



# NORTHWEST YESHIVA HIGH SCHOOL

presents

## Thoughts on Tisha B'Av

By Rabbi Bernie Fox, Head of School

Upcoming NYHS Events:

Monday, August 11, 2008 -- NYHS Class of 2012 Welcome Party at the home of Alex and Rachel Sassoon at 6:30 p.m.

Sunday, August 24, 2008 -- New Student Orientation Barbecue at NYHS

### Tisha B'Av, Devarim 5768

***There are days on which all Yisrael fasts because of the tragedies that occurred on these days. This is done in order to awaken hearts and to open the roads to repentance. These observances are a reminder that our evil actions and the actions of our fathers – that were like our current actions – brought upon them and us these tragedies. It is through recalling these things that we will repent, as it is said, “And they should confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers.” (Mishne Torah, Hilchot Ta’aniyot 5:1)***

Tisha B'Av is a public fast established by the Sages. According to Maimonides, the basic institution of a public fast is created by the Torah. The Torah commands us to observe a day of “fasting” when the nation or community is threatened by tragedy or disaster. The observance includes two basic components. First, the day is dedicated to *za'akah*—prayer. Second, we are required to consider the causes of the tragedy or disaster that we are facing. Specifically, we must accept responsibility for this threat and recognize that the danger that we are facing is a result of our own actions. The destiny of Bnai Yisrael is governed by providence. Our providential relationship with Hashem is predicated on our observance of the *mitzvot* and our dedication to fulfilling His will. If we are faced with eminent disaster, our own behaviors have provoked this state of affairs.

According to Maimonides the Torah *mitzvah* includes only these two components. There is no requirement to abstain from eating and drinking. The requirement to fast—abstain from eating a drinking—was added by the Sages.<sup>1</sup>

The Torah commands us to declare a fast in response to a specific threat when the threat occurs. However, the Sages established a number of annual fast days. The primary fast days are Tzom Gedaliah, Asarah B'Tevet, Shiva Asar B'Tamuz and Tisha B'Av. All of these fasts commemorate some element of the events surrounding the destruction of the *Bait HaMikdash* and the ensuing exile. Tisha B'Av, which commemorates the actual destruction of the Temple,

is the climax of this series of observances.

Although it seems reasonable for the Sages to require that we observe these four fasts in a manner that conforms with Torah-level fast days, there are certain significant differences. First, the prophet Zechariah characterizes the four fast days created by the Sages as days devoted to crying and lamentation. This element of lamentation is most apparent on Tisha B'Av. On Tisha B'Av a central element of the observance is the reading of Megilat Eicha and the *kinot*—elegies relating to the destruction of the *Bait HaMikdash* and other disasters that have afflicted Bnai Yisrael.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, Torah-level fast days—declared in response to a threat—do not include this element. Second, on fast days declared in response to a threat, the *Ne'elah* prayer service is recited at the end of the day. However, this service is not conducted on the fast days created by the Sages.<sup>3</sup> It is important to understand the reason for these differences.

As explained above, one of the central elements of a Torah-level fast day is the requirement to recognize that the threat that we are facing is a result of our behaviors. Maimonides offers a profound explanation of the significance of this element. He explains that the fundamental objective of the fast day is to encourage repentance. As long as we fail to see the relationship between our behaviors and the threat confronting us, we will not be motivated to alter our behaviors. But once we accept that our choices and behaviors are the underlying cause of our problems, we will recognize the imperative of repentance. It is clear from Maimonides' explanation that the fundamental objective of the Torah-level fast day is to encourage *teshuvah*—repentance. All other elements of the fast day are either designed to encourage *teshuvah* or are expressions of the actual process of *teshuvah*.

We can now reconsider the differences between Torah-level fast days observed in response of an approaching threat and the fast days established by the Sages to commemorate past calamities. Although every fast day

<sup>1</sup> Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Ta'aniyot 1:1-4.

<sup>2</sup> Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Ta'aniyot 5:11.

<sup>3</sup> Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Ta'aniyot 5:5.

has the same objective—to motivate *teshuvah*—the two types of fast days respond to different challenges and use different methods. In the instance of a fast day declared in response to an approaching threat, the danger being faced is clearly evident. It is not necessary to educate the community in this regard. For example, a Torah-level fast may be declared in response to a drought. It is not necessary to persuade the community that a drought --and the starvation and suffering that it will bring—is a disaster. However, in order to achieve the objective of motivating *teshuvah*, the community must recognize that its actions are the cause of this approaching threat.

The situation is different in the instance of the four principle fasts established by the Sages. In this case, the fasts relate to events in our past. We are separated from these events by centuries. In this instance, before the motivation to repent can be established, we must acknowledge the relevancy of the destruction of the *Bait HaMikdash* and the exile. We must acknowledge that these events are a national disaster and tragedy.

This distinction between the four fast days created by the Sages and Torah-level fast days explains the differences we noted earlier. On Torah-level fast days there is no major element of lamentation. These fast days are a response to an approaching disaster which we hope to prevent through repentance. We do not need to reinforce the significance of the approaching danger. We are already painfully aware of it. Therefore, there is no reason for including a major element of lamentation in Torah-level fast days.

However, in the case of fast days that commemorate tragedies that occurred in the past, a prominent element of lamentation is essential. This is self-evident when dealing with the fast days created by the Sages. Our generations—and all generations we have known—have grown up without the *Bait HaMikdash*. We have become accustomed to a reality that does not include the *Bait HaMikdash*. We accept this as the status quo. As a result, we must begin by considering the implications of the destruction of the *Bait HaMikdash*. The reading of Eicha and the various elegies on Tisha B'Av are designed to help us recognize the relevancy of this disaster that happened so many years in the past.

This explains another characteristic of Tisha B'Av. The fast day of Sheva Asar B'Tamuz initiates a three-week period of restrictions. As Tisha B'Av approaches, these restrictions become more severe. They reach their climax on Tisha B'Av. The restrictions are similar to those associated with mourning. What is the connection between mourning and Tisha B'Av? Based on the analysis suggested above, the connection is clear. We mourn in response to a loss. Therefore, in order to

help us recognize that the destruction of the Temple is a personal tragedy and loss, we are required to engage in the practices of mourning.

In this instance of Torah-level fast days, there is no need to foster sensitivity to the approaching tragedy. We are aware of and fear the approaching tragedy. We must recognize that our actions are the cause of our problems and we must turn to Hashem. In this instance, lamentation is not required. Instead, petitional prayer is appropriate. Therefore, we are required to recite the *Ne'elah* service—an additional petitional prayer.

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik summarized this analysis. He explained that there is a consistency among fast days. All fast days include an element of prayer. However, these two elements are expressed differently in the two types of fast days. On Torah-level fast days, the element of prayer is expressed through petitional prayer. On the fast days established by the Sages, the element of prayer is expressed through lamentations and elegies. Similarly, both types of fast days are designed to lead us to repentance. However, on Torah-level fast days repentance is encouraged by recognizing that our behaviors are the cause of the threats that are approaching. On the fast days established by the Sages, we must begin the path to repentance through mourning and recognizing the significance of the disasters in our past.

Rav Soloveitchik explained that there is a further distinction between Tisha B'Av and Torah-level fasts that can be explained by this analysis. The Talmud explains that on a Torah-level fast day there is a prohibition against *melachah*—labor.<sup>4</sup> However, this prohibition does not extend to Tisha B'Av.<sup>5</sup> According to Rav Soloveitchik, this is consistent with the above analysis. The emphasis on Tisha B'Av is on recognizing the relevance of past tragedies. This is accomplished through mourning. On Torah-level fast days, the emphasis is on recognizing the impact of our choices and behaviors upon our wellbeing. According to the Talmud, as part of the observance, the Sages would meet with the individual members of the community and discuss their actions and behaviors.<sup>6</sup> Rav Soloveitchik suggests that the prohibition against *melachah* is designed to create the opportunity for these discussions to occur. Therefore, because these discussions are fundamental to the theme of a Torah-level fast day, *melachah* is prohibited. However, on Tisha B'Av, the theme is one of mourning. This theme does not require a prohibition against *melachah*.<sup>7</sup>

4 Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Ta'anuyot 3:4.

5 Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Ta'anuyot 5:10.

6 Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Ta'anuyot 1:17.

7 Elyakim Konigsberg, *Shevrai HaRav*, (Orthodox Union, 1999), Part 2, pp. 1-3.