

תשעה באב
בעת הקורונה
Tisha B'Av in the Time
of Corona Virus

מאת

הרה"ג ר' יעקב שולמן שליט"א

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Tish'a b'Av in the Time of Corona Virus

By Rabbi Yaakov Shulman

This year, with the Corona virus pandemic still stalking the earth, we will be observing the Nine Days and Tish'a b'Av with two considerations kept in mind: One, some adjustments in our practices, due to health and safety concerns, and two, a more profound awareness of our utter dependence on Hashem to redeem us from this Golus.

First, the practices.

Nine Days

1. Chazal tell us (Mishnah, Taanis 26b): משנכנס אב ממעטים בשמחה – From the day the month of Av begins, we minimize joyful activities. Thus, for example, starting on Rosh Chodesh, we refrain from cosmetically improving a home, which includes painting, tile work, landscaping, etc. Work to repair a home, such as plumbing leaks, appliance failure, etc., is permitted.
2. Laundering of clothes is not permitted for all nine days (Ashkenazic Minhag), including washing clothing to put away for after Tish'a b'Av or giving it in to a dry cleaner for pickup after Tish'a b'Av. Children are exempt from this Minhag, so their clothing may be washed during the Nine Days. Additionally, we do not wear freshly-laundered clothing during these days (excepting socks and underclothing), so anything we put on needs to have been worn at least once prior to Rosh Chodesh.
3. Bathing is restricted, as well. The principle here is to bathe/shower for hygienic purposes, not for the comfort or enjoyment of the experience. This would rule out swimming, too; young children, though, may need their daily swim on hot days.
4. We do not eat meat (or chicken, or anything fleishig for that matter) nor drink wine throughout the Nine Days. The exception is Shabbos Chazon, when meat and wine are permitted, as well as a Seudas Mitzvah, namely, a Bris or a Siyum on a Masechta. For Havdalah, the Minhag is to give the wine to a boy under Bar-Mitzvah to drink; if that is not possible, then the person who made Havdalah drinks the wine himself.

Erev Tish'a b'Av

1. The main meal of erev Tish'a b'Av is eaten prior to Mincha. Mincha at Cong. Talmud Torah is scheduled for 6:00 pm.

2. After Mincha, we can begin the Seudah Hamefsekes. Only one cooked food is permitted at this meal; the Minhag is to eat hard-boiled eggs. We sit on the floor for this meal, without removing the shoes. Preferably, one should eat bread or toast at this meal and dip the Hamotzi into ashes.
3. After the Seudah Hamefsekes, one may continue eating, drinking, brushing the teeth, etc., until the start of the fast at 8:13 pm.
4. After that time, all Halachos of Tish'a b'Av take effect.
5. Put on sneakers prior to going to shul. Maariv is scheduled for 8:40, immediately followed by Eichah.
6. In shul, some of the lights will be lowered, based upon the verse in Eichah (3:6) "He placed me in darkness." In addition, the Paroches of the Aron Hakodesh will be pushed aside.

Fasting

1. The Halachos regarding fasting take into account this year the possible presence of the Corona virus and its weakening effect on the body. Thus:
 - a. Anyone who is symptomatic should not fast, even if not confirmed to be infected.
 - b. Anyone who tested positive on the viral test (showing current infection) should not fast, even if not symptomatic.
 - c. Anyone with fever above 101 degrees Fahrenheit should not fast.
 - d. People in quarantine should fast, unless they suspect that they are symptomatic.
2. Any Choleh – sick person – who feels very weak should not fast.
3. Nursing women should fast. Pregnant women, with the exception of high-risk pregnancies, should fast, preferably resting when possible in an air-conditioned environment.
4. Anyone experiencing signs of dehydration, including nausea, dizziness, or extreme dryness of mouth, should drink immediately and not fast.

Tish'a b'Av Day

1. Men do not put on their Tallis and Tefillin for Shacharis, but instead put them on in the afternoon for Mincha. There are two Minyanim for Mincha scheduled at the Talmud Torah, at 1:30 and 7:40.
2. Due to safety concerns during the pandemic, we will shorten the amount of time spent in shul on Tish'a b'Av morning. Thus, while normally we recite Kinos until almost noon, we will this year recite only an abbreviated subset of the Kinos.
3. Most editions of Kinos number them in a standard sequence. We will be saying the following ones, representing about 40% of the usual number:

ו, ז, י"א, י"ב, י"ג, ט"ז, י"ט, כ', כ"א, כ"ג, כ"ו, ל"א, ל"ד, ל"ו, מ"א, מ"ה, מ"ו

4. We are not permitted to study Torah except for passages that relate to the Churban, to fasting, or to Aveilus.
5. We do not extend greetings to others.
6. We do not work until after Chatzos – midday (approx. 1:00 PM).
7. We do not sit on a chair until after the usual time for ending Kinos (approx. noon).
8. When a person needs to wash the hands, such as after going to the bathroom, one washes only until the knuckles.

After the Fast

1. Maariv is scheduled for 8:40 PM. The fast ends at 8:58.
2. Usually, the practices of the Nine Days continue until Chatzos on the 10th of Av. This year, though, since Tish'a b'Av falls on Thursday, we allow a number of activities earlier than usual, in order to prepare for Shabbos.
3. Thus, one may start doing laundry immediately on Friday morning.
4. Bathing and haircutting are also permitted Friday morning.
5. Meat and wine, though, as well as listening to music, are prohibited until Chatzos at 1:00 pm.

Redemption from the Golus

Megillas Eichah begins with the well-known phrase, **איכה ישבה בדד** – “How is it that she [Yerushalaim] sat alone?” In the Torah leining of Shabbos Chazon, Parshas Devorim, we encounter a similar use of language: **איכה אשא לבדי** – “How it is that I can carry them alone?” Both Moshe Rabbeinu and Yirmiahu Hanavi employ the word “Eichah” to introduce the concept of aloneness, and to express their dismay over the notion of isolation.

During this year of the Corona pandemic, we experienced aloneness as never before. We remained isolated in our homes for months, unable to join one another for davening, for Yomim Tovim, or for Simchas. We felt the anguish that Moshe and Yirmiahu voiced, and wondered when it would ever end. This question, too, we find in Eichah, at its conclusion: **למה לנצח תשכחניו תעזבנו לארך ימים** – “Why have You forgotten us for [seeming] eternity, forsaken us for such a length of time?” And the answer offered in the very next Posuk is directed at us, as well: **השיבנו ה' אליך ונשובה** - “Return us to You, Hashem and we will return.” We admit that our stay in the exile remains beyond our understanding; only a return to the service of G-d can extract us from it.

Similarly, during this pandemic we have come to realize that what goes on in this world is far beyond our comprehension. For all our advances in science, in technology and in medicine, we still have only the vaguest notion of the mechanics of this virus. How does one acquire immunity? How long does immunity last? Are there perhaps different strains circulating? What is the correct balance between safety and living our lives? Can our children attend school in September? The questions go on and on; the answers remain elusive.

With all the world's governments studying the virus, with all the pharmaceutical companies participating in the race to the cure and to the vaccine, with scientific task forces working day and night, with the CDC involved, the FDA, the WHO, all the three-letter organizations in whom we've placed our trust, we look around and still see infection rates rising in many places. What's going on? Isn't anyone in charge?

And it becomes clear that Hashem is in charge, just as He always is, the difference being that now the illusion that we somehow have control has been shattered. The Nine Days, when we sit in Aveilus over the loss of Yerushalaim and the Mikdash, brings home clearly this idea, that our Golus mirrors our distance from Hashem. When all of Am Yisrael will recognize that it is not mankind who runs the affairs of the world, warms the globe, and cures its illnesses, but that it is Hashem who does so, then we will tread firmly on the path to redemption. May this Tish'a b'Av transform into a day of rejoicing, with the arrival of Moshiach, amein.

כל המתאבל על ירושלים זוכה ורואה בשמחתה