

Originally posted 2/19/96

Dear Friends,

As our group continues to grow, I continue to enjoy and learn from your comments, questions and suggestions. The feedback on the new "edited" version of the discussion page has been positive, so we'll be sending out this shortened version to you.

Our new passage is the last bit of Mishnah in this chapter before we begin the Gemara's commentary. As usual, there's some background you'll need to know so that it makes sense...

What is Megillat Ta'anit?

Megillat Ta'anit literally means "Scroll of Fasting" but (lest we invite the evil eye) it is actually a list of 36 days on which there were significant victories and happy events during the Second Temple period. On these days fasting is prohibited and sometimes, as we'll see in our mishnah, eulogizing the dead is prohibited as well. This work was probably finished around the time of the Second Temple's destruction (70 C.E.). No dates after 67 C.E. are listed and the observance of these happy days was rescinded in the third century.

Eulogizing and Fasting:

On all the days listed in Megillat Ta'anit, one may not fast. Only on some selected days is eulogizing the dead also forbidden. A eulogy might go on for quite some time, so the sages did not want people to eulogize on the day before a holiday as they might go on till evening fell and thus violate the spirit of the festival day itself. However, once the holiday was passed, there was no need to worry that the holiday would be saddened and eulogizing was permitted.

The sages allow fasting on the day before one of these holidays and on the day after. Rabbi Yose disagrees and fears lest one fast on the holiday and forbids it the day before the holiday. But after the holiday is over one can fast freely.

Mondays and Thursdays:

In the sages' days, villagers came to town to sell their wares at the market and to attend court. In memory of this, we still say longer prayers (*tachanun*) as well as read Torah on these days. Just as we do today, people stock up before a fast so that they are sure to have enough food wherewith to break the fast. On Thursday, people buy food for Shabbat, so the demand for food is already high on that day. Add a fast on top of that and the sages felt that some merchants might be tempted to price-gouge.

The law, interestingly, is according to Rabbi Yose here: fast series always begin on Mondays even in places where there's no fear of price-gouging.

The Ninth of Av

Tisha b'Av, the ninth of the month of Av, commemorates the destruction of both the first and second Temples, in 586 B.C.E. and 70 C.E. respectively. According to our calendar today, it never falls on a Friday. However, in the sages' days, when the calendar was set by observing the moon, it could fall on a Friday. If such was the case, the end of this twenty-four hour fast was cut short so as not to sadden the Shabbat.

Three sages are mentioned in this passage and it may help you to know a bit about them:

Rabbi Yose (ben Chalafta), a fourth (139-165 C.E.) generation Tanna was a disciple of Rabbi Akiba. He was a great and fair-minded scholar; always trying to take every aspect of a problem into account. So great was his scholarship that whenever there is a conflict between him and his contemporaries, Rabbis Meir, Judah and Simon, his opinion is always adopted. In addition to his intellectual gifts, he was also humble and righteous. It is said that Elijah was revealed to him every day.

Rabbi Meir was a fourth generation (139-165) Tanna. His ordination was confirmed by Rabbi Judah ben Baba, after having been ordained by Rabbi Akiba quite early in his (Meir's) career. He was the most prominent of Akiba's

disciples and continued Akiba's work in arranging the material of the oral law according to subjects. In this way he helped prepared the great Mishnah compilation of Judah HaNasi. Rabbi Meir's legal opinions are mentioned in almost every book of the Mishnah.

Rabban Gamliel was a second generation Tanna. After the Second Temple was destroyed in 70 C.E., Jerusalem came under Roman occupation and could no longer function as the spiritual center for Judaism. Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai therefore formed an academy in Yavneh to preserve the traditions of the Jewish people. After Johanan ben Zakkai died, Rabban Gamliel became the president of the Academy. He wanted to secure Yavneh's status as the spiritual center of Judaism. To that end he exercised his authority as Nasi, the President of the Academy, so harshly that he was eventually expelled from office. He was, however, reinstated shortly thereafter.

Mishnah Taanit 2:8-10, Bavli Taanit 15b, Steinsaltz, Volume 14, pp. 10-12

[On] all [the days] that are written in Megillat Ta'anit "not to eulogize", it is forbidden [the day] before [but] it is permitted [the day] after.

Rabbi Yose says: It is forbidden [the day] before and [the day] after.

"Not to fast"--it is permitted [the day] before and [the day] after.

Rabbi Yose says: It is forbidden [the day] before, [but] it is permitted [the day] after.

We do not decree a fast on the community beginning on Thursday, in order not to raise prices. Rather, the first three fasts are [on] Monday and Thursday and Monday, and the second three [fasts] are on Thursday [and] Monday and Thursday.

Rabbi Yose says: Just as the first [ones] do not [begin] on Thursday, so too the second [ones] do not and the last [ones] do not.

We do not decree a fast on the community on New Moons, on Hannukkah, or on Purim. But if they have [already] started, they do not interrupt. [These are] the words of Rabban Gamliel.

Rabbi Meir said: Even though Rabban Gamliel said [that] they do not interrupt, he would agree that they do not complete [the fast]. And likewise the Ninth of Av which falls on the eve of Shabbat.

Discussion Questions

1. The issue in this passage is the balance that must be struck between the eternal cycle of Israel's festival year and the pressing needs of the community *right now*. The joy can't be allowed to utterly override the pain and vice versa. How do you strike the balance in your own life between communal, eternal happiness and your own personal, immediate sadness? Can you feel the happiness at Purim when you are in mourning? How can this mishnah help us develop the discipline and perspective we need to put our immediate pain in eternal, communal context?
2. Rabbi Yose seems concerned to preserve the festive nature of the holidays while the anonymous majority of sages seem less concerned with possible infringements. How do you make festival days special? What don't you allow into your festivities? How do you do something similar for Shabbat? If you could make a Megillat Ta'anit of modern Jewish life, what festive days and victories would it include? Yom Ha'atsma'ut? What else?
3. Usually, only the anonymous majority has the law decided in its favor. An individual rarely merits this honor. But Rabbi Yose's teaching about when fasts can start is turned into law. In general, we could say that the sages take extraordinary care to be sensitive to the needs of those with little money. How could we adopt Rabbi Yose's stance in the Jewish community today?

©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](#)