

DAYS OF FASTING

by Rabbi Berel Wein

Having just recently passed through the fast day of the Seventeenth of Tammuz, the Jewish world sadly prepares for the fast day of the Ninth of Av, the day that marks the destruction of both Temples and commemorates other later national tragedies in Jewish history. The penultimate day of fasting on the Jewish calendar is naturally Yom Kippur. However, Yom Kippur differs from the other four biblical fast days – the Fast of Gedaliah on three Tishrei, the Tenth day of Tevet, the Seventeenth of Tammuz and the Ninth of Av – in that it is not a fast day that commemorates any sadness or tragedy. It is rather a holiday, a day of peace and forgiveness, of contemplation, repentance and spirituality. In fact, Maimonides, in his great code of Mishne Torah, describes Yom Kippur as a day of rest and not as a fast day per se. Part of our *mitzvot* on that day is that we abstain and rest from consuming food and drink. Thus we see that there are two types of fast days that exist in Jewish life. One is to commemorate past tragedies and historical national events while the other is to be seen as an act of contrition and repentance and a means of spiritual self-improvement. Because of this second type of fast day, the one of repentance, there is a custom of *Behab* – Bet, hey, Bet – Monday, Thursday and Monday – fast days that occur at the beginning of Cheshvan and Iyar. These are days of repentance to ask forgiveness for any excesses of behavior that may have occurred during the preceding holiday months of Tishrei and Nissan. There also was an additional fast day observed in Ashkenazic Jewry of the Twentieth of Sivan, which commemorated the pogroms and destruction of large Jewish communities in Eastern Europe in 1648-9. Individual Jewish communities also instituted fast days to commemorate sad events that befell them. There was a time in Jewish life when days of fasting were common fare amongst Jews.

However, over the last century, fasting and fast days have become less common in the Jewish world, with the natural exceptions of the biblical fast days. Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, known as Chafetz Chaim, in his monumental work on halacha, Mishna Brurah, already noted that physical fasting was no longer possible for much of the Jewish people. He therefore proposed that instead of fasting from food and drink, one should *“efast”* by abstaining from speech on that day. The avoidance of silliness, pettiness, slander and obscenity, all of which are intimately associated with speech and words, would truly make the day one of both commemoration and of repentance and spiritual self-improvement. In today’s Jewish world even *Behab* is no longer observed that much as days of physical fasting. Rather, these are now days of special penitential prayers, charity and kindness. It has become apparent that in our more affluent society, the have find it more difficult to

fast than did our have-not ancestors of previous generations.

In the times that preceded the destruction of the Second Temple there were fast days instituted by the rabbis in times of drought. An entire tractate in the Talmud, Taanit, deals with these fast days and their ritual. In those times there were also many days on the Jewish calendar when a fast day was forbidden. These were special days that were anniversaries of miracles and glorious victories for the Jews against their foes. The record of these days was kept in a special book called Megilat Taanit. This work is still extant today but since the destruction of the Temple and the loss of Jewish sovereignty, the book is no longer empowered to prevent the declaration of fast days by the Jewish community. It has always troubled me that a special fast day in commemoration of the Holocaust was never instituted. The Chief Rabbinate of Israel wished to have Yom Hoshuah fall on the day of the Tenth of Tevet, so as to have a fast day as part of the remembrance of this great tragedy of Jewish history. The Israeli Knesset, in one of its less than wise decisions, instituted instead a moment of silence on the 27th of Nissan as the memorial for the victims of the Holocaust. This secular remembrance, devoid of any connection to Jewish tradition in these matters, has created a further rift in Israeli society. Instead of being a day of unity, which a fast day such as the Tenth of Tevet would have been, Yom Hashoah has become a day of dissension and further pain in Israeli public life. Perhaps a day of silence, a "fast" of inappropriate speech instead of only minutes of silence, would have been more appropriate.

Shabat shalom.

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