

Tisha B'Av @ DC Beit Midrash

Tuesday, July 27, 2004; 9 Av 5764

Welcome to the DC Beit Midrash!

The Chumash (Five Books of Moses) is divided into 54 portions, which Jews read sequentially each week in services. Each week, a member of our community will lead us in a text-study of this portion, or *parasha*, or in a subject related to our particular location in the Jewish liturgical calendar. The voices of both past and contemporary interpreters will inform our discussion. Every week, a sheet summarizing the Torah portion of the week and the other sources the teacher will use will be provided to aid you in your study.

This Week's *Parasha* (Torah Portion): Vaetchanan

Deuteronomy (*Devarim*), 3:23–7:11

As Parashat Vaetchanan opens, Moshe again relates his petition to God to allow him to enter into the Promised Land, but is refused. Moshe continues his review of the history of the Israelites since the Exodus from Egypt. However, his emphasis now turns to the laws and rules that God has given to the People of Israel, repeatedly imploring the Israelites to accept and faithfully follow all of God's instructions. Such compliance will be rewarded with goodness. Moshe then repeats the Ten Commandments, followed shortly after by the passage which we use liturgically as the first paragraph of the *Shema*. Moshe then warns the Israelites not to forget God after they enter into the land and are established as a prosperous people. They are to avoid assimilation and always remember that they are God's "treasured people."

(http://www.kolel.org/pages/parasha/devarim_summary.html)

Tisha B'Av

The saddest day in Jewish history is the ninth of *Av*, which falls some time between late July and mid-August. On this day, the Babylonians destroyed the First Temple in 586 B.C.E., and the Romans burned down the Second Temple in 70. The events commemorated by Tisha B'Av are so tragic that, two millennia ago, the rabbis ordained that Jews should refrain from most pleasurable activities from the beginning of the month during which Tisha B'Av falls, including hair cutting and shaving, drinking wine and eating meat, and washing clothes. This date marks as well the day on which the Jews of England were expelled from that country in 1290. The greatest catastrophe of medieval Jewish history, the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, occurred on the ninth of *Av* in 1492; it is possible that King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella sadistically chose the date to intensify the Jews' misery and horror. During the Holocaust, the Nazis took pleasure in organizing murderous activities against the Jewish community on the ninth of *Av*.

To commemorate the destructions of the two Temples, the rabbis designated Tisha B'Av as a full fast day, lasting from one evening to the next. In addition to not eating, it is forbidden to drink any liquid, bathe, wear leather shoes, put on makeup or perfume, or have sexual relations. As on Yom Kippur, pregnant women, nursing mothers, and severely ill individuals are freed from the obligation of fasting if their health will be endangered. They are expected to eat, however, only what is necessary, no more. Unlike on Yom Kippur, one is permitted to smoke and work on Tisha B'Av, although one should not work if it distracts him or her from mourning.

(Excerpted from Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Literacy*, pp. 594–595)

This Week's Sources

Pirkei Avot

c. 200

Pirkei Avot is the colloquial name for tractate *Avot* of the Mishna. Perhaps the most widely studied of the mishnaic tractate, *Avot* presents the chain of rabbinic tradition, the reception of the oral law, from Mount Sinai through the generation of Judah the Prince, the editor of the Mishna. Accompanying the naming of each rabbi is one or more ethically oriented statements attributed to him. It is for this reason that the name of the tractate is often translated as *The Ethics of the Fathers*. *Pirkei Avot* is often found in prayer books after the Shabbat afternoon service, because it is also commonly used as the study component of the afternoon meal, *Seudah Shlishit*.

(excerpted from <http://learn.jtsa.edu/topics/diduknow/sources/pirkeiavot.shtml>)

Avot d'Rabbi Natan

c. 200

Avot D'Rabbi Natan is an extra-canonical minor tractate of Talmud, usually printed at the end of tractate *Nezikin*. It is a commentary on tractate *Avot* as it existed prior to editing by Judah the Prince in the process of canonizing the Mishna. One of the 14 so called "Minor Tractates," it is printed in all editions of the Talmud.

(excerpted from <http://learn.jtsa.edu/topics/diduknow/sources/midrashim.shtml#adr>)

Talmud

c. 500

The Babylonian Talmud (*Talmud Bavli*) is a compilation of discussions on the Mishna, discussions which had been going on some three hundred years already at the time they were written down. Because the Babylonian edition is far more extensive than its Palestinian counterpart (*Talmud Yerushalmi*), compiled around 400, it has become the most authoritative compilation of Jewish law. When people speak of studying the Talmud, they almost invariably mean the Bavli. The Talmud's discussions are recorded in a consistent format. A law from the Mishna is cited, which is followed by rabbinic deliberations on its meaning. The Mishna and the rabbinic discussions (known as *Gemara*) comprise the Talmud, although in Jewish life the terms *Gemara* and *Talmud* are usually used interchangeably. The rabbis quoted in the *Gemara* are known as *Amoraim*, explainers or interpreters. In addition to extensive legal discussions (*halacha*), the rabbis incorporated into the Talmud guidance on ethical matters, medical advice, historical information, and folklore (*aggadata*).

(Excerpted from Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Literacy*, p 150-153.)

Rambam (Maimonides)

1135–1204

If one did not know that Rambam (Maimonides) was the name of a man, Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, one would assume it was the name of a university. The writings and achievements of this twelfth century Jewish sage seem to cover an impossibly large number of activities. Maimonides was the first person to write a systematic code of all Jewish law, the *Mishneh Torah*; he produced one of the great philosophic statements of Judaism, *The Guide to the Perplexed*; published a commentary on the entire *Mishna*; served as physician to the sultan of Egypt; wrote numerous books on medicine; and, in his spare time, served as leader of Cairo's Jewish community. Maimonides' major contribution to Jewish life remains the *Mishneh Torah*, his code of Jewish law. His intention was to compose a book that would guide Jews on how to behave in all situations without having to expend large amounts of time. Despite sometimes-intense opposition, the *Mishneh Torah* became a standard guide to Jewish practice, later serving as a model for the *Shulchan Arukh*, the 16th century code of Jewish law that many Jews still regard as authoritative.

(www.us-israel.org/jsource/biography/Maimonides.html)

This Week's Teachers:

Sharon Freundel is on the faculty of the Melvin J. Berman Hebrew Academy's Upper School and *rebbetzin* of Kesher Israel, the Georgetown Synagogue.

Matlee Yadin has long been active in the Conservative movement and is a consultant and trainer for the Women's League for Conservative Judaism.

Virginia Spatz, a writer/educator and former director of the Jewish Study Center, is active in several independent havurot and at Temple Micah.

This Week's Food Sponsors:

Virginia Spatz and the American Jewish Committee

The American Jewish Committee was established in 1906 by a small group of American Jews in response to pogroms aimed at Jews in Russia. The group determined that the best way to protect Jews around the world was to work towards a world in which all peoples are accorded respect and dignity. Almost 100 years later, that founding mission continues to guide AJC's efforts to promote pluralistic and democratic societies where all minorities are protected. Its areas of focus are: combating anti-Semitism and all forms of bigotry; promoting pluralism and shared civic values; protecting human rights and combating abuses; asserting Israel's right to exist in peace and security with its neighbors; and safeguarding and strengthening Jewish life.

This Week's Food Shlepper:

Simma Asher

Due to the end of the holiday of Tisha B'Av (see previous page), this week's food will be served at the conclusion of the Beit Midrash, after the fast of Tisha B'Av has concluded.

Wanna teach, think about teaching, or suggest a teacher? E-mail Jesse at teachers@dcbeitmidrash.org

Wanna sponsor food? E-mail Simma at food@dcbeitmidrash.org

Suggestions about how and where to publicize the DC Beit Midrash? E-mail Jeff at publicity@dcbeitmidrash.org

Questions, feedback, wanna join our email list? Anything else? E-mail info@dcbeitmidrash.org

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