

Your response to the idea of going right through a tractate and using your insights as "cybertosafot" in a commentary on that tractate has been positive. Therefore, we are going to go back to the beginning of the section in Taanit we've been studying. This corresponds to Volume XIV of the Steinsaltz English Talmud. If you want to buy a book and be able to follow along in Hebrew and English, that's the one I'd recommend.

Why aren't we going back to the beginning of the whole tractate? Because the first passage of just about any tractate is, ironically, one of the worst places to start studying Talmud. It's almost always an extended look at all sorts of dimensions which will be raised in the tractate. It can be very difficult to follow if you don't know what's going on. In fact, I would almost never recommend that you start studying a tractate from the beginning. I would recommend you do it the way we will: we'll study the whole thing and then read the first passage. At that point, it will make sense.

What is the order [of service] on fasts? They carry the ark out to the open area of the town and they place burnt ashes on the ark and on the head of the Nasi and on the head of the president of the court and each and every one [else] places [ashes] on his head. The elder among them says before them words of admonition. "Our brothers, it is not said about the people of Ninveh: And God saw their sackcloth and their fast" but rather, "And God saw their deeds, that they had returned from their evil way. (Jonah 3:10)" And in the Prophets it says, "And rend your heart and not your garments. (Joel 2:13)"

They stand up in prayer. They send down before the ark an elder, who is well-versed [in the prayers] and who has children, and whose house is empty so that his heart will be perfect in the prayer. And he says before them twenty-four blessings, the eighteen of every day, and he adds to them another six. **(M. Taanit 2:1)**

Here's a little background to help make this passage somewhat more intelligible.

If, Kislev (the Jewish month that has Hannukkah at its end) comes in the land of Israel and two series of three fasts each have not made rain fall, then seven more fasts are decreed upon the community. This mishnah asks what sort of service is conducted on these seven fasts.

The ark used to be kept in a portable box and was carried out during services. The Nasi is a community official. Prayer services in the days of the Mishnah was a bit like jazz music today. There were no uniform prayer books as we have today. Each person who would lead services knew the basic contents of each prayer but could do "riffs" of their own design, as long as they were appropriate. The Amidah, the long prayer which begins "Elohei Avraham, Elohei Yitzchak, v'Elohei Ya'akov...", normally has eighteen benedictions in it on a weekday (actually nineteen, but that's a discussion for another day). On a fast day, extra prayers would be added to these eighteen prayers.

One more note. Tractate Taanit is not like most of the other tractates of the Bavli in that the mishnayot are cited right at the beginning of each chapter instead of interspersed throughout it. So we'll be doing a few weeks of Mishnah before we get to the Gemara. If you like studying in Hebrew, these are the weeks to do it since Mishnaic Hebrew is relatively easy.

Here are some discussion questions to guide your thoughts:

1. Take a look at the "production values" described in this service. How would your services be different if the ark moved? If you could take services outdoors? If your prayer leaders used visible, symbolic gestures such as putting ashes on the ark and on themselves and on you? If the prayer leader were chosen for character and sincerity? How could we reincorporate some of this fluidity and creativity and use of symbolism into our services?
2. What if there were a standing admonition before fasting services (e.g., Yom Kippur) that just showing up, or even just fasting, wasn't the point? That you really have to change for this whole service to be effective? Would it help your prayer? Would it drive people away? How would you have to do it for the admonition to be effective?

3. The prayer leader had to have the intellectual skill (be fluent in the prayers), the life-experience (he's an elder) and the appropriate affect (his children are hungry and dependent on him). Could we ever conceivably use this as our criteria for who should lead prayers today? Could we rotate this role as people came to suit these categories? What would it be like if we did this? You'd have to know the people you prayed with and their qualities. How would that change your prayer community? Do you, in fact, have this sort of environment when you pray? What are its advantages and disadvantages?

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