

HALOCHOSCOPE

This week's question:

Should starting a new venture be avoided on *Asara b'Teves*?

The issues:

A) *Asara b'Teves*

B) The concept of *raia mazla*, ominous times of the week, month or year; *lo mesanna milsa*, avoiding things that are not considered positive signs

C) Does this apply to a fast day?

A) *Asara b'Teves*

The Torah imposes one Scriptural fast, *Yom Kippur*, when we are to afflict ourselves. Scripturally, this means to refrain from all eating and drinking. Rabbinically, additional forms of self-affliction were added, such as bathing. Four more public fasts were added by the *Nevi'im*, the Prophets, to commemorate the sorrowful events surrounding the destruction of the *Bais Hamikdash* and the exile. These are considered a type of communal mourning fast. They are the 17th of *Tamuz*, the 9th of *Av*, the 3rd of *Tishrei* and the 10th of *Teves*. Except for *Tisha b'Av*, on these fasts, only eating and drinking are restricted. On *Tisha b'Av*, restrictions on bathing and wearing shoes are self-afflictions as well as mourning practices. More communal fasts are imposed when Rabbis perceive Heavenly dissatisfaction with our behavior. This is shown by catastrophic events or drought. On most of these, the fast is limited to eating and drinking restrictions. In extreme situations, the other restrictions are also applied. Great people adopt the other restrictions at an earlier point in the series of fasts. They also adopt more restrictions on the mourning fasts.

Personal fasts are undertaken as penitence, in the event of personal or family catastrophes, after bad dreams, to commemorate events such as a *yahrzeit* or to raise one's spirituality. Such fasts are only valid if they are verbally undertaken, much like a vow. The undertaking, or *kabalah*, is on the day before the fast, ideally at *mincha*. A *yachid*, individual undertaking a fast, means to fast by day the following day. With the exception of *Yom Kippur*, *Tisha b'Av*, and cases of extreme drought in Eretz Yisroel, other fasts also begin in the morning. In Judaism, the date begins the preceding evening. Accordingly, one would expect that a date commemorating an event would begin the night before. The Talmud assumes that while one may eat the night before most fasts, if he finishes eating, he may no longer eat that night. This stage is debated by the Talmud. However, one may declare, when he is about to finish eating, that he does not intend to begin his fast until dawn. He will state that he has not really finished eating. Some maintain that the other fasts should begin by night. However, the Rabbis did not restrict eating for so long.

In addition, there is a special additional insert in *shemone esrai* on a fast. Most poskim maintain that, ideally, one would mention this in *maariv* the night before as well,

even though he will still eat that night. We do not follow this in practice. The *shliach tzibur* inserts it in his repetition in the morning, and all others only insert it at *mincha*. This is beyond the scope of our discussion. We mentioned that to be valid, a fast must be adopted by day the preceding day. All of this indicates that the commemoration actually begins at nightfall, but that the restrictions begin by day.

A question is raised with regard to holding a wedding feast on the night before the fast of the 17th of *Tamuz*. This is also the first day of the Three Weeks of mourning culminating in *Tisha b'Av*. Along with other mourning practices, weddings, which are considered specially festive, are restricted. Some poskim maintain that weddings would be permitted the preceding night if the issue was merely one of fasting. However, based on the Three Week mourning restrictions, it should be forbidden except in extenuating circumstances. Others maintain that the same should really apply to all the fasts instituted to commemorate the Destruction. They all include an element of mourning.

According to the stringent view, there is further debate regarding weddings on the night preceding *Asara b'Teves*. There is another discussion on whether a wedding ceremony may be held on *Asara b'Teves* itself, with the festive meal the following night. [In former times, a wedding was scheduled for Friday. The *seuda* would be combined with *Shabbos*, saving expense. *Asara b'Teves* can fall on a Friday.] The poskim discuss how to proceed with regard to the order of the ceremony and the service at *mincha* on a fast. Clearly, there was no objection to the ceremony *per se*.

Another issue is a reference by some poskim to the reason that the other restrictions were not instituted for the other three fasts. They say it was due to the relative peace in exile. When the Jewish people are beset with hardship, this reason is no longer valid. Therefore, pious individuals should practice the extra restrictions on these fasts as well. Some poskim maintain that pious individuals should also begin fasting at night. However, in honor of *Shabbos*, one is obliged to bathe. Thus piety must take a back seat when *Asara b'Teves* falls on Friday. One should also not afflict himself as soon as *Shabbos* goes out. For this and other reasons, the Rabbis manipulate the calendar, so that *Yom Kippur* should not fall on a Friday or Sunday. One should not have to make a dramatic change of mood. [*Tisha b'Av* can indeed fall on Sunday, or on *Shabbos* and is pushed to Sunday.] Nonetheless, *Asara b'Teves* happens to be the one fast that can fall on Friday. Other fasts that fall on *Shabbos* are pushed off to another day. The poskim cite a source saying that this would not be the case with *Asara b'Teves*. In practice, that cannot happen with our current fixed calendar. Various explanations are given on why this fast can even be observed on *Shabbos*. According to one view, *Asara b'Teves* was the beginning of the end. It began the downward spiral that culminated in the Destruction. Therefore, it has certain things in common with *Tisha b'Av*, and even with *Yom Kippur*, which often falls on *Shabbos*. In this respect, our question is more relevant.

Another difference between this fast and others is the original reason. Three separate calamities befell the Jews on the 8th, 9th, and 10th of *Teves*. On the 8th, the Torah was translated into Greek by the seventy elders. This brought three days of darkness to the world. It was considered a major negative turning point in the history of the Torah. The non-Jews would now claim the Torah as their own. On the 9th, Ezra the scribe passed

away. He was the last absolute leader of the Jews, who returned much of the former glory. On the 10th, the siege of Yerushalayim began, marking the beginning of the end of the Jewish sovereign state. Originally, three consecutive fasts were instituted. This became too burdensome, so all these events are commemorated on the 10th. Based on this, the preceding night should possibly have certain restrictions as well. In reality, we do not practice extra restrictions, but there might be *halachic* differences, including our case. [See *Shabbos* 24a *Eruvin* 40b *Taanis* 11a-12b, *Poskim*. *Tur Sh Ar OC* 550:2 551:2 564:1 565:3 *YD* 391 402, commentaries. *Igros Moshe OC*:I:168. *Tzitz Eliezer* VII:49:11 X:26. *Bais Avi* I:6. *Lev Aryeh* (Grossnas) 5-6. *Shaarei Nechama* 3:7:4-6. *Moadim Uzmanim* VII:245. *Hanisuin Kehilchasan* 5:45, references. *Nitei Gavriel Chanukah* Ch. 82.]

B) Raia mazla; lo mesamna milsa

The Talmud teaches of two interrelated concepts, *siman* and *mazal*, signs and fortunes. The word *mazal* occurs once in *Tanach*. It refers to a deity, and is mentioned together with the *baal*, sun, moon and stars. In that context it means a form of worship, in which the forces that are symbolized by constellations and seem to have certain influence are worshipped. Literally, the word *mazal* in the original Hebrew comes from the root *nazal*, to flow, or to move or cause movement. In the simple sense, the constellations do move in their orbits. This movement has an effect on natural events in the universe. By observing the patterns of these movements and their relationship to events, one can trace the connections. Clearly, the universe is in a delicate balance, with constant motion. On a deeper level, it is taken to refer to the flow of Divine will and influence. It represents the combination of droplets to form a flow. The droplets are the different aspects of influence that affect the individual. In the more general sense, *mazal* refers to what is commonly called destiny or fate. The implication is that there is a greater plan in which the individual has little or no input. In a certain sense this is the case. Hashem runs the world as He sees fit, and nothing we say or do can influence that.

The Hebrew root *siman* also occurs once in *Tanach*, in context of a marked spot. *Siman* means that certain times, places, activities or events are bound up with positive or negative signs. In many instances, these would seem to be close to Scripturally forbidden forms of reading superstition into events. This could come under a variety of prohibitions, such as *darkei Emori*, the ways of the superstitious gentiles of Canaan, or *nichush*, divination. Nonetheless, we have traditions about good or bad signs.

On the one hand, we are taught that Avraham our forefather was informed that he was above his *mazal* (to be childless), and *ain mazal leYisrael*, Israel is outside the purview of *mazal*. The Torah says that the nations of the world are governed by the celestial bodies, from the fourth day of Creation. Israel is governed directly by Hashem. On the other hand, the Talmud shows that there are certain areas controlled by one's *mazal*. Nevertheless, one can change his or her *mazal* through prayer, penitence and changes to a name or location. One can also avoid triggers of bad *mazal*, or do things to trigger good *mazal*. Furthermore, certain people can use their shared *mazal* to fend off evil decrees.

The Talmud discusses *siman* in various contexts. For example, while it is not technically forbidden to work on *Erev Shabbos* afternoon, one does not see *siman brocha* from the work performed. This is connected to the way a person values his spiritual priorities.

One should avoid selling the first piece of land he bought, because *lo mesamna milsa*, it is not a good sign. This is connected to how one views the blessings that Hashem gave him personally. We eat specific foods on *Rosh Hashana* due to the *siman* in their names. We do not celebrate weddings during the Three Weeks. While it is joyous, it is also a *mitzvah*, yet weddings should be held on days of good *siman* and *mazal*. This period is one of *lo mesamna milsa*. The poskim discuss the best and worst days to fix weddings, based on the *siman*. The ideal is to choose a propitious time to begin this “venture”. There are also days that are considered good or bad to begin other ventures, such as a business or beginning a study section. Our question is whether this means that a fast day, which is evidently considered a sad day in the calendar for a reason – it commemorates events that happened then – is ominous for such ventures as well. [See Beraishis 1:14-18 Lech Lecha 15:5 Yisro 20:4-5 Va'eschanan 4:15-20 Melachim:II:23:5 Yeshaya 28:25, commentaries. Shabbos 156a Psachim 50b Rosh Hashanah 16a Taanis 29a-b Megillah 13b Moed Katan 28a Kidushin 82a Horayos 12a Chulin 95b, Poskim. Tur Sh Ar OC 151:1 551:2 583:1-2 YD 179:1-4, commentaries.]

C) Applying *raia mazla* to a fast day

The Talmud discusses work done on *Tisha b'Av*. The Talmud also restricts commercial activity on a serious communal fast day. This does not mean that it is not propitious, but that it should be restricted to highlight the situation. It would seem logical that if bad things happened on this day, such that we fast and repent specially on this date, that it is not a day of good omen. Perhaps it is so obvious that it need not be mentioned.

Another *halachic* source says that if one conducts business on a fast day, he should be exceptionally honest and careful. This requires explanation. One should always be careful and honest. The implication is that one's business affairs on a fast day also come under divine scrutiny. One must be careful not to arouse judgment against himself, and possibly spoil the results.

A *halachic* reference compares the three other fasts to the Nine Days, in terms of restrictions. While no source is cited, we may imply from a source to show that *raia mazla* is applied to all fasts in regard to dealings with gentiles. The Talmud says that one should avoid litigation with a gentile during the month of *Av* because of *raia mazla*, and try to litigate during *Adar* due to *bari mazla*, good *mazal*. The poskim cite as a source the earlier statement of the Talmud: *megalgin chova leyom hachayav*, bad things happen on a bad day. This refers to both the 17th of *Tamuz* and *Tisha b'Av*, when five bad things happened throughout history. *Asara b'Teves* commemorates three separate calamities, in a similar vein. While they did not occur on the one day, the Rabbis saw fit to connect them. Accordingly, just as litigation should be avoided for this reason, we may assume that *raia mazla* in general applies on this day. [See Taanis 29a-b, Tosafos. OC 551:(PMG:EA10) 568:12 (Baer Hetev), commentaries.]

In conclusion, there is good reason to avoid starting a venture on *Asara b'Teves*.

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