

# THE FIFTEENTH OF MENAHEM-AV

*by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom*

*Dear Haverim,*

I originally wrote this essay in honor of the birth of our third child, Aharon Binyamin, who was born on the 15th of Av.

This Monday morning, Roni will be davening at the Kotel (keVatikin) and reading from the Torah and getting his first Aliyah as he reaches the auspicious occasion of his Bar-Mitzvah - exactly 13 years since he was born.

In honor of this celebration, I am resending this shiur.

B'rakhot MiTziyon

Yitzchak Etshalom

I

THE CELEBRATION OF "TU B'AV"

The Mishnah in Ta'anit (4:8) records:

R. Shim'on ben Gamliel said: There never were greater days of joy in Yisra'el than the fifteenth of Av and Yom haKippurim. On these days the maidens of Yerushalayim used to go out in white garments which they borrowed in order not to put to shame any one who had none...The maidens of Yerushalayim came out and circle-danced in the vineyards...likewise it says: Go forth, daughters of Tziyyon, and gaze upon King Sh'lomo, even upon the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding and on the day of the gladness of his heart. The day of his wedding, this refers to the day of the giving of the Law. And on the day of the gladness of his heart, this refers to the building of the Beit haMikdash, may it be built speedily in our days.

The opening statement here is truly astounding; comparing the obscure festival of the fifteenth of Av with the "singular day of the year" - Yom haKippurim - challenges our perception and understanding of the significance of the calendar. In analyzing this statement, the Gemara (ibid. 30b-31a, see also BT Bava Batra 121a-b and JT Ta'anit 4:7) raises the following question:

I can understand the Yom haKippurim, because it is a day of forgiveness and pardon and on it the second Tablets of the Law were given, but what happened on the fifteenth of Av?

The Gemara provides six reasons for the celebration of "Tu bAv", five of which are commemorative

and the sixth seasonal: (The same list appears, albeit with minor variations, in BT Bava Batra; the presentation used in this essay is from BT Ta'anit. The Yerushalmi's presentation overlaps this one but is significantly different - an analysis of these differences is beyond the scope of this shiur. The full text of each of the explanations appears below).

- 1) The tribes were allowed to inter-marry.
- 2) The tribe of Binyamin was allowed to rejoin the nation
- 3) The generation of the desert ceased dying
- 4) The border guards, preventing people from the north to come to Yerushalayim, were removed
- 5) The dead of Beitar were allowed to be buried
- 6) The end of the season of cutting wood for the altar

## II

### ANALYZING THE LIST

There are several incongruities in this explanation. First of all, if this holiday is on a par with Yom haKippurim regarding its festive nature, why are its origins so murky? The presentation of six independent explanations indicates a lack of confidence about any of them. Wouldn't the "Hakhmei haMesorah" (masters of the tradition) have a firmer grasp on the genesis of this gala day?

Secondly, none of these explanations seems very convincing - why would, for instance, the cessation of dying in the desert be cause for a celebration the likes of which can only be sensed on Yom haKippurim? What is the great rejoicing associated with the end of the season of cutting wood that gives this day such a lofty place in our calendar?

Finally, if the fifteenth of Menachem Av was such a storied celebration, why does it go by nearly unnoticed by us? The omission of Tachanun isn't even a faint shadow of the day of which it can be said "There never were greater days of joy in Yisra'el".

In order to respond to these questions, we'll need to take a closer look at the six explanations presented in the Bavli, attempt to identify common features between them and reassess our understanding of this holiday .

## III

### THE LIST - EXPLICATED

#### A: THE TRIBES MAY INTERMARRY

Background:

In Bamidbar 27, as Mosheh is presenting the future inheritance of the people, the daughters of Tz'lof'had come before him. They are concerned that since, as per Mosheh's presentation thus far, only sons will inherit land. Since they are five daughters - with no brothers - and their father has already died, they are concerned that their father's name (see our shiurim on Megillat Ruth for an analysis of the connection between land and legacy) will be lost among his tribe. Mosheh brings their "suit" before G-d, Who responds by affirming their claim. Indeed, if a man dies with no sons, his estate goes to his daughter(s). All is fine until, in the final chapter of Bamidbar, the chieftains of Tz'lof'had's tribe (Menasheh) come to Mosheh with a similar complaint, on a more global scale. If Tz'lof'had's daughters inherit his land - which is part of the allotment of Menasheh - and they marry a member of another tribe, that land will eventually revert to that tribe (either through the inheritance of the husband if the wife predeceases him, or via the inheritance of her own children who are considered members of that other tribe. See the discussion at BT Bava Batra 112-113). Mosheh responds by noting that this is what the original command to B'not Tz'lof'had included - along with inheriting their father's land, they were restricted to marrying within their own tribe: This is the thing which the Lord does command concerning the daughters of Tz'lof'had, saying, Let them marry whom they think best; only to the family of the tribe of their father shall they marry ...And every daughter, who possesses an inheritance in any tribe of the people of Yisra'el, shall be the wife to one of the family of the tribe of her father, that the people of Yisra'el may enjoy every man the inheritance of his fathers. (36:6,8). From that point on, intermarriage between tribes was somewhat restricted - one could only marry a woman from another tribe if she had at least one brother. The Gemara maintains that the celebration of 15 b'Av is related to the suspension of this restriction, as a result of the conquest of the Land and the completion of settlement:

Rav Yehudah said in the name of Sh'mu'el: It is the day on which permission was granted to the tribes to inter-marry . Whence may this be adduced? Scripture says, This is the thing which Hashem commanded concerning the daughters of Tz'lof'had etc., [meaning] this thing shall hold good for this generation only.

## B: THE TRIBE OF BINYAMIN MAY REJOIN THE NATION

### Background:

The entire book of Shoftim ("Judges") is a spiraling series of narratives in which the fortunes and ethical/spiritual status of the people continues to degenerate to unprecedented depths. The book concludes with two horrific stories, the final one (Ch. 19-21) of which is known simply as "Pilegesh b'Giveah" (the concubine at Giv'ah). It involves a S'dom-like attack on a visitor to one of the towns of Binyamin, after which the members of Binyamin refuse to hand over the perpetrators for judgment. Civil war is declared and almost all of the Binyaminites are killed - only six hundred men (and no women or children) remain. At the conclusion of the war, we learn that even before the war: The men of Yisra'el had sworn in Mitzpah, saying, None of us shall give his daughter to Binyamin for a

wife. Now that the war was over, the people were anxious to find a solution for the Binyaminite remnant of six-hundred that would allow them to rebuild the tribe. First they located four hundred women in Yavesh Gil'ad, whose members had not been present for the oath. Subsequently, they advised the remaining Binyaminites to lay in ambush during the yearly festival at Shiloh:

And they said, Behold, there is a feast of Hashem in Shiloh yearly in a place which is on the north side of Beit-El, on the east side of the highway that ascends from Beit-El to Sh'khem, and on the south of Levonah. Therefore they commanded the sons of Binyamin, saying, Go and lie in wait in the vineyards; And see, and, behold, if the daughters of Shiloh come out to dance in the dances, then come out of the vineyards, and catch every man his wife of the daughters of Shiloh, and go to the land of Binyamin. (21:19-21)

We will yet return to this text, as it may hold the key to understanding the festival of Tu b'A v . Regardless, the two solutions offered so far were only "band-aids" (we can surmise that in future years, the women dancing in Shiloh were "on guard") and the tribe of Binyamin was still in danger of decimation, along with its official disassociation from the rest of the nation. Therefore, the Gemara's second explanation for the festive nature of Tu b'Av is that it commemorates the relaxing of the ban:

R. Yoseph said in the name of R. Nahman: It is the day on which the tribe of Binyamin was permitted to re-enter the congregation [of Yisra'el], as it is said, Now the men of Yisra'el had sworn in Mitzpah, saying: There shall not any of us give his daughter unto Binyamin to wife. From what was their exposition? - Rav said: From the phrase any of us which was interpreted to mean, 'but not from any of our children'.

## C: THE GENERATION OF THE DESERT CEASES DYING

### Background:

In Bamidbar 13-14, the tragic story of the scouts, sent by Mosheh, is retold. In the aftermath of their cowardly report regarding the upcoming conquest of the Land, the people wept and wailed, as a result of which they were punished with wandering through the desert for the remainder of forty years, during which they would die out. Their children, about whom they had fretted, would inherit the Land, while they would perish in the wasteland. According to the number of the days in which you spied the land, forty days, each day for a year, shall you bear your iniquities, forty years, and you shall know my displeasure. (Bamidbar 14:34). S'forno, ad loc., following Eikhah Rabbah and JT Ta'anit (see below), notes that the peculiar phrase a day for a year indicates that there would be one day each year during which the people would perish. The Midrash (Petich'ta of Eikhah Rabbah par. 33, paralleled in JT Ta'anit 4:7) explains in detail. Since the sin of the scouts (and the sin of the people's reaction) took place on Tish'ah b'A v , that was the day marked for those whose "time had come" to die. Every year on the day before Tish'ah b'A v , Mosheh would announce that everyone should dig a grave, in which each person would sleep that night. Whoever woke the next morning knew that he had another year, at least, to live. Every year, they found 15,000 dead. The final year, everyone woke

up. Thinking that they had made an error in calculating the date, they went back into their graves for another night. This continued until they saw a full moon (on the fifteenth), at which time they knew that the decree had been completed.

[Rabbenu Tam challenges this explanation - see Tosafot s.v. Yom sheKalu Bo M'tei Midbar, Bava Batra 121a. See another explanation at Tosafot s.v. Yom shebo Kalu M'tei Midbar, Ta'anit 30b. There are Rishonim who, in light of Rabbenu Tam's challenge, explain that the "Shiv'ah" for the final group of deaths on Tish'ah b'Av concluded on the fifteenth.]

One additional feature of this long period of perishing was the cessation of prophecy - which was restored after the decree was complete. Thus, in the third (and most famous) explanation for the rejoicing on Tu b'Av, the Gemara records:

Rabbah b. Bar Hanah said in the name of R. Yohanan: It is the day on which the generation of the wilderness ceased to die out. For a Master said: So long as the generation of the wilderness continued to die out there was no divine communication to Mosheh, as it is said, So it came to pass, when all the men of war were consumed and dead . . . that Hashem spoke unto me. [Only then] came the Divine communication unto me.

#### D: THE BORDER GUARDS WERE REMOVED

Background:

After the death of Sh'lomo, the kingdom was split into a northern monarchy, ruled by Yerov'am ben N'vat, and the southern Judea, under the rule of Rehov'am, Sh'lomo's son. Yerov'am was aware that so long as the central worship-site was Yerushalayim, the capital of Judea, his kingdom would not last. As part of his attempt to establish a separate identity, Yerov'am built two sanctuaries -one in the extreme north (Dan), the other near the border with Judea, in Beit-El. (I Melakhim 12:25-33). He also established a new festival on the fifteenth of the eighth month, to parallel (but be distinct from) the festival of Sukkot, on the fifteenth of the seventh month.

According to Rabbinic tradition, Yerov'am also established *mitsurim* (border guards) to prevent people from ascending to Yerushalayim, forcing them to worship at Dan or Beit-El. These lasted for nearly two centuries, until they were removed just before the conquest of the northern kingdom by the Assyrians. The Gemara records that the removal of this obstacle took place on the 15th of Av.

'Ulla said: It is the day on which Hoshea the son of Elah removed the guards which Yerovoam the son of N'vat had placed on the roads to prevent Yisra'el from going [up to Yerushalayim] on pilgrimage, and he proclaimed, Let them go up to whichever shrine they desire.

#### E: THE DEAD OF BEIT AR WERE ALLOWED TO BE BURIED

Background:

During the years 133-136 CE, Shim'on bar Kosba led a rebellion of Jewish freedom fighters against the Roman occupation of Judea.

When their forces were finally crushed, the enemy soldiers engaged in a bloodbath the likes of which have rarely (if ever) been seen. Rabbinic tradition maintains that the massacre at Beitar took place at Tish'ah b'Av (M. Ta'anit 4:6). One of the miracles recorded in Rabbinic tradition (see below) within this tragic episode is that although the Romans did not allow the Jews to come in to Beitar to bury the fallen heroes right away, they finally relented (evidently a week later) - and the bodies were found to be in "fresh" condition, no decomposition having set in. This permission took place on Tu b'Av:

R. Mattenah said: It is the day when permission was granted for those killed at Beitar to be buried. R. Mattenah further said: On the day when permission was granted for those killed at Beitar to be buried [the Rabbis] at Yavneh instituted [the recitation of] the benediction, *chynvu cuyv* (Who is kind and deals kindly etc) *cuyv*: Because their dead bodies did not become putrid; *chynvu*: Because permission was granted for their burial.

## F: THE END OF THE SEASON OF CUTTING WOOD FOR THE ALTAR

### Background:

The Mishnah (Midot 2:5) rules that any wood which has worms in it is unfit for the altar (see also MT Issurei Mizbe'ach 6:2). In order to make sure that the finest, driest wood is brought to the altar, no wood would be cut once the "sun's strength ebbed", i.e. by late summer. The Gemara adds a footnote - that since the days become shorter, everyone must use this opportunity to increase his study of Torah at night. Rabbenu Gershom (commentary to Bava Batra 121) understands the connection a bit differently: Since the people are not engaged in the hewing of wood, they are now more "at leisure" and can devote more time to the study of Torah. Here is the sixth - and only seasonal - explanation for the celebration of Tu b'Av:

Rabbah and R. Yoseph both said: It is the day on which [every year] they discontinued to fell trees for the altar. It has been taught: R. Eliezer the elder says: From the fifteenth of Av onwards the strength of the sun grows less and they no longer felled trees for the altar, because they would not dry [sufficiently]. R. Menashya said: And they called it the Day of the Breaking of the Axe. From this day onwards, he who increases [his knowledge through study] will have his life prolonged, but he who does not increase [his knowledge] will have his life taken away. What is meant by 'taken away'? R. Yoseph learnt: Him his mother will bury.

## IV

## THE TIES THAT BIND

A sensitive reading of these passages leads us to an interesting conclusion: There isn't necessarily a dispute among the Amora'im as to the origins of the holiday. R. Yoseph, for example, is the co-author of the last explanation, while he also reports the second one, relating to the reinclusion of Binyamin. (This is not found in the version in Bava Batra, as the first statement is attributed to R. Yohanan). We need not read this list of six events as six disparate options, rather as a range of approaches - which are mutually harmonious - to explaining an enigmatic festival.

In other words, if we can identify a common theme between the items listed, we will understand the underlying theme of the day and appreciate the different perspectives of that theme suggested here. The first observation about these events is that none of them is, *prima facie*, cause for celebration. Each is a restoration of the natural or proper order of things. There is nothing extraordinary about the member of the nation being able to marry across tribal divisions (A & B). Certainly, we do not normally expect people to dig their own graves every Tish'ah b'Av - so it is not unusual for everyone to wake up the next morning (C). Having a people divided such that members of one district cannot freely worship in their Sanctuary, which is housed in another area, is unnatural - the removal of the border guards is simply a return to the way things should be (D). Even ruthless tyrants allow their executed prisoners or vanquished enemy soldiers to be buried and returned to native soil. The brutality of the Romans is beyond the pale - allowing the martyred fighters to be properly interred is what should be expected (E). Although the final item - not an event, but a season - does not seem to fit this pattern, the argument could be made for inclusion as follows: The reason that the trees are free of worms until now is due to the searing heat which does not allow for dampness (and the consequent infestation of life) in the wood. A day when the heat loses its intensity such that life may resume is, again, a return to normalcy.

Once we have identified the first common theme among these six events associated with the 15th of Av, we need to relate this theme to the celebration.

Keep in mind that the Mishnah equated the joy of Tu b'Av to that of Yom haKippurim. What is the source of the festive feeling on Yom haKippurim? It is, undoubtedly, due to the restoration of a perfect, unsullied and untainted relationship between *tu v lurg ausev* and *ktrah og*, on the one hand - and between *tu v lurg ausev* and each individual Ben or Bat Yisra'el on the other.

Just as Yom haKippurim celebrates a return to "the way things ought to be" between Man and G-d, Tu b'Av is a commemoration of restoration of the way things ought to be among the members of Am Yisra'el.

This explains why the Mishnah ends by equating the celebration of the giving of the Torah - which is part and parcel of the joy of Yom haKippurim (see our Gemara) and the building of the Beit haMikdash, which is the unifying point around which Am Yisra'el rallies (see below).

This also explains some of the details of the celebration, as reported in the Mishnah: The *kujn* - circle-dance - which not only includes all but keeps everyone in the circle facing each other and the

borrowed clothes, designed to avoid embarrassing the poor .

This notion is presented from six different perspectives, as follows:

a) Although each tribe (and each family) has its own identity, its own flag and its own camp (see Bamidbar 2), the goal of the events which brought us to Eretz Yisra'el (the Exodus, the Stand at Sinai and the travails of the desert) was to unify us as one holy nation. The most intense expression of this unity is in the ability to weave lives together via marriage, which enhances and expands the fabric of each family and, ultimately, of the nation. In order to preserve tribal identity, it was necessary to restrict this intermarriage in some cases until the people were settled in the Land - but as soon as that restriction could be lifted and the potential for national unity restored, it was.

b) Following that thinking, sometimes it becomes necessary to distance a member of the nation - or even an entire family or tribe - due to the harmful influences they exert on the national enterprise of holiness. This is, again, a necessary - and temporary - evil which disrupts the national ideal. Once it has been determined that the family - or, in this case, the tribe - can be reinstated within the national body politic, that step is taken. Just as the generation of Binayminites that refused to hand over the villains of Giv'ah demonstrated a defiance towards the national interest and (those that remained) were thus distanced by the other tribes, once a new generation was born, the restriction was relaxed and the tribe was reintegrated.

c) The relationship between the people and their Land had been ruptured by the reaction on the part of the generation of the Exodus to the report of the scouts. Once the new generation, born (or raised) outside of Egypt took their place, that relationship could be restored. Once the annual plague on Tish'ah b'Av ceased, the new generation understood that they would soon be entering the Land.

d) The Beit haMikdash represents the focal point of unity of the people in their national-spiritual endeavors. All hearts, all mouths and all souls aim their loftiest thoughts, prayers and hopes towards that central House (see I Melakhim 8). When the kingdom was ripped into two, that tear was felt not only in political and military terms, but also in the loss of a united focus. As soon as a king (much too late in the game, unfortunately), allowed the possibility for everyone to ascend to that one cherished mountain, this unity was, at least in potential, restored.

e) The heroes of Beitar represented much more than freedom fighters. They were the last hope of a crushed population, looking to restore the former glory and to rebuild the monarchy and Mikdash. When they were massacred, it was a cruel quashing of national hope. Yet, there was one last act which the people could do to preserve the dignity of the nation - to bury its heroes. Part of the tragedy of Tish'ah b'Av was the imposition of a Roman restriction against this final act of kindness and honor. When they were finally allowed to be brought to rest, they were restored to their people. Even restoration in death is a form of unity and return.

f) As the Gemara comments in regards the "breaking of the axe", from this point on, the measure of one's Torah study is the measure of his life. As opposed to the interpersonal focus expressed in the



first five items, this one is intrapersonal - each member of Am Yisra'el returns to the appropriate balance in life - the heat (or work, as per R. Gershom) distract less and allow for more study, which is the source of our life.

V

## POSTSCRIPTS

One of the implications of this Mishnah is that the happiest day of the year is not a commemoration of extraordinary miracles or of a supernatural event; rather, our greatest celebration is a return to the proper relationship between the tribes, the people and their Land and the individual and his own spiritual growth. There are those who suggest that the festival of Tu b'Av was an ancient holiday whose origins may be found in the harvest dance in Shiloh mentioned in the Pilegesh b'Giv'ah episode. In Otzar haGe'onim (Volume 5, page 50), the similarities between the description of this dance in Shoftim 21:19 and that noted in the Mishnah lead to the following comment: All of this was a commemoration to the story of Giv'at Binyamin with that ordinance that they made for Yisra'el with marriage.

We may, indeed, find an allusion to the six events mentioned in the detailed description of this festival: And they said, Behold, there is a feast of Hashem in Shiloh yearly in a place which is on the north side of Beit-El, on the east side of the highway that ascends from Beit-El to Sh'khem, and on the south of Levonah

a) The mention of Shiloh here points to the unity of the nation (see Yehoshua 17:1) - as expressed in the ability of all tribes to marry together.

b) The context is, of course, that of the inclusion of Binyamin.

c) The mention of vnhnh ohnbn ("yearly") alludes to the phrase vbak ouh vbak ouh as part of the decree against the generation of the desert.

d) The inclusion of Beit-El in the directions to the festival hint at the southern Temple of Yerov'am, placed at Beit-El.

e) What is our association with Sh'khem? It is, as kōōzj say, a bloody city. Our first encounter with Sh'khem was the rape of Dinah, followed by the massacre of the city led by Shim'on and Levi. Yoseph was sold near Sh'khem - and the interested reader is directed to Shof 'tim Chapter 9 for further episodes in the bloody history of that city. The bloodbath in Beitar could be hinted to by the mention of Sh'khem. (See Midrash T anhumā Vayyeshev #2)

f) Note that the direction given here for east is not jrzn or vnse, but the fuller anav jrzn - literally "shining of the sun" - an allusion to the ebbing of the sun's heat on Tu b'Av.

[The interested reader is also directed to the comments of the vrut ire at the end of Massechet T a ' a

n i t . ]

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