֵי לַחֹדֶשׁ לֵאמֹר:

In the ninth year, on the tenth day of the tenth month, the word of the LORD came to me:

בְּיָדָם כְּתוּב- [כְּתַב-] לֵךְ אֶת־יָשָׁם הַיּוֹם אֶת־עֶצֶם הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה סִמָּךְ מִלְּךְ-בָּבֶל אֶל־יְרוּשָׁלַם בְּעֶצֶם הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה:

O mortal, record this date, this exact day; for this very day the king of Babylon has laid siege to Jerusalem.

This is not just a dispassionate account of the events of the day. In fact, there is no detailed description of what happened, aside from saying that the king of Babylon placed Jerusalem under siege. What is of note is a three word phrase the prophet uses, twice: עֶצֶם הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה. This is not a phrase regularly used in Tanach. It is used when Noach and his family emerge from the ark, when Yitzchak had his Bris, when the Jewish people finally leave Egypt, when the Torah describes the obligation to fast on Yom Kippur, and when the Torah talks about the offering of the Korban Pesach as the action that permits the consumption of wheat that took root in the previous year. What do all these

contexts have in common? Not much, it seems, other than to indicate a date of great significance. To be more precise, it connotes a date of demarcation, after which things will not be the same. Noach and his family emerge and begin their life after destruction; Yitzchak now is a full-fledged servant of God; The Jewish people begin their emancipated lives; A Jewish person begins the year anew with a clean slate and Pesach allows us to enjoy the harvest of the previous year. In describing the tenth of Tevet, the prophet Yechezkel is telling us that this day is a date of demarcation as well. How is that so? For that, we need to refer back to the second book of Kings. You see, the siege of Jerusalem was not an isolated event, not just a gesture. In laying siege to the city, Nevuchadnezzar's army placed an embargo on it, with no goods entering or leaving the city. What started as an inconvenience rapidly turned into a famine, as the stranglehold lasted for *two and a half years*. Starved and vulnerable, the residents of Yerushalaim were too weak to defend themselves, thus creating prime conditions for the invasion that occurred on the 17th of Tammuz, and the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash three weeks later. Jews were brutally slaughtered, the Beit Hamikdash was laid waste, its vessels plundered and the Jews who revered it sent into exile. When the dust settled, a glimmer of hope emerged when Nevuchadnezzar appointed a general named Gedalya ben Achikam to lead the small community of Jews who remained in the land of Israel. Gedalya attempted to reassure them that they were now safe, and that they would be treated

with respect and dignity by their rulers going forward, but they did not believe him- and murdered him. This was the event that confirmed that exile was an inescapable reality, and that there was no future for Jewish settlement in the land of Israel- and wouldn't be for seven decades. It is difficult to mourn the destruction of a temple we never saw, whose grandeur we never experienced. But imagine how proud, how successful the Jews of the day must have felt. They had a beit Hamikdash, and while prophets had told them repeatedly to cease their idolatrous ways, they never believed that the warnings of doom and destruction would actually come to pass. But when they heard the horses neighing at the gates, the unsheathing of swords, generals barking instructions outside the gates and slaves hammering scaffolding into place to trap them within the walls, they realized that life was about to change irrevocably. The illusion of invincibility, the comfort and complacency they enjoyed for so long, had finally drawn to a tragic close.

We all have עצם היום הזה moments in our personal and national lives, after which life will never be the same. It is a tragedy of the human condition that we often cannot perceive them as they are happening; sometimes, these inflection points are subtle, only realized in retrospect. If we knew when they were happening, we could seize upon them as opportunities for growth

and improvement, and implement the necessary corrections our lives might desperately need. Asarah BeTevet because it is a day when nightmare turned into reality, and we fast in the hope and prayer that we will not be visited with the same fate. I'd like to add another dimension, though, based on a comment by the Lubavitcher Rebbe<sup>3</sup>, who pointed out that the siege of Jerusalem could have accomplished a positive outcome, by awakening its inhabitants to repentance and forcing them to unify. After all, everyone awaited the same fate regardless of religious and socioeconomic status. While this is a desirable state, it is worth noting what happened next. Rather than banding together to fight their oppressors, rather than trusting one another, rather than awakening spiritually to reverse the potential destruction, our response then, as it has always been, was to turn against one another. We descended into recriminations, accusations, unhelpful and unwelcome suggestions.

The Rambam writes<sup>4</sup> that the purpose of fast days is to awaken us to repentance. A look around the world today shows that Asarah BeTevet is more relevant than ever. With threats from the outside and the counterproductive chattering and agenda-peddling from within, we run the risk of making the same mistakes, and not realizing until it's too late. On

---

3

[https://www.sie.org/templates/sie/article\\_cdo/aid/2624103/jewish/Asarah-BTevet-Tevet-10.htm#footnote1a2624103](https://www.sie.org/templates/sie/article_cdo/aid/2624103/jewish/Asarah-BTevet-Tevet-10.htm#footnote1a2624103)

<sup>4</sup> Laws of fasts 5:1



Tuesday in Dallas, the fast begins at 6:18 AM, and ends at 6:10 P.M. It is worth forgoing two square meals to reflect on our future, by learning from our past. May we do so, and have no more fast days- only slow ones.