

Restrictions during the "Three Weeks" from Tammuz 17 to Av 9

You have hopefully read my letter that explains the two sad days of the Jewish calendar in the summer months, the 17th of Tammuz and the 9th of Av. (Or if they fall on Shabbat between 18th of Tammuz and 10th of Av). An Excellent article by Matthue Roth from "My Jewish Learning".com, explains that these two fast days bracket a period of time we traditionally refer to as *Bein Hameitzarim*.

In Hebrew, the period of the Three Weeks is known as “*bein hametzarim*,” or, literally, “within the straits” or “within the borders.” This name comes from a verse in the Book of Lamentations, or *Eicha*, which is read on Tisha B’Av :

Judah has gone into exile because of affliction, and because of great servitude. She dwelt among the nations, she found no rest; all her pursuers overtook her within the borders. ([Lamentations 1:3](#))

This idea of borders — or “restrictions” — alludes to the additional restrictions of mourning which are traditionally taken on during this period.

Traditionally, Jews take on several mourning customs during the Three Weeks. Similar to the period of the Omer, no weddings, parties, or public celebrations are held. Some people abstain from getting haircuts and shaving. Some people also refrain from going to concerts or listening to music during this period.

The Nine Days

The last nine days of the period, starting with the first of the month of Av, occupy a special status. Foods traditionally associated with joy, such as wine and meat, are forbidden, except on Shabbat. Swimming and bathing, beyond what is absolutely necessary, is prohibited, as is doing laundry, and buying or wearing new clothes. (Showers are permitted but warm rather than hot water and short duration are required)

This culminates in the fast of Tisha B’Av, the Ninth of Av, a day that is spent entirely in mourning—by fasting, praying, sitting on stools instead of chairs, and reading the book of Lamentations. Since the Mishnah, in [Masekhet Taanit 29b](#), decrees that these additional restrictions before Tisha b Av are only valid in “shavua she-hal bo,” or the week that Tisha B’Av occurs, many Sephardic Jews only observe the restrictions within the week that Tisha beAv falls.

“Decreasing ... in Joy”

Even though the Three Weeks mark the time of the Temple’s destruction, there are signs of hope throughout. The three haftarot read during this period, are full of admonitions and prophetic passages that warn about the consequences of sin. Yet each ends in a promise of eventual redemption.

The Talmud says, “When the month of Av enters, one should decrease in joy.” (Memaatim beSimcha) The Hasidic rebbe Rabbi Chaim Elazar Spira (1861-1937), said that, though the Talmud says to “decrease in joy,” it should be read, “decrease...in joy.” In other words, though it is proper to mourn, even in that mourning, we should do so joyously, knowing that better times are ahead.

The phrase "It is not easy being a Jew" is apt when we adopt such stringent customs in and around Tisha be Av in a period of summer when so many are celebrating and vacationing. Nonetheless, the traditional Jew finds deep meaning in these customs of fasting and collective reflection, and emerges from it with a renewed sense of Jewish belonging and hopefulness. The next Shabbat is Shabbat Nachamu, in which we hear the comforting words of the Prophet expressing a forgiving God and revitalized people. May that day come soon when peace will blossom forth among nations, when Jerusalem shall be secure and built up, and intimate connection with our God of Israel be achieved. Amen.