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Understanding Fasting

This week we begin *messechet Ta'anit* whose primary focus is on public fast days that were enacted in response to drought or other calamities that befell the community. The *Rambam* explains (*Ta'anit* 1:1-3):

It is a positive biblical *mitzvah* to cry out and blow trumpets on any calamity that befalls the community... And this is one of the paths of *teshuva* (repentance). When a catastrophe occurs, and they cry out... and know that it occurred as a result of their bad deeds... this will cause the tragedy to be removed. But if they do not cry out... and [dismiss the events] as "the way of the world" and [bad luck or] chance, this is stubbornness and causes them to stick to their bad ways resulting in further misfortunes.

Fast days are not simply days in which we refrain from eating and drinking. Nor is it voluntary suffering that is crudely presented in exchange for relief. As the *Rambam* presents it, a *ta'anit* is a driver for *teshuva*. The fast motivates introspection and an understanding that *Hashem* engineers all that occurs in response to our actions. Out of the fast, decisions to improve ourselves and change our ways are made with the hope that the situation will improve.

This idea was already presented toward the end of the *messechet* we just completed – *Rosh Hashanah*. The *Mishnah* (3:8) writes:

"And when *Moshe* raised his hand, *Bnei Yisrael* were victorious" [in the battle against *Amalek*] (*Shmot* 17:11). Do *Moshe* hands really make or break a battle? Rather [the *Torah*] is teaching you that the entire time that *Bnei Yisrael* looked towards the heavens, and subjugated their hearts to their Father in heaven – they were victorious, if they did not – they would fall..."

The *Ohr Gedalyahu* (*Purim*) writes that *Moshe* indeed did perform many miracles "with his hands". Therefore the *Mishnah* must be understood as asking, if the outcome depended solely on *Moshe's* hands then why did he ever lower them? To this the *Mishnah* responds that the outcome was dependant on the heart of *Bnei Yisrael* and when they turned their hearts "to the earth", *Moshe's* hands would fall.

That *Mishnah* is even more closely related to our discussion presented thus far. *Rashi* (*Shmot* 17:10) explains that during the war the entire nation was engaged in a *ta'anit*¹ – the first instance of one in the *Torah*. The *Ohr Gedalyahu*, citing a principle brought in the works of *R' Tzadok Ha'Kohen*, explains that the first mention of a concept in the *Torah* is the key to understanding its essence. Consequently, we find that a *ta'anit* is the vital weapon in our fight against *Amalek*. *Amalek* espouses the philosophy of "chance" and "natural order". Their power over *Am Yisrael* only takes hold when *Am Yisrael* ascribe to that philosophy. Indeed, according to *Rashi*, the first time they attacked *Am Yisrael* was after *Am Yisrael* asked "Is *Hashem* with us or not?" (*Shmot* 17:7) The *Ohr Gedalyahu* explains that having seen all the wondrous miracles in Egypt they knew *Hashem* was with them, they however doubted His involvement in all natural events. Thus, empowered, *Amalek* came. *Am Yisrael's* advantage and ultimate victory over *Amalek* only came through the fast and turning their hearts toward the heavens and recognising the ultimate control of *Hashem*.²

The *ta'anit* therefore realigns us, refocuses us and motivates us to improve as well as recognise *Hashem's* influence in all matters. One must remember however, a *ta'anit* comes in response to a wake-up call that indicates that we have strayed. Ideally we should keep the message of the *ta'anit* close to our hearts so that we shall no longer need them.

David Bankier

¹ See *Rashi* who explains that a *halacha* is learnt from *Moshe*, *Aharon* and *Chur* standing together at the top of the hill, that we call three people to the *Torah* on a public fast day.

² The *Ohr Gedalyahu* continues to explain that the power of the *ta'anit* against *Amalek* continues throughout history. He explains that this is indeed why *ta'anit Esther* is an integral part of the festival of *Purim*. (See the *Ohr Gedalyahu* for full explanation).

Revision Questions

ראש השנה ג' ר' - ד' ט'

- Can a *shofar* that cracked and was glued together be used? (ג' ר')
- If a *shofar* had a hole in it and was filled in, may it be used? (ג' ר')
- Can someone fulfil their obligation by hearing the echo produced from a *shofar*? (ג' ר')
- If someone walked past a *shul* and heard the sound of the *shofar* has he fulfilled his obligation? (ג' ר')
- How does the *Mishnah* explain the following *pasuk*: (ג' ח')
"ויהיה כאשר ירים משה ידו וגבר ישראל..." (שמות י"ז: י"א)
- Which other *pasuk* does the *Mishnah* explain in a similar manner? (ג' ח')
- When was the *mitzvah* of *shofar* different inside and outside the *Beit Ha'Mikdash*? (ד' א')
- What decree did *R' Yochanan ben Zakkai* enact after the destruction of the *Beit Ha'Mikdash*? (Include both opinions.) (ד' א')
- What was the difference between *Yavneh* and the *Beit Ha'Mikdash* with respect to the *halachot* of *shofar*? (ד' ב')
- What other *mitzvah* also has distinct laws between the inside and outside the *Beit Ha'Mikdash* like *shofar*? (ד' ג')
- What decree did *R' Yochanan ben Zakkai* enact after the destruction of the *Beit Ha'Mikdash* with respect to *kiddush ha'chodesh*? (ד' ד')
- List the two opinions regarding the order of the *berachot* of *mussaf* on *Rosh Hashanah* and the location of the *tekiyot*? (ד' ה')
- How many *pesukim* are recited for *malchiyot*, *zichronot* and *shofarot*? (ד' ו')
- Which *chazzan* recites *Hallel* on *Rosh Hashanah*? (ד' ז')
- Can one climb a tree to retrieve a *shofar* on *Rosh Hashanah*? (ד' ח')
- Is one allowed to clean out a *shofar* with water or wine on *Rosh Hashanah*? (ד' ט')
- If one hears someone practicing blowing the *shofar* have they fulfilled their obligation? (ד' י')
- How many blasts must be heard on *Rosh Hashanah*? (ד' י"א)
- How long is a *tekiya*? (ד' י"ב)
- How long is a *teruah*? (ד' י"ג)

יומא א' א' - ב'

- From what date do we begin to recite "*mashiv ha'ruach u'morid ha'gashem*"? (א' א')
- When do we stop asking from rain? (א' ב')

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Next Week's Mishnayot...

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	שבת קודש
11 th June ט"ו סיון	12 th June ט"ז סיון	13 th June י"ז סיון	14 th June י"ח סיון	15 th June י"ט סיון	16 th June כ' סיון	17 th June כ"א סיון
Taanit 1:3-4	Taanit 1:5-6	Taanit 1:7-2:1	Taanit 2:2-3	Taanit 2:4-5	Taanit 2:6-7	Taanit 2:8-9

