

Tammuz

The *mazal*, or constellation, for Tammuz is the crab. The seventeenth of Tammuz is a day with many meanings in our history.

It is told that Noach sent out a dove on that day to see if the flood waters had receded, if the mountain peaks were visible. It is a day on which we renew our covenant to protect God's world.

The seventeenth of Tammuz is also the day Moshe returned from the Mountain with the *luchot habrit*, the stone tablets with the ten commandments. As he approached the camp, he found the people dancing around a Golden Calf that they had erected when they lost faith in Moshe's return. In anger and despair, Moshe threw the tablets to the ground, shattering them to bits.

Later in our history (70 C.E.), the seventeenth of Tammuz was a day of destruction, when the Romans broke through the walls of Jerusalem and began their siege of the city.

These three events raise the themes of abandonment and commitment. Noach saw the rainbow as a covenant with God, that God's people would not be abandoned. After Moshe's departure for Mount Sinai, the people felt abandoned, confused, scared. And upon his return, he felt abandoned by the people, angry, hurt. As the Romans approached, the Jews of Jerusalem fought to not abandon their holy city. Then and now, we commit ourselves through song, Seder, and prayer to never forget Jerusalem. Each of these experiences of abandonment was followed by a recommitment of faith.

The 17th of Tammuz is a semifaast day: one fasts only from sunrise to sunset. All other prohibitions regularly found on full fast days are not enforced.

The group may wish to do a textual study of the Prophet Ezekiel Chapter 36 verses 24 through 28. (This is part of the Haftarah reading for Shabbat Parah, one of the four special Shabbatot leading up to Pesach.) These verses discuss moral purification and spiritual renewal, specifically related to the Golden Calf incident.

For I will take you from among the nations, and gather you out of all the countries, and I will bring you into your own land. And I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean; from all your uncleanness and from all your idols, will I clean you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you; and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My spirit within you, and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you shall keep My ordinances. And you shall dwell in the land that I gave your ancestors; and you shall be my people and I shall be your God.

Focal Points for Each Month

ז' אהבם בן-הגוים וקבצתי אתכם מכל-הארצות והבאתי אתכם
 ודמתם: וירקתי עליכם מים שחורים ופזרתם מכל סמאיותיכם
 ג' גליליכם אשרו אתכם: ותמתי לכם לך חודש ורוח חיה אתן בקרבכם
 ז' את-לך הארץ מבישרכם תנחתי לכם לך בשל: ואת-רוח אתן
 כ"ט ועשיתי את אשר-בתוך חלכי ומשפטי תשמתי ועשיתם:
 ב"ט בארץ אשר נתתי לאבותיכם והייתם לי ליעם ואנכי אהיה לכם לאלהים:

Various commentaries on these verses may be read and discussed, as considering the feelings of being sprinkled with clean water and hearts refreshed and warmed.

During the month of Tammuz (Parashat Pinchas Numbers 27:1-7), about the daughters of Tzelophchad. Tzelophchad had five daughters, Noa, Chogla, Milka, and Tirza. He had no sons. When he died, his daughters petitioned Moshe for the right to inherit from their father. They said: our father's name be lost to his clan just because he had no son. Give us among our father's kinsmen." Moshe brought the case before God and back that God said, "The plea of Tzelophchad's daughters is just: You give them a hereditary holding among their father's kinsmen; transfer father's share to them." And so set the precedent for women to inherit. How do we as Jewish women continue to enrich our community by questioning authority and advocating just causes?

Learn more about these and lesser known biblical women. Discussions of inheritance, both material inheritance and ethical and moral inheritance. Who do we inherit from? How do we use our inheritances? How our name reflect our inheritance?

Women's Yahrzeits:

Zivia Lubetkin—7th of Tammuz (1914–1978), a member of the Warsaw resistance and a founder of Kibbutz LoChamei HaGhetto-ot.
 Chaya Ehrenreich—11th of Tammuz (1887–1980), a founding member Women, a labor Zionist organization.
 Gertrude Stein—28th of Tammuz (1874–1946), poet, author, critic of the arts who left the United States for Paris in 1902 and established a salon for art and literature with Alice B. Toklas.

Av

The constellation, or *mazal*, for Av is the lion. When announcing the name of Av, we call it Menachem Av, Comforting Av. Av necessitates co

Tisha B'Av, the 9th of Av, is a full fast marking the destruction of both Temples and periods of tragedy in our history. For many Holocaust survivors who have no exact dates to observe the deaths of their family, Tisha B'Av becomes a *yahrzeii* (anniversary of a death) for their family members. Av becomes a time to look at catastrophic destruction, both historically and in our own times. It is a time of collective mourning. It is a time to connect, from a sense of deep mourning, with the tragedies of human destruction.

The Shabbat after Tisha B'Av is Shabbat Nachamu, the Sabbath of Comfort (the Haftarah is Isaiah 40:1–26 and begins, “Nachamu Nachamu Ami,” “Comfort, comfort, My people”). Shabbat Nachamu begins seven weeks of consolation, moving us from Tisha B'Av toward the Days of Awe. Rabbi Vicki Hollander writes:⁸

Av beckons

Let the tears arise
for they water
the garden.
They prepare the ground
to receive the seeds.

And from loss we look forward, toward what we have and may grow into. We sing Hashiveinu from Megillat Eicha, the Book of Lamentations, which is read on Tisha B'Av. The song speaks of renewal and return.

Hashiveinu Adonai eilecha V'nashuva
Chadesh, chadesh yameinu k'kedem.

הַשִׁיבֵנו אֲדֹנָי יְהוֵה אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְנָשׁוּבָה חֲדָשׁ כְּקֶדֶם

The great cycle of the Jewish year is a model, a metaphor, of the great cycle of life—and of the life of the Jewish people. Over and over, we move from birth to maturity to fulfillment, to what seems to be a death—but is really the seed of a new birth, a new life. . . . Tisha B'Av can teach us how to make a new beginning. . . . From the darkness of our mourning comes the night vision, the dream welling up from our unconscious, of new life. From the blankness, empty white space that surrounds the letters of the Torah, from the fluidity and openness, comes new direction. It is not empty blankness, but white fire around the black fire of the letters.⁹

In the Northern Hemisphere, Av comes during the hottest time of the year. How would you correlate each of the four seasons with each of the moon's phases?

Why? How would you describe yourself, in terms of the qualities and moods of a season? How does your body cycle correlate with the moods of the seasons and the phases of the moon?

Women's Yahrzeits:

Rebecca Kohut—8th of Av (1864–1951), a social worker, educator, and philanthropist. She was the president of the World Council of Jewish Women.
Ernestine Potovsky Rose—10th of Av (1810–1892), feminist and antislave activist.

Adah Isaacs Menken—21st of Av (1835–1868), a leader of the 1857 protest against exclusion of Jews from Britain's House of Commons. She was a dancer and appeared in flesh-colored leotard and tights on stage, becoming known as the “naked lady.”

Lillian Wald—28th of Av (1867–1940), a pioneer in the fields of social work and public health.

Elul

The constellation, or *mazal*, for Elul is the young child. Elul is the time of preparation before the Days of Awe. On Rosh Chodesh Elul, the shofar is blown for the first time in the season. It is blown each morning of Elul (except Shabbat) until the day before Rosh HaShanah. The trumpeting blast reminds us to awaken ourselves fully and to begin *i'shuvah*, the turning toward each other and God in anticipation of Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. It is a time to begin to ask for forgiveness.

ELUL אֱלּוּל, the Hebrew letters that make up this month, are an acronym for the verse from “Song of Songs,” “Ani L'Dodi V'Dodi Li’’:
אֲנִי לְדוּדַי וְדוּדַי לִי

I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine. At a time when we are turning towards each other and towards God, at a time of asking forgiveness, it is heartwarming to know that we are loved and can love.

The story of Joseph in Egypt with his brothers is one of the classic tales of *i'shuvah*. Read the story, beginning with the brothers' second visit to Egypt chapter 44:20–45:5.

Over the past year, how have we wronged another person?

How have we wronged ourselves?

What are we not yet able to let go of?

To whom do we need to ask forgiveness?