

SEVENTEENTH OF TAMMUZ -- שְׁבַעַת עֶשֶׂר בְּתַמּוּז

EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS

The Seventeenth of Tammuz is a fast day. It is one of the so-called “minor” fasts. Why minor? Because unlike Tish’a B’Av and Yom Kippur, this fast begins at daybreak, rather than the evening before, and requires abstention from food and drink only, but not from bathing, wearing of shoes, and marital relations.

What does the Seventeenth of Tammuz commemorate?

Passage #1

חֲמִשָּׁה דְּבָרִים אֲרָעוּ אֶת אֲבוֹתֵינוּ בְּשִׁבְעָה עֶשֶׂר בְּתַמּוּז....(1) נִשְׁתַּבְּרוּ הַלְּוִיחֹת, (2) וּבִטֵּל הַתְּמִיד, (3) וְהוּבְקָעָה הָעִיר, (4) וְשָׂרָף אֶפֹּסֶטְמוֹס אֶת הַתּוֹרָה, (5) וְהֶעֱמִיד צֶלֶם בְּהֵיכַל.

Five things happened to our ancestors on the Seventeenth of Tammuz....(1) The Tablets were broken, (2) the daily offering could no longer be brought in the Temple (animals could not be gotten during a siege), (3) the city walls (of Jerusalem) were breached (by the Romans), (4) Apostemos burnt the Torah, and (5) an idolatrous image was erected in the Temple. (Mishnah, Ta’anit 4:6)

[[Comment: We know very little about what (4) and (5) are referring to. We generally focus on (3) in connection with this fast, i.e. that it was the beginning of the end for Jerusalem in the Great War against Rome (three weeks later, the Temple was captured and burnt, on Tish’a B’Av). But the very first incident in the list (the breaking of the Tablets) deserves some attention, since it connects directly to the Torah reading for this day.]]

QUESTION: WHAT WERE THE CIRCUMSTANCES UNDER WHICH THE TABLETS WERE BROKEN? ARE THOSE CIRCUMSTANCES RELEVANT TO OTHER “LOW POINTS” IN JEWISH HISTORY? WHY SHOULD WE REMEMBER THE BREAKING OF THE TABLETS AT ALL?

(Continued)

Passage #2 (from Torah reading for public fasts)

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה פֶּסֶל לָךְ שְׁנֵי לוחות אֲבָנִים כְּרַאשֵׁי וְכָתַבְתִּי עַל הַלוחות אֶת הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ עַל הַלוחות הָרִאשִׁימ אֲשֶׁר שִׁבַּרְתָּ.....
וַיֹּאמֶר.....לָךְ נָא אֲדַנִּי בְּקַרְבֵּנוּ.....וְסַלַּחְתָּ לְעוֹנֵנוּ וְלַחַטָּאתֵנוּ וּנְחַלְתָּנוּ;
וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי כֹרֵת בְּרִית.....

The Lord said to Moses: "Carve two tablets of stone like the first, and I will inscribe upon the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you shattered".....

[Moses] said: "pray, let the Lord go in our midst.....pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for Your own"; [God] said: "I hereby make a covenant....."

(Exodus 34:1,9-10)

QUESTION: WHAT WAS SYMBOLIZED BY THE SECOND TABLETS THAT MOSES CARVED AND GOD WROTE ON? CAN YOU RELATE THIS IN ANY WAY TO YOUR LIFE? THE RABBIS OF THE TALMUD SAID THAT "BOTH THE SECOND TABLETS AND THE SHATTERED PIECES OF THE FIRST TABLETS WERE KEPT TOGETHER IN THE HOLY ARK". WHAT DO YOU THINK THEY WERE TRYING TO SAY?

Passage #3

אָמַר רַב פִּפְא: ...בְּזַמַּן שְׁיֵשׁ שְׁלוֹם -- יְהִיו לְשִׁשּׁוֹן וְלְשִׁמְחָה; יֵשׁ גְּזֵרַת הַמַּלְכוּת -- צוּם; אֵין גְּזֵרַת הַמַּלְכוּת וְאֵין שְׁלוֹם -- רְצוּ מִתְּעַנּוּן, רְצוּ אֵין מִתְּעַנּוּן

(Speaking of the various fast days, except Yom Kippur and Tish'a B'Av):
Rav Papa said: In a time of complete peace, these days will become days of rejoicing; in a time of persecution, these days are mandatory fasts; in a time in which there is neither persecution nor complete peace, those who wish to fast may do so and those who wish not to fast may do so. (Talmud, Tractate Rosh Hashanah 18b)

QUESTION: WHY SHOULD EXTERNAL, POLITICAL CIRCUMSTANCES DICTATE WHETHER AN ANCIENT FAST IS STILL OBSERVED? WHAT KIND OF AN ERA ARE WE LIVING IN? WHAT WOULD YOU RECOMMEND ABOUT OBSERVING THE FAST OF THE SEVENTEENTH OF TAMMUZ, AND WHY?