

The Three Weeks: What, How, and Why – Source Sheet

Source 1: [Mishnah Ta'anit, Chapter 4, Mishnah 6](#)

NOTE: The **bolded English** text is a translation; the regular text is an explanation and additions.

חֲמִשָּׁה דְּבָרִים אֶרְעוּ אֶת אֲבוֹתֵינוּ בְּשַׁבָּעָה עָשָׂר בְּתַמְזַז וְחֲמִשָּׁה בְּתַשְׁעָה בָּאָב. בְּשַׁבָּעָה עָשָׂר בְּתַמְזַז נִשְׁתַּבְּרוּ הַלְלוּחוֹת, וּבִטְלָה הַתְּמִיד, וְהִבְקָעָה הָעִיר, וְשָׂרְף אֶפֹסְטוֹמוֹס אֶת הַתּוֹרָה, וְהָעֶמִיד צֶלֶם בְּהִיכָל. בְּתַשְׁעָה בָּאָב נִגְזַר עַל אֲבוֹתֵינוּ שֶׁלֹּא יִכְנסוּ לָאָרֶץ, וְחָרַב הַבַּיִת בְּרֵאשׁוֹנָה וּבִשְׁנִיָּה, וְנִלְכְּדָה בֵּיתָר, וְנִחְרְשָׁה הָעִיר. מִשְׁנַכְנֵס אָב, מִמַּעֲטִין בְּשַׁמְחָה:

Introduction: This *mishnah* lists events that occurred and are therefore commemorated on two fast days, the seventeenth of *Tammuz* and the ninth of *Av*.

There were five events that happened to our ancestors on the seventeenth of Tammuz and five on the ninth of Av.

On the seventeenth of Tammuz: The tablets were shattered; The *Tamid* (offering) was cancelled; The [walls] of the city were breached; And Apostomos burned the Torah, and placed an idol in the Temple. **On the ninth of Av, it was decreed that our ancestors should not enter the land. The Temple was destroyed the first and the second time, Betar was captured, and the city was plowed up. When Av enters, they limit their rejoicing.**

Five events occurred on the seventeenth of *Tammuz*:

- 1) Moshe broke the first set of tablets.
- 2) On the seventeenth of *Tammuz*, shortly before the Second Temple was destroyed, they ran out of sheep to sacrifice, and hence they had to cancel the *Tamid*, the daily offering.
- 3) The Romans breached the walls of the city of Jerusalem.
- 4) Apostomos, an unidentified Greek or Roman, burned a Torah scroll.
- 5) Apostomos placed an idol in the Temple.

Five events occurred on the ninth of *Av*, which, besides Yom Kippur, is the only major fast day in the Jewish calendar:

- 1) After the people of Israel believed the bad report of the ten spies over that of Yehoshua and Calev, God decreed that no one over the age of twenty would make it into the land of Canaan (see *Bemidbar* 14:29).
- 2+3) Both Temples were destroyed, the first by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E. and the second by the Romans in 70 C.E. The first Temple was set aflame on the ninth and burnt on the Tenth, see *Yermiyahu* 52:12-13.
- 4) Betar, an important Jewish stronghold during the Bar-Kochba revolt, fell to the Romans.
- 5) After the Bar Kochba rebellion was defeated, the Romans plowed over the city, destroying any remaining buildings and quashing any hopes that the Temple would be rebuilt.

When the month of Av comes in, we decrease celebrations, on account of Tisha B'Av, the greatest day of mourning on the Jewish calendar.

Comprehension Questions:

1. How many tragedies does the Mishnah list for Shiv'ah Asar b'Tammuz and for Tisha B'Av?

2. Which *Beit HaMikdash* (Holy Temple) was destroyed on Tisha B'Av? The first? The second? Both?

Thought/Discussion Questions:

1. Take note of how many historical time periods are included and how much time there is between the events from the Torah (the breaking of the Tablets, the spies' report, and *Bnei Yisrael's* response) to the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE and Beitar in 135 CE! It's more than 1500 YEARS!

What do you think the Mishnah is trying to teach us by putting all these events together?

2. Why do you think that we begin decreasing celebrations at the beginning of Av instead of limiting the mourning to Tisha B'Av?

Source 2: Talmud, Mesechet Ta'anit

a. [Ta'anit 26b](#)

משנזכרנו אב ממעטין בשמחה. שבת שחל תשעה באב להיות בתוכה אסור מלספור ומלכבס, ובחמישי מותרין מפני כבוד השבת. ערב תשעה באב לא יאכל אדם שני תבשילין, לא יאכל בשר ולא ישתה יין. רבן שמעון בן גמליאל אומר: ישנה. רבי יהודה מחייב בכפית המטה, ולא הודו לו חכמים.

Not only does one fast on the Ninth of Av, but **from when** the month of **Av begins**, **one decreases** acts of **rejoicing**. During **the week in which the Ninth of Av occurs**, it is **prohibited to cut one's hair and to launder** clothes, **but** if the Ninth of Av occurs on a Friday, **on Thursday**, these actions **are permitted in deference to Shabbat**. On **the eve of the Ninth of Av**, a person may **not eat two cooked dishes** in one meal. Furthermore, one may **neither eat meat nor drink wine**. **Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says:** One

must **adjust** and decrease the amount he eats. **Rabbi Yehuda obligates one to overturn the bed** and sleep on the floor like one in a state of mourning, **but the Rabbis did not agree with him.**

Comprehension Questions:

1. What is forbidden during the week in which Tisha B'Av falls?

2. What is the exception to this rule?

3. What is forbidden on the eve of Tisha B'Av?

b. Ta'anit 29b

וְאִסּוּר לְסַפֵּר וּלְכַבֵּס מִרֵּאשֵׁי חֹדֶשׁ וְעַד הַתְּעֻנִּית, דִּבְרֵי רַבִּי מֵאִיר. רַבִּי יְהוּדָה אוֹמֵר: כָּל הַחֹדֶשׁ כּוֹלּוֹ אִסּוּר. רַבִּן שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן גַּמְלִיאֵל אוֹמֵר:
אֵינוֹ אִסּוּר אֲלָא אוֹתָהּ שָׁבֹת בְּלֵבָד.

...And it is prohibited to cut one's hair and to launder from the New Moon until after the fast. This is the statement of Rabbi Meir. Rabbi Yehuda says: These activities are prohibited throughout the entire month. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says: They are prohibited only during that week of the Ninth of Av...

Comprehension Questions:

4. What are the mourning practices that are being discussed in the Gemara?

5. There are 3 opinions as to when the mourning practices begin and for how long they continue. What are they?

- Rabbi Meir: _____
- Rabbi Yehoshua: _____
- Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel: _____

c. **Ta'anit 29b**, cont.

תניא כלישנא קמא: ערב תשעה באב לא יאכל אדם שני תבשילין, לא יאכל בשר ולא ישתה יין. רבן שמעון בן גמליאל אומר: ישנה. אמר רבי יהודה: כיצד משנה? אם היה רגיל לאכול שני תבשילין — יאכל מין אחד, ואם היה רגיל לסעוד בעשרה בני אדם — סועד בחמשה, היה רגיל לשותות עשרה כוסות — שותה חמשה כוסות. במה דברים אמורים משש שעות ולמעלה, אבל משש שעות ולמטה — מותר.

It is taught in a *baraita* in accordance with the first version: On the eve of the Ninth of Av, a person may not eat two cooked dishes. Furthermore, one may neither eat meat nor drink wine. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says: One must adjust and decrease the amount he eats. Rabbi Yehuda said: How should one adjust his meal? If he is accustomed to eat two cooked dishes at each meal, he should eat only one type of food; and if he is accustomed to dine in the company of ten people, he should dine with only five; and if he is accustomed to drinking ten cups of wine, he should drink only five cups. In what case is this statement said? From six hours onward, however, from six hours earlier, all these practices are permitted.

Comprehension Questions:

6. What are the food-related prohibitions on the eve of Tisha B'Av?

7. Is Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel more strict or more lenient? Explain your answer.

Thought/Discussion Questions:

1. What is your “takeaway” from the debates in the Gemara? Explain how you came to your conclusions.
2. Do you think that the practices mentioned in the Gemara (the Talmud) actually decrease joy and increase mourning? Why or why not?
3. What kind of actions would you recommend to decrease joy and increase mourning?

Source 3: Peninei Halacha

a. [Chapter 8: The Customs of the Three Weeks - Part 1](#)

Even though the Sages did not make any special enactments to mark the suffering and mourning of the Three Weeks, the Jewish people adopted the custom to refrain from music and dancing, and to avoid reciting *She-hecheyanu* during this period.

There are other customs of mourning that various communities have adopted. Ashkenazim and some Sephardim, including Jews from Morocco and Djerba, refrain from cutting their hair during the Three Weeks. Other Sephardim are strict about this only during the week of Tisha B'Av. Ashkenazim, Yemenites, and most Sephardim do not conduct weddings during the Three Weeks. Other Sephardim are more lenient, only avoiding weddings from the beginning of the month of Av.

Comprehension Questions:

1. Did the mourning customs of the Three Weeks originate with the Talmud, or did they seem to come later?

2. What are the customs that were adopted regarding restrictions during the Three Weeks?

3. Do Yemenites align more with the Ashkenazim or with the Sephardim?

b. Chapter 8: The Customs of the Three Weeks - Part 10: Haircuts

The Sages instituted prohibitions against cutting one's hair and washing one's clothes during the week of Tisha B'Av (*Ta'anit* 26b). Accordingly, *Shulḥan Arukh* (551:3) rules that one may not cut one's hair from the beginning of the week in which Tisha B'Av falls, and many Sephardim follow this practice. One may not cut even children's hair if they have reached the age of ḥinukh (education), to train them to mourn the destruction of the Temple. The custom, moreover, is not to cut the hair of even children who have yet to reach the age of ḥinukh, to express the sorrow we feel during this period (SA 551:14).

Ashkenazim and some Sephardim – including Jews from Morocco and Djerba, and those who follow Arizal's customs – are stringent and avoid haircuts during the entirety of the Three Weeks.

Comprehension Questions:

4. Is the prohibition of haircuts a “custom” that was “adopted” or was it instituted by the Sages in the Gemara?

5. What is the rationale behind not getting a haircut?

6. Which groups are more strict about the time frame of this restriction? Which groups are more lenient?

c. Chapter 8: The Customs of the Three Weeks - Part 13: Meat and Wine

According to the Mishna (*Ta'anit* 26b), the prohibition on eating meat and drinking wine only applies to the *se'uda ha-mafseket*, the final meal before the fast of Tisha B'Av begins. Nonetheless, the *Rishonim* adopted the stringency of refraining from consuming meat and wine during the entirety of the Nine Days, because meat and wine are known to bring joy, and the Sages said, “When Av arrives, we curtail our joy.”...In practice, the Ashkenazic custom to abstain from meat and wine throughout the Nine Days includes Rosh Ḥodesh Av. This was also Arizal's practice. According to the custom of most Sephardim, however, one may eat meat and drink wine on Rosh Ḥodesh; the prohibition begins when the day ends (MB 551:58, *Kaf Ha-ḥayim* 551:125). We are

stringent on the tenth of Av as well, taking care to refrain from eating meat and drinking wine then too, because the Temple continued to burn on that day. Ashkenazim abstain only until midday on the tenth of Av, while most

Sepharadim are stringent until the end of the day on the tenth of Av (SA and Rema 558:1, *Kaf Ha-hayim*, ad loc. 10). The custom of Yemenite Jews is not to be stringent about this at all; they eat meat and drink wine throughout the Nine Days, only abstaining from meat and wine at the *se'uda ha-mafseket*, as the Mishna rules.

Comprehension Questions:

7. In the time of the Gemara, on which day(s) was it forbidden to eat meat and drink wine?

8. Which days do Ashkenazim and many Sephardim not eat meat or drink wine?

9. Which days do some Sephardim not eat meat or drink wine?

Thought/Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think that the mourning practices expanded throughout Jewish history?

Hint: think of the tragedies that have occurred over the last 1000+ years: discriminatory laws and taxes wherever Jews lived (in both Christian and Muslim lands), expulsions, pogroms, the Inquisition?

2. Ashkenazi Jews come from Western and Eastern Europe, which were predominantly Christian lands, while Sephardi/Mizrachi Jews come from North Africa, the Balkans, Turkey, and Greece, and the Middle East, which were predominantly Muslim lands. The Jews who originated in Spain and Portugal experienced both the "Golden Age" of Spain and then the horrors of the Catholic Inquisition. They fled and/or were expelled from the Iberian Peninsula. The Jewish experience in Christian lands was overall harsher and more marked by tragedy than that of Jews in Muslim lands. How might that historical reality have impacted the evolution of mourning customs and their restrictiveness?

3. Are you able to relate to the destruction and loss of the *Beit HaMikdash*? Why might it be more difficult or challenging for us today to relate to past tragedies?
4. Why is it important to have rituals and practices that remind us of tragic events and times in our history?
5. Do you think that the traditional restrictions actually achieve their goal of “decreasing joy?” Why or why not?
6. What customs and practices could you design to help you remember and be mindful of the collective losses and tragedies of the Jewish people throughout history?
7. What customs and practices could you design to help others remember and be mindful of the collective losses and tragedies of the Jewish people throughout the ages?

Final Discussion Questions:

If you have ever been on Ben Yehudah Street or the Machaneh Yehudah shuk in Jerusalem during the Nine Days, you know that it is totally bustling. There are lots of people, the restaurants are filled, people are shopping for everything, including clothes, and there is music playing. It is almost the furthest thing imaginable from a “mourning” atmosphere.

How do you think that the prophet Yirmiyahu or the Talmudic sages (who all lived WAY before the Jewish world divided into Ashkenaz and Sepharad) would react to the scene? Would they be outraged, horrified that the traditions and laws are being ignored? Or would they be overjoyed to see how Jerusalem is rebuilt, albeit not “finished?”