

RITUALS OF RESILIENCE: FASTING, PRAYER, AND CHALK OUTLINES

Reb Irwin Keller – Shavuot 5782



Mishnah Ta'anit 1 – Community Fasting in Case of Drought, with Mounting Severity

הגיע שבִּעָה עֶשֶׂר בְּמִרְחָשׁוֹן וְלֹא יָרְדוּ גְשָׁמִים, הִתְחִילוּ הַיְחִידִים מִתְעַנֵּן שְׁלֹשׁ תַּעֲנִיּוֹת. אוֹכְלִין וְשׂוֹתִין מִשְׁחִשְׁכָּה, וּמְתַרֵּין בְּמִלְאָכָה וּבְרַחֲצִיָּה וּבְסִיכָה וּבְנֻעִילַת הַסַּנְדֵּל וּבְתַשְׁמִישׁ הַמָּטָה:

If the 17th of Heshvan (25 days after Sukkot ends) arrives and rain has not fallen, individuals begin to fast three fasts for rain. The fast begins in the morning. One may eat and drink after dark, and during the fast one is permitted to engage in work, bathe, rub oil on one's body, wear shoes, and have sexual relations.

If the new moon of Kislev arrives (37 days after Sukkot ends) and rain has still not fallen, the *beit din* declares three fasts on the entire community. One may eat and drink after dark, and during the fast one is permitted to engage in work, bathe, rub oil on one's body, wear shoes, and have sexual relations.

If these three prescribed fasts have passed and they have not been answered with rain, the *beit din* declares three additional fasts on the community. These are severe fasts. One may eat and drink only while it is still day of the eve before. On the day of the fast itself one is prohibited from work, bathing, rubbing one's

body with oil, wearing shoes, and engaging in sexual relations. The bathhouses will be locked so no one bathes that day.

If these three fasts have passed and they still have not been answered, the *beit din* declares another seven fasts, making a total of thirteen fasts decreed upon the community. These seven fast days are more severe; in addition to all the earlier stringencies, they sound the alarm and they lock the storehouses...

If these fasts have passed and they have not been answered the *beit din* does not decree additional fasts, but the entire community observes the customs of mourning. They decrease their engagement in business, in building and planting, in betrothals and marriages, and in greeting each other, like people who have been rebuked by God. Certain individuals, i.e., Torah scholars, resume fasting every Monday and Thursday until the month of Nisan ends (at which point one no longer prays for rain).

עֲמָדוֹ בַתְּפִלָּה, מוֹרִידֵינִי לְפָנֵי הַתֵּבָה זָקֵן וְרָגִיל, וְיֵשׁ לוֹ בָּנִים, וּבֵיתוֹ רִיקָם, כְּדֵי שְׂיֵהָא לְבוֹ שְׁלָם בַתְּפִלָּה, וְאוֹמֵר לְפָנֵיהֶם עֲשָׂרִים וְאַרְבַּע בְּרָכוֹת, שְׂמֵנָה עֶשְׂרֵה שְׁבָכָל יוֹם, וּמוֹסִיף עֲלֵיהֶן עוֹד שֵׁשׁ:

[On such a fast day, the congregation] would stand in prayer; appointing an elder, who is experienced in leading prayer, to stand before the ark. This prayer leader must have children and must have an empty house (i.e., he must be poor) so that his heart will be fully focused on the prayer for the community's needs. He recites 24 blessings: the 18 of the everyday *Amidah* prayer, to which he adds another six blessings, as follows:

The *zikhronot* and *shofarot* blessings of Rosh Hashanah; the psalms beginning with “In my distress I called to Adonai and Adonai answered me” (Psalm 120:1), “I will lift up my eyes to the mountains; from where will my help come” (Psalm 121:1), “Out of the depths I have called You, Adonai” (Psalms 130:1), and “A prayer of the afflicted, when he faints” (Psalms 102:1). Rabbi Yehuda says: instead of the *zikhronot* and *shofarot* passages, the leader should recite the passage beginning with: “If there be famine in the land, if there be pestilence” (I Kings 8:37), followed by the verse “The word of Adonai that came to Jeremiah concerning the droughts” (Jeremiah 14:1). And he recites at the end of each of these six blessing their own special tag.

For the conclusion of the first blessing: Redeemer of Israel, he recites: He Who answered Abraham on Mount Moriah (see Genesis 22:11–18), He will answer you and hear the sound of your cry on this day. Blessed are You, Adonai, Redeemer of Israel.

For the second blessing, to which he adds the verses of *zikhronot*, he recites: He Who answered our forefathers at the Red Sea (see Exodus 14:15–

31), He will answer you and hear the sound of your cry on this day. Blessed are You, Adonai, Who remembers the forgotten.

For the third blessing, which includes the verses of *shofarot*, he recites: He Who answered Joshua at Gilgal, when they sounded the *shofar* in Jericho (see Joshua 5:6), He will answer you and hear the sound of your cry on this day. Blessed are You, Adonai, Who hears the shofar blast.

For the fourth blessing, he recites: He Who answered Samuel in Mitzpah (see I Samuel, chapter 7), He will answer you and hear the sound of your cry on this day. Blessed are You, Adonai, Who hears cries.

For the fifth he recites: He Who answered Elijah on Mount Carmel (see I Kings, chapter 18), He will answer you and hear the sound of your cry on this day. Blessed are You, Adonai, Who hears prayer.

For the sixth blessing he recites: He who answered Jonah from within the belly of the fish (see Jonah 2:2–11), He will answer you and hear the sound of your cry on this day. Blessed are You, Adonai, Who answers in a time of trouble.

For the conclusion of the seventh blessing, which is actually the sixth additional blessing, as the first blessing listed here is an expanded version of a regular weekday blessing, he recites: He Who answered David and Solomon his son in Jerusalem (see I Kings 8:12–53), He will answer you and hear the sound of your cry on this day. Blessed are You, Adonai, Who has mercy on the Land.

Mishnah Ta'anit 3 – Fasting and Crying Out Without Delay

סֹדֵר תַּעֲנִיּוֹת אֵלּוּ הָאֲמוּר, בְּרַבִּיעָה רֵאשׁוֹנָה. אֶבֶל צָמְחִים שְׁשָׁנוּ, מִתְרִיעִין עֲלֵיהֶם מִיָּד. וְכֵן שֶׁפָּסְקוּ גִשְׁמִים בֵּין גִּשְׁם לְגִשְׁם אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם, מִתְרִיעִין עֲלֵיהֶם מִיָּד, מִפְּנֵי שֶׁהִיא מַכַּת בְּצִרְתָּהּ:

Decreeing fasts in an order of increasing severity is only in the case when the first rainfall has not come. However, if vegetation began to grow and its appearance changed due to disease, the court does not wait; the community cries out about it immediately. Likewise, if rain ceased for a period of forty days between one rainfall and another, they cry out about it because it is a plague of drought.

If sufficient rain fell for the vegetation but not enough for the trees; or if it was enough for the trees but not for the vegetation; or if sufficient rain fell for both, but not enough to fill the cisterns, ditches, and caves with water to last the

summer, they cry out about it immediately.

Likewise, if there is a particular city upon which it did not rain, while the surrounding area did receive rain, this is considered a divine curse, as it is written: “And I caused it to rain upon one city, but caused it not to rain upon another city; one piece was rained upon, and the portion upon which it did not rain withered” (Amos 4:7). In this case, that city fasts and cries out (by blowing the *shofar*) and all of its surrounding areas join them in their fast, but they do not cry out. Rabbi Akiva disagrees and says: They cry out but they do not fast.

Mishnah Ta'anit 3 – Fasting and Crying Out in Response to Other Perils

וְכֵן עִיר שִׁישׁ בָּהּ דָּבָר אוֹ מַפְלֵת, אוֹתָהּ הָעִיר מִתְעַנֶּה וּמִתְרַעֵת, וְכָל סְבִיבוֹתֶיהָ מִתְעַנּוֹת וְלֹא מִתְרִיעוֹת.

If a city is afflicted by pestilence or collapsing buildings, that city fasts and cries out, and the surrounding areas fast but they do not cry out. Rabbi Akiva says: They cry out but they do not fast.

What constitutes a plague of pestilence? If a city has a population of 500 able-bodied men, and three dead are taken out of it on three consecutive days, this is a plague of pestilence. Fewer than that, this is not pestilence.

For the following calamities they cry out in every place: For blight; for crop mildew; for locusts; for

dangerous beasts that have entered a town; and for the sword, i.e., an invading army. The reason that they cry out about these misfortunes in every place is because these are calamities that quickly spread...

For the following calamities they cry out even on Shabbat: For a city that is surrounded by foreign troops, or for a place in danger of being flooded by a river that has swelled its banks, or for a ship tossed about at sea. Rabbi Yosei said: One may cry out on Shabbat to summon help, but [the alarm] may not be sounded for crying out to God.

Possible Purposes of Fasting

Contrition and atonement; imitation of death – theatrical pre-enactment of the outcome of the current peril; communal sharing of suffering; assertion of no business as usual; inducement of altered state in which one can reflect and pray more deeply; creation of “negative space” – an emptying out so that a different spirit or insight might enter.

Fasting Averting Destruction: Jonah Chapter 3

The word of Adonai came to Jonah a second time, saying: Arise! Go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I bid you. And Jonah arose, and went to Nineveh, according to the word of Adonai.

Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days’ journey across. Jonah entered the city, going a day’s journey, and he cried, and said, “Another forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” The people of Nineveh believed God, *and proclaimed a fast*, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. And word came to the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he took off his robe, and covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying: Neither man, beast, herd or flock should taste anything! They should not feed nor drink water! Let every person and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; let them everyone turn from their evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands.

Who can tell if God may yet turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, so that we perish not? And God saw their doings, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, which he had said that he would do to them; and he did not do it.

Fasting in Support of Another’s Action in Time of Peril: Esther 4:10-17

Esther again spoke to Hatach, and gave him a message for Mordecai: “All the king’s servants, and the people of the king’s provinces, know that whoever – whether man or woman – comes to the king into the inner court who is not called, there is a law to put them to death, except one to whom the king shall hold out the golden scepter, that they may live. I have not been called to come to the king for thirty days.”

They told Mordecai Esther’s words. Then Mordecai sent an answer to Esther: “Think not that in the king’s palace you shall escape, any more than all the Jews. For if you remain silent at this time, then shall relief and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but you and your father’s house shall be destroyed. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”

Then Esther bade them return Mordecai this answer: “Go, gather together all the Jews who are present in Shushan, *and fast for me*, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day; I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go to the king, though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.”

So Mordecai went his way, and did according to all that Esther had commanded him.

Example of Modern Communal Spiritual Protest: The Die-In

The die-in is attention-grabbing, inexpensive, and easy to organize using social media: the perfect protest for the Internet age. That was abundantly clear in the wake of the police killings of two Black men, Eric Garner (New York) and Michael Brown (Ferguson, MO), in the summer of 2014. Across the United States, and eventually internationally, people organized die-ins that targeted not just public buildings, but shopping malls, department stores, and public transportation. Powerful images of people of all ages and backgrounds lying dead in solidarity with Garner, Brown, and other victims of police violence circulated around the world. Nearly fifty years old, the die-in still retains its capacity to shock. (Daniel Ross, “The Die-In: A Short History,” activehistory.ca, 2015)

ACT UP Die-Ins

ACT UP wanted the Food and Drug Administration to give AIDS patients access to an experimental drug. The FDA wouldn't even discuss it.

So hundreds of activists converged on the FDA's headquarters.

"One group were wearing lab coats that were stained with bloody hands," recalls Barr. "Other people brought tombstones that they made and lied down in front of the building and held up the tombstones: 'Dead from FDA red tape.' "

The activists advanced in rows, blocking the entrances. The demonstration made national news.

Within days the FDA agreed to meet. In a couple months, officials opened up the policy on access to experimental drugs.

France says the two prongs of ACT UP's strategy were equally important. The aggressive protests got them a foot in the door, but it wouldn't have made a difference if they hadn't done the homework needed to offer insightful and viable proposals once they did get a meeting.

"What made this work was not just the anger. But the anger coupled with the intelligence," says France. ACT UP came to call this approach its "inside-outside strategy." And they deployed it over and over again — with the National Institutes of Health, and then with pharmaceutical companies, eventually becoming full partners with key scientists.

(Nurith Aizenman, “How to Demand a Medical Breakthrough: Lessons from the AIDS Fight,” NPR Weekend Edition, Feb. 9, 2019)