

# 17<sup>th</sup> of Tammuz

## TEACHERS GUIDE

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# SEVENTEENTH OF TAMUZ

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The Fast of the 17<sup>th</sup> of Tamuz is also the beginning of the three weeks – the period known as '*bein hametzarim*'. This is the saddest time in the Jewish calendar, when we avoid anything happy, and focus on mourning for the destruction of both the Temples. The 17<sup>th</sup> of Tamuz marks the beginning of the destruction, when the Romans (and perhaps also the Babylonians – see source 8) breached the walls of Jerusalem and began the fight that led to the destruction of the Temple.

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These are the five things that occurred on this day. We know that certain days in the calendar are set aside for happiness, and others set aside for sadness. The fact that so many tragedies occurred on this day gives us reason indeed to mourn.

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Jeremiah (Yeremiyahu) was an eye witness to the destruction of the First Temple. He tells us that the walls of Jerusalem were breached by the Babylonians on the 9<sup>th</sup> of Tamuz. Accordingly, the reason that we only fast on the 17<sup>th</sup> and not also the 9<sup>th</sup> is because the Rabbis felt it would be too much to expect everyone to fast twice in a week. The Second Temple is closer to us historically, and therefore awakens greater sadness. However see source 8 for an alternative explanation.

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Moshe smashed the first set of Ten Commandments, which had been written by G-d. He smashed them as a response to the worshipping of the Golden Calf which greeted him as he came down from Mount Sinai. Even though Moshe eventually received a second set of tablets, the destruction of the first tablets meant that our Torah learning today is much more difficult, as we have to cope with forgetfulness and mortality (neither of which would have existed had we never worshipped the Golden Calf)

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Menashe was the most evil king of Yehuda. Even though he was the son of one of the greatest kings, Chizkiyahu, he led the nation in organized idol worship, removing G-d's name from even the Torah scroll that Moshe had written. He went so far as to place an idol in the holiest part of the Temple on the 17<sup>th</sup> of Tamuz (which remained there for several generations).

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Tosefot resolves the discrepancy between the Bavli and Yerushalmi Talmuds in two alternative ways. Either one verse refers to the First Temple, and the other to the Second. Or, the walls of Jerusalem were breached both times on the 17<sup>th</sup> of Tamuz, but the people in Bavel who heard the news changed the dates (either intentionally or accidentally). The Maharsha explains here that according to all opinions there were 21 days between the walls being breached and the Temple being destroyed. If the walls were breached on the 9<sup>th</sup> of Tamuz, the Temple was burnt on the 1<sup>st</sup> of Av. He implies that the people wanted to commemorate the tragedy of the destruction with the beginning of a new month. In other words, the destruction required an entirely new beginning for Judaism in exile, which was marked by changing the date to the first of the month.

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The reason that we fast on the 17<sup>th</sup> of Tamuz is not only to recall the past but to understand the reasons for the tragedies that happened and to prepare for the future. One of the key aspects of all the fast days which is stressed by the Sages is the mourning of the present because of the past as the means to celebrate at the rejoicing of the salvation in the future.

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The holy books tell us that the first occurrence of the something in the Torah is the true root of the concept. Noach sent out the dove on the 17<sup>th</sup> of Tamuz. The dove was sent out of the ark and couldn't find any rest. How does this connect to the fasting and tragedies of the day? If the dove symbolizes the Jewish people, perhaps we can understand the search for rest and the desire to return to the ark as metaphors for exile and redemption.

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Even though the sin of the Golden Calf was ultimately the cause of all future tragedies that happened to the Jewish people, it also allowed for Jewish history to unfold. Had the Israelites entered straight into the Land of Israel there would have been no need for exile and further redemption. When G-d agrees to Moshe's request to spare the nation, and tells him "on the day that I punish [sin] I will punish them for their sin [of the Golden Calf]", G-d thereby creates Jewish history and allows for a future which will atone for the sin. We, as those future generations, would have had no reason to exist, since the perfection of the world would have been accomplished without us.