

# The Fast of Tisha B'Av

A Date to Remember, A Date to Never Forget

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What I'm about to write are the collected facts on an unusual date in history – Jewish history. Then I have a short, odd, personal account of my own connection to the day of fasting on Tisha B'Av 2015.

Tisha B'Av means “the ninth (day) of Av.” It's the saddest day of the Jewish calendar and occurs in July or August on Western calendars.

If the inventive comedic movie *Groundhog Day* had instead focused solely on Jewish tragedies it would have been titled *Tisha B'Av Day*. What follows here are interesting, though brief accounts of actual events happening on the same date in different centuries, plus religious responses to this mystical truth. If you are a Jew, Jew-friendly or a Jew-lover, you will sorrow. If you are a Jew-hater, you will laugh and shake your head in amusement. If you are simply a curious reader, you will wonder how this could be. Tisha B'Av primarily commemorates a list of catastrophes and what follows is an *incomplete* list. The fast mainly centers on the destruction of the two ancient and holy Temples in Jerusalem.

The First Temple, (Solomon's) was destroyed on the ninth of Av, by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E. Approximately 100,000 Jews were killed during the invasion. The remaining tribes in the southern kingdom were exiled to Babylon and Persia. The Second Temple (Herod's), was destroyed by the Roman army in 70 C.E. Both on the same date, the ninth of Av, 655 years apart.

On Tisha B'Av, in the year 1313 B.C.E., the Israelites were in the desert wilderness having recently experienced the miraculous Exodus from Egypt, and were then ready to enter the Promised Land. But first they sent a reconnaissance team of 12 men. The spies return on the eighth day of Av. Ten out of the twelve reported that their enemies were unconquerable. That night, the 9th of Av, the people wailed and cried. They insisted that they'd rather go back to Egypt. God was so displeased with that generation of Israelites, that they never entered the Promised Land. Only their children had that privilege, after wandering in the desert for 38 years.

On Tisha B'Av, 135 C.E. the Bar Kochba revolt in Israel against the Romans was crushed. Many Jews believed Simon bar Kochba was the long-awaited Messiah. The Jewish rebels were brutally butchered in the final battle. Then the Romans plowed over the Temple Mount, the nation's holiest site. Out of approximately four to five million Jews in the world, over a million died in the failed war for independence. Many died of starvation, fire and crucifixion. So many Jews were sold into slavery that in the Mediterranean world the price of slaves dropped dramatically. Jews were also given over to the gladiatorial arenas and circuses.

On Tisha B'Av, in 1095, the First Crusade was declared by Pope Urban II. In Europe, 10,000 Jews died in first month of Crusade.

On Tisha B'Av, in 1290 CE, the Jews were expelled from England. The edict was not an isolated incident, but the culmination of over 200 years of increased persecution. All of their property was seized by the crown and outstanding debts payable to Jews were transferred to the King's name.

In 1492, in Spain, Queen Isabella and Ferdinand ordered that the Jews (apprx. 200,000) be banished from the land. The edict of expulsion was signed on March 31, 1492, and the Jews were given exactly four months to put their affairs in order and leave the country on Tisha B'Av. They could not take anything of value. Inquisitions in Spain and Portugal culminated in the expulsion of the Jews. Families were separated, many died by drowning, there was a massive loss of property. With one decree, Europe's most prosperous and affluent Jewish community was declared evicted and homeless, facing an uncertain future.

Moving into modern times. 1942 on Tisha B'Av, deportations from the Polish Warsaw Ghetto to the Treblinka concentration camp began—a death sentence for Warsaw's thousands of Jews.

On Tisha B'Av, in 1955, Israel's airline, El Al, lost it's only passenger plane ever, shot down accidentally over eastern Europe.

On Tisha B'Av, in 1994, was the deadly bombing of the AMIA building (the Jewish community center in Buenos Aires, Argentina) which killed 86 people and wounded 300 others.

Remember, this is an incomplete list. One date? Yes. Not a mathematical stretch. You may have fair questions on dates, coincidences, gaps in history and other occurrences. Yet, I wonder if there is another Tisha B'Av tragedy about to happen. What is it about that date?

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One man. A dozen men. Hundreds of women and children. Thousands of families. Millions. Then more millions. Death awaited. Because they were Jews—they were different (and remember, they killed Jesus). Yes, they brought on some of this by their own seriously mistaken decisions. God did some too, passively, as Scripture shows. Hate and evil did the rest—an army is always ready to do their bidding.

Bad karma? Don't think so.

In commemoration of these tragedies, Tisha B'Av is a centuries old day of fasting. The restrictions are similar to those on the Day of Atonement—Yom Kippur: to refrain from eating and drinking (even water); or brushing one's teeth. No washing, bathing, shaving or wearing cosmetics, engaging in sexual relations, or even studying the Torah is allowed. People are to refrain from smiles, laughter and idle conversation. No wearing of new clothes. Work is also restricted.

In certain synagogues, the Book of Lamentations is read in which the prophet Jeremiah mourned the (first) destruction of Jerusalem of his time. This helps set the tone for this tragic day. Mourning prayers and liturgy are recited. Black skullcaps and head coverings are worn by men and women. The ark (cabinet where the Torah is kept) is draped in black, and or, the decorative curtain that covers the front of most arks is removed. The ornamental and colored fabric mantles which cover the Torah and others scrolls are removed, so

even the Torah is unadorned on this mournful day. In some communities, for the evening service, the electric lights are dimmed and services are held by candlelight.

Not all Jews or synagogues are the same, this isn't a complete list of do's and don't's. There are other customs designed to prompt meditative moments...*and beyond.*

## After My Fast of Tisha B'Av

Now to me. I've found that the more I chose to adhere to my heritage, my bloodline, the more major and minor holidays I learn of and involve myself. Until recently, I had not known of the history and fast of Tisha B'Av.

The older I get the less I like to fast—that is, to *voluntarily* not eat. I've clocked in my days of serious fasting over the decades. Fasting is an exotic and private behavior—foreign to our affluent culture. Choosing to bypass the abundant edible produce around us appears backwards, unhealthy and purposeless. During recent decades, in softened America, a trend started in churches and some synagogues. If you don't totally fast from meals and liquids (a hard-core Biblical fast) for 24 hours or more, then deny yourself something else. Get out of your comfort zone—the more significant the better. No TV for the day. Or, no *favorite* TV show (yeah, I guess you can still tape it). Coffee? Then, no coffee. Coffee? Then, no cream. Coffee? Then, no sweetener. I know this is a real kick in the rear to the religious souls who are not consuming food or water. This year, my first Tisha B'Av fast, I chose the wimpy road. Some folks would say “not a fast at all.” What matters most is that what one does is done in earnest.

Understand some of my lifestyle—I'm self-employed and have time to myself. I work alone in a small room with no windows, in my unlovely basement. I listen to music—I love music—a wide variety too. I also listen and watch YouTube documentaries, audio books, radio interview programs, concerts, stories, and stop to see too many of those distracting whatchamacallits all over the Internet. If I'm making money, and can do that, I suppose some would call me lucky, and they'd rightly be envious. I've been able to pick 'n' chose for most of my adult life—and that's valuable.

Tisha B'Av, July 25, 2015 for me? I chose no basement entertainment for the work day. No auditory or visual stimulus. Now, some would call my self-denial “ridiculous.” Others would call it peculiar, interesting, and maybe something which God can use—can honor. (Yes, I had coffee—no cream, no sweetener.)

As I read over my compilation of the records of sufferings of my people, my “no stimulus fast” hit me as pathetic. I squirmed. But, I reckoned that I wasn't accountable to anyone—but the Big Guy. Man has made this such a deadly and *noisy* planet.

The days after the fast of Tisha B'Av, I was surprised that the daily drive in me to have music, talk shows, or radio to listen to lessened. Less culture, less input and fewer current events. This is now also true while driving my car or seated by the kitchen or bathroom table radio. I have less curiosity, less distracting need to know. Sometimes I think I've heard it all before. What do I mean? What had happened to me due to

my self-imposed religious restrictions? MORE: peace, silence, calm, quiet. Just me and my duties. That was a new one for me. I have craved that varied stimulus since...well, since my early teen years. The luxury of sights and sounds had lived as a constant requirement—silence was the enemy. Meaning: KEEP FINDING WHAT SATISFIES MARK!

Now, I don't think I'm missing something.

Some people eat too much. Some drink more than they should. They make crimes against themselves. We all need help. Sometimes it comes from unexpected places and unexpected ways. Did I need help? I'll let you decide.

I've lived and appreciated what's available electronically at my isolated office and shop in the next room. But the next couple days, as my stomach filled with coffee (just the way I like it), the want, or pressure, to pass the time with my audio/visual routine wasn't there. I gave little time to those creative efforts ready to audition for my entertainment. What does this have to do with slavery, torture, destruction and death? Very little. Very little, indeed. But I've changed. Changed in a way that's better and new, more focused. In my teen years, in Los Angeles, I started to fill my head with sounds, thanks to an increasing record collection, headphones, great speakers, radio, etc. I started ladling myself over-and-over. It's not that I'm older and tastes have narrowed, no. God, the divine Person, adjusted me. A stretch? Don't think so. He removed a pressure—one burrowed down deep—and I'm glad. True, a pleasurable source has less control of me. Could drinking chamomile tea have done the trick? Nope. Don't think so.

How did it work? I was obedient, observant to something that was somehow tied to God and important to Him. He recognized my minor sacrifice rooted to my heart. That pleased Him. Was it a coincidence I chose less stimulus and He chose less stimulus too? No, I don't think so. He helped me move past myself to enter into a newer self. I feel like there's more of me, and also less of me. The tweak? I think God is more invested in me than I am in Him.