

Originally posted 2/5/96

Greetings and Happy Tu B'Shevat.

*This way of sharing Talmud continues to be a joy for me and I hope for you, too. We continue to grow and, as we do, I think some changes are in order. From now on, I am going to edit the discussion summaries to make them a manageable length. I will continue to respond to each post personally and you are welcome to mark those insights which you especially wish the rest of the group to see. I hesitate to take this step because each and every one of your insights is a treasure to me. However, I want to make this group easy for folks to use.*

This week we continue studying the mishnah that discusses how fasts were conducted in the days of the Temple. This week's mishnah passage outlines how the fasts affected different persons connected with the Temple. As usual, we're going to need a bit of background for this to make sense.

Here's some of the information you'll need to know:

### **Priests**

*Mishmar*: The priests were divided into 24 groups called *mishmarot* (*mishmar*, singular). *Mishmar* means "watch". Each *mishmar* served for one week at a time and so served for approximately 2 weeks a year. This makes sense if you remember that under king Josiah (c. 622 BCE) the "local" altars were closed down and worship was centralized in Jerusalem. What could be done with all those out of work priests who'd been downsized out of a job? You gave each group from different locales a shift at the Temple. (Some people theorize that it was these out-of-work priests who put the Torah together.)

*Beit Av*: This is literally "a father's house" (plural: *batei av*), i.e. Paternal families. Each *mishmar* was divided into six paternal families and they each served one day a week.

(Ancient Mesopotamia had a base-60 number system which you can see at work here. This is why we have 60 seconds in a minute, 360 degrees in a circle, and so forth.)

### **Laypersons**

*Ma'amad*: Each priestly *mishmar* had a group of lay-persons connected to it called a *ma'amad* (a post or division). When the *mishmar* would go serve at the Temple, a delegation from the *ma'amad* went with this group of priests and represented their "district" in the national center. The folks who stayed home kept a vigil while their delegation served in the Temple.

### **Fasts**

We have begun our studies in the middle of this tractate. So you'll need to know that earlier, the tractate tells us that there were a series of fasts in response to drought. First, there are three fasts. If these do not produce rain there is another series of three fasts. If these fasts do not bring rain there is a third series of seven fasts. Obviously, the situation becomes more and more desperate as the drought continues. Earlier (Mishnah Taanit 1:5-6) outlined how the general population was to fast. Now, in this mishnah, we'll see how these rules apply, or don't apply, to the priests who are officiating in the Temple during the fasts and to their lay-supporters.

### **Mishnah Taanit 2:6-7, Bavli Taanit 15b, Steinsaltz Volume 14, pp. 8 10:**

[On] the first three fasts, the members of the *mishmar* fast but do not complete [their fast], and members of the *beit av* do not fast at all.

[On] the second three [fasts] the members of the *mishmar* fast and complete [their fast], and the members of the *beit av* fast but do not complete [their fast].

[On] the last seven [fasts], both these and those complete [their fast]. [These are] the words of Rabbi

Yehoshua.

But the sages say:

[On] the first three fasts, both these and those do not fast at all.

[On] the second three [fasts], the member of the mishmar fast but do not complete [their fast], and the members of the beit av do not fast at all.

[On] the last seven fasts, the members of the mishmar fast and complete [their fast], and the members of the beit av but do not complete [their fast].

The members of the mishmar are permitted to drink wine in the nights but not the days. And the members of the beit av [drink] neither in the day nor in the night.

The members of the mishmar and the members of the ma'amad are forbidden to cut their hair or wash their clothes. But on Thursday they are permitted because of the honor of Shabbat.

## More Background

Let's make the analogy to today's hospitals, and I think it will become a bit clearer.

The *mishmar* are doctors who are attending physicians in the hospital this month. The *beit av* are the physicians who are on call tonight. The *ma'amad* are the families of the patients who are sitting in the waiting room while the surgery is going on or waiting for visiting hours to start. As a member of the patient's family, you want the physicians operating on your relative in top form. You don't want them to be faint from hunger, intoxicated or hung over. This is the rationale behind these different rulings. Of course, a priest had to be in possession of all his faculties to perform the service correctly. A priest who was intoxicated invalidated his offering.

Now, what is this business about haircuts and laundry? One should arrive at the Temple with trimmed hair and clean clothes. So they prohibit people from doing these tasks in the middle of the week to force them, as it were, to do these chores before the week "on duty" at the Temple starts. Only the Sabbath overrides this principle. It really is rather like preparing for a hospital stay. You stock the freezer, get your hair cut, do as many chores as you can so that you won't have to do them while you're recuperating. For example, before a baby comes, one often rushes about trying to get shopping, haircuts and cleaning done before the delivery.

## Discussion Questions

1. As the drought becomes more and more severe, the priests must take on more and more of the burden of the community. Whose views are more lenient, those of Rabbi Yehoshua or the sages? You may want to make a chart which contrasts their two views. We gave the example of physicians keeping themselves in top form in order to operate. Is there another analogy you can make with today's world that sheds light on this issue? If so, do you tend to favor the sages' or Rabbi Yehoshua's views?
2. There is a beauty to the priestly hierarchy and the Mishnah's poetic account of it: everyone has a role to play. There is order and meaning and ritual expression of both. What benefit could a person receive from such a system? What harm could come from such a system? Where, for you, does the balance lie? Do you find this order in your religious community? If so, where? Remember, the priests and the Temple aren't alone: they are reflections here on earth of the heavenly congregation of angels above. Does that insight change your thinking on this issue?
3. Tu Bishvat bonus question: It is the time of planting. How is going ahead and learning this slightly arcane material about the Temple, and other seemingly irrelevant topics in the Talmud, like planting a tree? When do you figure you'll be able to harvest this fruit?

&copy;1996; Judith Z. Abrams

Maqom is a non-profit organization. For information about tax-deductible contributions to Maqom, about becoming a Maqom Associate (a \$36 annual contribution), or for sponsoring a weekly Talmud portion please send [e-mail](#) to Maqom or snail mail to P.O.Box 31900-323 Houston, TX 77231.

We are grateful for our [Maqom Associates](#).

Maqom: A Place for the Spiritually Searching admits students of any race, color and national or ethnic origin.

---

*[Return to MAQOM homepage](#)*