

# Salt and the Seventeenth of Tammuz

On the civil calendar, the fourth of July holds a special place in our hearts as we consider it to be the birthday of our country. Personally, I am grateful to God to be born in such a nation that values freedom and the equality of all humans.

The United States has been a haven, a home away from home, for much of the Jewish community. In the second half of the twentieth century, more Jews were living in the United States than any other country. By 2010, the number of Jews in Israel overtook the number of Jews in America. But to this day, the US and Israel together host about 85% of the world's Jewish population.

Although the US has not always been the epicenter of Jewish diaspora, I find it fascinating that it ultimately took on this special role, especially during and after World War II. Because the day the United States declared independence landed on a significant day on the Jewish calendar. July 4, 1776 landed on the 17<sup>th</sup> of Tammuz in the year 5536.

The 17<sup>th</sup> of Tammuz is a fast day commemorating several tragedies in Jewish history. It is also the beginning of the three-week period of mourning leading up to the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av, an even more severe fast day marking even more tragic events.

As for it being the birthday of the United States, I don't see this as a bad omen at all. In fact, I think it is a good omen. After all, it's too much to ask the United States to be God's chosen people or holy land. There is only one chosen people and one holy land. But it appears that from its founding, the US was destined to become the last stop in the circuitous route before Messiah brings his people home. And that's pretty great.

## Fast of Tammuz

Let's talk a little about the fast of Tammuz. Tammuz is the name of the month. According to the sages,<sup>1</sup> the fast on the seventeenth day commemorates five events in Jewish history that happened on this day of the year:

1. Moses smashed the tablets after seeing the Israelites worshipping the golden calf.
2. During the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem, the priests ran out of lambs and were no longer able to offer the daily burnt offerings.
3. A general named Apostomos burned the Torah. It is unclear when exactly this occurred, but it was either under Greek or Roman occupation. Some say that the Torah scroll he burned was the authoritative scroll penned by Ezra himself.
4. An idol was placed in the Temple. The Mishnah makes it sound like this also was the doing of Apostomos, but commentators suggest it was done by the evil King Manasseh of Judah.
5. In the days of the Apostles, it was on this day that the Romans breached the walls of Jerusalem, ultimately leading to the destruction of the Temple three weeks later.

One of these things is not like the others. Four of these five acts were committed by wicked people with evil intentions toward Israel. But the first one, the smashing of the Tablets, was Moses' response to a sinful act by members of the Jewish people. As it is the first tragedy, this seems to be the pacesetter, the

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<sup>1</sup> m. Taanit 4:6.

trigger that echoed through history. This ongoing echo implies that the underlying condition, the problem that manifested itself in the sin of the golden calf, has still not been fully resolved.

This is a biblical fast, in that it is mentioned in Zechariah 8:19. In that verse, Hashem calls it the fast of the fourth month. Nisan, the month of Passover, is month one. Iyar is month two. Sivan, the month where Shavuot occurs, is month three. And Tammuz is four.

Hashem promises in this verse that it will one day become a day of joy and a festive holiday. I think that's because of the potential good buried within this dark day.

### **The 120 Days of Fasting**

Think about the timing of it all. On Shavu'ot, God spoke the Ten Commandments. Then Moses went up on the mountain and fasted for forty days as he received the rest of the Torah. This brings us to the 17<sup>th</sup> of Tammuz, when Moses came down the mountain and saw them engaged in idolatry.

Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, tablets that were written on both sides; on the front and on the back they were written. (Exodus 32:15)

And as soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses' anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. (Exodus 32:19)

Then we learn that Moshe went back up the mountain to gain forgiveness and atonement:

The next day Moses said to the people, "You have sinned a great sin. And now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin." So Moses returned to the LORD and said, "Alas, this people has sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will forgive their sin-- but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written." (Exodus 32:30-32)

In Deuteronomy we learn that this second visit was also a fast for forty days and nights:

So I took hold of the two tablets and threw them out of my two hands and broke them before your eyes. Then I lay prostrate before the LORD as before, forty days and forty nights. I neither ate bread nor drank water, because of all the sin that you had committed, in doing what was evil in the sight of the LORD to provoke him to anger. (Deuteronomy 9:17-18)

Forty days from the seventeenth of Tammuz, with a little transition time, brings us to the end of the month of Av. Then Moshe is told to go down and then climb back up the mountain with a new set of tablets:

The LORD said to Moses, "Cut for yourself two tablets of stone like the first, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke. Be ready by the morning, and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai, and present yourself there to me on the top of the mountain. (Exodus 34:1-2)

Deuteronomy tells us that this third visit was also forty days and forty nights:

I myself stayed on the mountain, as at the first time, forty days and forty nights, and the LORD listened to me that time also. The LORD was unwilling to destroy you. (Deuteronomy 10:10)

Rashi points out that this literally says “I *stood* on the mountain as the first time.” The first forty days, Moses was standing. For the second, he was prostrate the entire time. The third time, he stood once again.

Finally he comes down holding the new set of tablets, which shows that he secured complete atonement for the people. Forty days after the beginning of Elul brings us to the tenth day of Tishrei, which is the Day of Atonement.

What went wrong on the seventeenth of Tammuz was ultimately corrected on Yom Kippur. The connection between the two is intense. We might even surmise that if it weren't for the sin of the golden calf, Yom Kippur would never have been necessary at all. You'll notice it's never mentioned in the Torah prior to this point, even in the list of holidays in Exodus 23. If it hadn't been for the golden calf, Moses would have come down the mountain on Tammuz 17, and that day would forever have been remembered as a day of unity and love between God and Israel, a day of unparalleled spiritual heights and intense joy.

This is the hidden reality behind the 17<sup>th</sup> of Tammuz, which will one day be revealed with the return of our master King Messiah, soon and in our days.

### **Observances of Tammuz 17 and the Three Weeks**

But for now, the 17<sup>th</sup> of Tammuz remains a day of fasting and repentance. It's in our best interest to let that day do its job of waking us up and causing us to cry out in repentance.

This year, the 17<sup>th</sup> of Tammuz is this coming Thursday, July 9<sup>th</sup>. The fast is from dawn to dark. In Hudson, that means about 3:30am to 9:30pm. Jewish fasts are always complete fasts of food and water, although if you have health issues there is room to be lenient.

Of course, Gentiles have no obligation to participate in this fast at all. However, choosing to do so would be a very meaningful expression of solidarity, especially considering the role Gentiles have played in the punishments Hashem inflicted on Israel. At the very least, I would encourage you all to tune into the spiritual message of the day, whether or not you choose to fast.

The 17<sup>th</sup> of Tammuz also initiates a three-week period of mourning called *bein hametzarim* or “in the narrow straits.” During these three weeks, Jews abstain from shaving, from haircuts, from listening to music, and from getting married. Closer to the end of the three weeks, additional restrictions are observed. And the three weeks conclude with the fast of the ninth of Av, which I'm sure we will learn more about later.

### **What We Hope to Accomplish**

What do we hope to accomplish with all these observances? There are three main goals, as I see it. First is to recognize the brokenness of the world that we live in. The second is to learn the causes and solutions to the exile. And the third is to commit to laboring toward redemption. I'll go over each of these in more detail.

#### **1. Recognize the Brokenness of the world.**

First, we aim to awaken ourselves to recognize the brokenness of the world. This world is a mess. We certainly not in the kingdom. The world is full of diseases, wars, environmental crises, famines, poverty, abuse, injustice, and it seems like knowledge of God is fading from society.

Over time we become dulled to this reality and begin to accept it. We don't realize what we're missing. We take three weeks and mildly inconvenience ourselves, just to nudge us into feeling a sense of loss.

This year, we are better equipped than ever to tap into that sense of loss. We all feel a sense of loss due to the unfortunate events of this year. If you feel a sense of loss because of missing out on fellowship at a synagogue for a few months, how much more we should feel a sense of loss for the holy Temple, which has been absent for almost two thousand years! It is natural for you to feel frustrated by the necessity to wear masks or by limits on travel or by events being canceled. But that feeling should pale in comparison to the banishment of the Jewish people from Jerusalem, the desecration of its holy places, and the ongoing persecution and suffering ever since.

Not to mention the loss for all nations of the world. On the 17<sup>th</sup> of Tammuz the Roman legions broke through the walls of Jerusalem, but the sages saw a sad irony in this:

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: If the nations of the world had only known how beneficial the Temple was for them, they would have surrounded it with fortresses in order to protect it! It was even more beneficial for them than for Israel, as Solomon arranged his prayer, "Likewise, when a foreigner who is not of your people Israel ... [prays toward this house] ... do according to all for which the foreigner calls to you" (1 Kings 8:41–43). But when he refers to Israel, this is what is written: "Render to each whose heart you know, according to all his ways" (1 Kings 8:39). If he was worthy, he would give it to him, but if not, he would not give it to him.<sup>2</sup>

Rabbi Yohanan said: Woe unto the nations of the world that lost something and do not know what they lost.<sup>3</sup>

My hope is that we can take this feeling of constraint, and isolation, and lockdown—and pivot during the three weeks to feeling the reality of exile that has been with us our whole lives and long before.

The reality is that even when our Master Yeshua was here, Israel was already in lockdown due to the Roman occupation. The Master saw how it was going to get even worse, and he wept over the fate of the city. Like the gardener who fertilized the tree to keep it from being cut down, he told his generation what they could do to stop the destruction of the Temple. To this day, his teachings provide for us everything we need to make our way back.

## **2. Learn the Causes and Solutions for Exile**

That brings me to the second goal we hope to accomplish with the fast of Tammuz and the three-week mourning period that follows: We should spend this time learning the causes and solutions for exile.

Right now there are forces in this world that want to divide us by enticing us to blame one another for our problems. Friends, it's not a political party or a billionaire or a government that is causing the

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<sup>2</sup> Numbers Rabbah 1:3.

<sup>3</sup> b. Sukkah 55b

world's problems. Yeshua told Pilate, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above." We have got to learn to see through spiritual eyes.

Our Master taught us that the kingdom is the answer. Everything hinges on us seeking the kingdom. In comparison everything else is worthless.

During this time, we should renew our efforts to learn the teachings of our Master in the Gospels, because everything Yeshua taught relates to this concept. Let me give you an example.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Yeshua taught, "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet." (Matthew 5:13)

There are a few things we need to note about this passage.

Salt's primary function is to be a preservative. It prevents spoiling. For example, the sages in the Talmud used salt as an illustration of the soul or *neshamah* in a body. If you take out the soul, then what happens to the body? It decays. The sages in the Talmud quote a popular saying: "If you take the salt out of meat, you might as well throw it to a dog."<sup>4</sup>

In another place in the Talmud, the sages asked the daughter of a rich man how she ended up penniless. She responded, "Salt for wealth is missing." In other words, there is nothing that keeps wealth from spoiling. The sages responded, don't say "Salt for wealth is *chaser* (missing)," but "Salt for wealth is *chesed* (kindness)."<sup>5</sup>

Likewise, Yeshua is saying that his disciples preserve the world. Because of their properties, their *middot*, they prevent the world from being corrupted and destroyed. We are like the ten righteous that were missing from Sodom and could have held back its destruction.

Yeshua did not come up with the question "If salt spoils, how do you salt it?" This was already considered a clever meme back in Yeshua's day. The same phrase shows up in the Talmud in a battle of the wits between Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya and the sages of Athens.<sup>6</sup>

Yeshua quoted this popular saying to say: if an item loses its primary function, there is no sense in keeping it around. In the same way, if we disciples lose the properties that make us capable of holding back destruction, then we will be caught up in it.

Finally, Yeshua says that the useless salt is to be trampled under people's feet. "Trampling" is an allusion to the prophets who spoke about the destruction of Jerusalem. For example, Isaiah chapter 5 contains a parable where Israel is compared to a vineyard. The owner comes looking for plump grapes, but instead finds icky wild grapes.

And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. (Isaiah 5:5)

Here the prophet predicts the breach of Jerusalem's wall and its destruction, describing it as "trampled."

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<sup>4</sup> b. Niddah 31a.

<sup>5</sup> B. Ketubot 66b.

<sup>6</sup> b. Bechorot 8b.

Or we can look at the book of Daniel. Daniel 8:9 says,

Out of one of them came a little horn, which grew exceedingly great toward the south, toward the east, and toward the glorious land. (Daniel 8:9)

Rashi interprets this horn as referring to Titus who attacked Jerusalem and breached the walls on the 17<sup>th</sup> of Tammuz. The next verse says,

It grew great, even to the host of heaven. And some of the host and some of the stars it threw down to the ground and trampled on them. (Daniel 8:10)

Notice the “throwing” and “trampling” just as Yeshua stated.

It became great, even as great as the Prince of the host. And the regular burnt offering was taken away from him, and the place of his sanctuary was overthrown. (Daniel 8:11)

Again, we mourn the loss of the continual burnt offering on the 17<sup>th</sup> of Tammuz. And in verse 13 Daniel hears an angel ask: “For how long is the vision concerning the regular burnt offering, the transgression that makes desolate, and the giving over of the sanctuary and host to be trampled underfoot?” (Daniel 8:13)

My point is that when Yeshua called us the “salt of the earth,” it was not a light-hearted statement. It was a stern warning. If we fail to bear the proper characteristics as disciples, destruction will come.

What are those characteristics? This teaching comes directly after the beatitudes. Yeshua’s disciples are poor in spirit. They are mourners. They are meek. They hunger and thirst for righteousness. They are merciful. They are pure in heart. They are peacemakers.

In Mark’s version, Yeshua taught, “Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.” (Mark 9:50)

I provided this example of one statement of Yeshua simply to demonstrate that he was constantly speaking about the destruction of the Temple and how to prevent it. If we want to learn the causes and solutions for the exile during this period of the three weeks, we must scour and internalize his teachings about the kingdom.

### **3. Commit to repairing the world**

But we can’t stop with simply learning. We have got to commit to actions to repair the world.

Some people figure that this world is going to be destroyed anyway, and it’s the spiritual world that really counts. They think that we should just set our mind on heaven and not concern ourselves with the destruction that’s happening here on earth. That is not a Jewish view, and certainly not a Messianic Jewish view!

Hashem is in the business of restoring this world. Messiah is like the foreman in charge of the job. In fact, he already showed up and got started on the project. But then he left, but before he did, he put his disciples in charge of continuing the process. That’s you and me. As his agents, we have the right and the responsibility to act in his name and finish the Messianic task he started.

Think about what Yeshua did while he was here. He turned people's hearts away from fighting. He healed people's diseases. He fed the hungry and gave to the poor. He revealed the love of God to people. He brought hope to those who were oppressed, and he inspired repentance on the part of abusers.

With every act he did, he repaired the world, sometimes just one person at a time. This is not surprising, because he's the Messiah. But now, you, dear disciple, are the closest thing the world has to him for the time being. That means you must pick up where he left off and bring the world closer to redemption.

As disciples and agents of the Messiah, we are supposed to be a promise of what is to come. When people encounter us, they should feel a sense what it's like to be in the Messianic Era. Wherever we go and whatever we involve ourselves in, the Messianic Kingdom should start blossoming forth.

That means that we should constantly be asking these questions: What will the Messianic Kingdom be like, and what can I do that will make the world more like that right now?

### **Three Weeks of Intention**

As the fast of Tammuz and the three weeks of mourning approach, let's seize the opportunity that they provide for us. Don't just fast because it's the thing to do. Don't mourn the loss of music and haircuts. Mourn the loss of the Temple and the absence of our Messiah. Let this time fulfill its purpose of awakening our hearts to what the world is missing. Recognize the brokenness of the world.

When you've realized that this world needs redemption, learn from our Master how it can be repaired. Pore through his teachings and memorize them because his words are the solution to this problem.

But don't stop with learning. Learning is useless without doing. Commit to becoming an agent of Messiah in this world, continuing in his behavior of fixing what is wrong, even one person at a time. Disciples are to be "salt" to the world, bearing the properties that hold judgment at bay.

With God's help, we will see the fast of Tammuz become the joyous season and festival day that it was meant to be, as Hashem inscribes his Torah on the tablets of our hearts.