



## “A Day of Hearing”: The Other Tevet Fast

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We know about the fasts that mark the destruction of the Temple from a prophecy of Zekhariah. While the Jewish exiles were in Babylon, the prophet was asked whether traditional fasts would continue to be observed. In his response, Zekhariah refers to four fast days:

**זכריה ח:יט**

כֹּה אָמַר ה' צְבָאוֹת צוֹם הָרְבִיעִי וְצוֹם הַחֲמִישִׁי וְצוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי וְצוֹם הָעֲשִׂירִי יִהְיֶה לְבֵית יְהוּדָה לְשִׂשׁוֹן  
וְלִשְׂמֵחָה וְלִמְעֵדִים טוֹבִים וְהָאֵמֶת וְהַשְּׁלוֹם אָהָבוּ:

### **Zekhariah 8:19**

Thus said God of Hosts: The fast of the fourth, the fast of the fifth, the fast of the seventh, and the **fast of the tenth** shall become times of joy and gladness, festivals for the house of Yehudah—so love truth and peace.

The verse alludes to four fasts in four different months. These fasts are observed to this day: 17 Tammuz (in the fourth month), 9 Av (in the fifth month), Tzom Gedalyah (in the seventh month), and 10 Tevet (in the tenth month). However, the verse isn't explicit about the exact



dates of these fasts or about what each one commemorates. Because of this ambiguity, the Tosefta records a dispute about “the fast of the tenth.”

### תוספתא סוטה (ליברמן) ו:י,יא

אמר רבי שמעון בן יוחאי ארבעה דברים היה רבי עקיבא דורש ודברי נראין מדבריו...  
דרש רבי [עקיבא]... צום העשירי זה עשרה בטבת יום שבו סמך מלך בבל את ידו על ירושלם...  
ואני אומר צום העשירי זה חמשה בטבת שבו באתה שמועה לבני גולה שנאמר ויהי בשתי' עשרה שנה  
בעשירי בחמשה לחדש לגלותינו בא אלי הפליט וגו' ושמעו ועשו יום שמועה כיום שריפה.

### Tosefta Sotah (Lieberman) 6:6,10,11

R. Shimon ben Yohai said: “There were four matters that R. Akiva would interpret—but my own interpretation seems more correct than his....

“My teacher (i.e., R. Akiva) interpreted: ...‘The fast of the tenth,’ is 10 Tevet, the day when the king of Babylonia set his hand upon Jerusalem. ...

“But I (i.e., R. Shimon) say that ‘the fast of the tenth’ is 5 Tevet, the day when the report reached the exiles, as it is said: ‘In the twelfth year of our exile, in the tenth month, on the fifth of the month, the fugitive came to me.’ (Yehezkel 33:21). The exiles heard the news, and they made the day of hearing like the day of burning.”

R. Akiva’s interpretation is familiar: 10 Tevet is a fast marking the beginning of the siege on Jerusalem. But R. Shimon claims the Tevet fast is actually on the 5<sup>th</sup> of the month, which was the day that the exiles in Babylon received word of the Temple’s destruction. About a decade before the destruction of the First Temple and the exile of most of the population, Judean high society was exiled in a first wave known as the exile of Yehoyakhin: the king, scholars, artisans, and leaders were deported to Babylon. According to R. Shimon, the fast in the tenth month marks the moment that this group, living far from Jerusalem, learned about the destruction of the Temple.

The halakhic tradition follows R. Akiva. But fasts can have overlapping meanings,<sup>1</sup> and R. Shimon's alternative lingers in the liturgy of 10 Tevet.<sup>2</sup> What is the message of R. Shimon's fast, and how can it inform how we think of our Tevet fast today?

R. Akiva lived in the Land of Israel about fifty years after the destruction of the Second Temple. When he tells the story, he considers it strictly an Eretz-Yisraeli story, a story for the people of the Land. I imagine him saying to his student R. Shimon: "I am here beside the ruins of the Temple. Why would I mourn it through the sorrow of the exiles in Babylonia? They are not part of this—my—story."

Nevertheless, R. Shimon conceives of the story in a broader way. He draws the mourning of the exiles into the very fabric of the destruction, insisting that their pain is a major part of it.

This brings us to R. Shimon's final words: "They made the day of hearing like the day of burning." They seem unnecessary in R. Shimon's statement. The nature of 17 Tammuz, the main other fast that isn't 9 Av, is that it is **connected** to the destruction, but does not mark the destruction **itself**. So these non-destruction moments are serious enough to be marked, but not serious enough to rise to the level of the 25 hour fasting and extra practices of 9 Av. Yet R. Shimon's evocative phrase suggests that "the day of hearing" is a uniquely painful moment, making the Tevet fast as tragic as the one in Av. So in what sense is "the day of hearing like the day of burning"?

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<sup>1</sup> As R. Yitzhak Zilberstein notes with regards to R. Shimon's opinion: "When we fast, the fast encompasses all the tragedies that occurred in that month" (*Hashukei Hemed* on Rosh Hashanah 18b). And see Mishnah Ta'anit 4:6 for overlapping meanings of 9 Av.

<sup>2</sup> One of the *piyyutim* in *Selihot* (Ezkerah Matzok) reads as follows: "The sequence of calamities burns within my heart, when the fugitive came to me, saying: 'The city has fallen!'"



I offer an answer to this question through answering a different question, one pointed out by the nineteenth-century scholar R. Shlomo ha-Kohen.<sup>3</sup> He notices a problem with R. Shimon's timeline: If the Temple was destroyed in Av, how could the exiles have heard only in Tevet? The journey from Jerusalem to Babylon is about two weeks' long—so why had the exiles not heard any news for six months? To answer this, R. Shlomo ha-Kohen proposes that, by Tevet, the exiles already knew about the fall of “Jerusalem below,” the physical city. But what happened in Tevet was that they learned that Jerusalem above,” the spiritual counterpart of the city and Temple, had also been struck. This was when they discovered—or perhaps truly internalized—that even the Shekhinah (Divine Presence) had gone into exile.

By reading this midrashic image of R. Shlomo ha-Kohen as a commentary on R. Shimon's words (“They made the day of hearing like the day of burning”), we might transform our experience of the fast of Tevet. In this view, the essence of the Temple was never its walls, but the people who sought God through it, the human beings who knew there was a place in the world where the Infinite, in boundless mercy, made space to dwell among mortals. Even those living far away in Babylonia knew that somewhere there was a place they could dream of reaching, a place that gave shape to their yearning and endurance to their hope. When those distant people learned that the Temple no longer stood, something within them shattered. The destruction of “Jerusalem below” may be ontological, a collapse of a physical reality. But the destruction of “Jerusalem above” is epistemological, a collapse of an inner world view. Even if the physical burning took place on 9 Av, the spiritual burning in the hearts of the people on 5 Tevet was just as real. In this sense, learning about tragedy and experiencing it are the same.

R. Shimon's message points to some vital truths. We are called to tell a story that embraces Jewish life in all its places. Sharing values and being in true fellowship does not require

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<sup>3</sup> Binyan Shlomo, Tikkunim ve-Hosafot #35.



dependence or even a shared fate. Mourning is not confined by geography, and therefore neither are the things we hold dear. And Jerusalem is a physical place, but also a lot more than that.

As we mourn together, we also pray for a time in the future when we will all rejoice together, as Zekhariah said: “The fast of the fourth, the fast of the fifth, the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth shall become times of joy and gladness, festivals for the house of Yehudah—so love truth and peace.”

