

Asara Be-Tevet

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The Prophet Zecharia says:

“Thus said Hashem, Master of Legions, ‘the fast of the fourth [month], the fast of the fifth [month], the fast of the seventh [month], and the fast of the tenth [month] shall become joyful and glad occasions, and happy festivals for Yehuda” (Zecharia 8:19).

How are the months enumerated, and which fasts are referred to in the pasuk? Nisan is the first month, and all the other months are counted from Nisan. Hence, the “fast of the fourth” is 17 Tammuz, since Tammuz is the fourth month starting from Nisan. Similarly, Av is the fifth month; therefore, the “fast of the fifth” is Tisha Be’Av. The “fast of the seventh” is Tzom Gedalia (the third of Tishrei), because Tishrei is the seventh month. Finally, the “fast of the tenth” is 10 Tevet, since Tevet is the tenth month starting from Nisan.

The Jewish people accepted these fasts upon themselves because of the terrible events that occurred on these dates. We will focus, in this article, on the fast of 10 Tevet.

The Tannaim (BT Rosh Hashana 18b) disagreed as to the reason for the “fast of the tenth.” (The fast’s precise date depends on this machloket.) According to R. Akiva, the fast occurs on the 10th of Tevet, as that was the day the Babylonian king placed a siege around Yerushalayim. As it says in Sefer Yechezkel:

“Then the word of Hashem came to me in the ninth year, in the tenth month, on the tenth of the month, saying, ‘Son of man, write for yourself the name of the day, this very day; the king of Babylon has besieged Yerushalayim on this very day’” (Yechezkel 24:1-2).

In contrast, R. Shimon bar Yochai holds that the fast occurs on the fifth of Tevet, because on that day, “The news came to the exile that the city had been sacked.”

The Rishonim and Acharonim all ruled according to R. Akiva, and there are two reasons why they did so. Firstly, R. Shimon bar Yochai was R. Akiva’s disciple, and “halachah does not follow the student in place of the teacher” (Yalkut Yosef – Mo’adim, p. 529, comment 6).

However, there is yet another explanation. R. Akiva’s opinion reflects Chazal’s general approach of examining an occurrence’s roots rather than focusing on the event’s revelation. Tisha Be’Av is another clear indication of this trend. Although the fire that consumed the Beit Ha-Mikdash did not begin until the afternoon of the ninth of Av and mainly raged on the tenth of Av, we observe the ninth as the date of the churban, destruction. We are thus taught that the beginning was the critical time. At that point, rectification was still possible. However, since we did not merit rectification, we mourn that lost opportunity.

This idea continues to serve as an important lesson for us: Prevention is only an option during an event’s early stages. Once everything is revealed and in the open, it may be too late to apply the brakes.

Yet, we must understand that the fast days are not merely memorials of the past; they serve as

warning signs for the present, as well. Each generation that does not merit seeing the rebuilding of the Beit Ha-Mikdash is considered to have suffered the destruction anew. Therefore, Asara Be-Tevet is more than just a distressing historic event. As long as these days have not, as of yet, been transformed into days of happiness, we must recall that we are obligated to do everything in our power to enable that long-anticipated transformation.

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