

# Tisha B'Av's Parshiot

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R. Yosef Karo, in **Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 428:4**, lists the various Parshiot of the Tora that are read in association with some of the holidays and commemorations of the Jewish year:

Parshat Tzav is always read prior to Pesach during a normal year, and Parshat Metzora during most leap years...,  
BaMidbar before Shavuot,  
**Tisha B'Av always precedes Parshat VaEtchanan,**  
Nitzavim before Rosh HaShana...

The passage in the Shulchan Aruch might be no more than prosaic, i.e., simply establishing criteria by which to measure whether the Parshiot of the Tora have been allocated evenly so that the book of Devarim will be completed by Simchat Tora.[1\[1\]](#) However, intrinsic connections between these particular Tora readings and the occasions with which they are being associated, can also be sought after.

It is possible that the Shulchan Aruch's formulation regarding the Parsha associated with Tisha B'Av could be based upon the following Talmudic passage:

## Ta'anit 31b

On the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av itself...what is the Tora reading?

It has been taught:

Others say, (VaYikra 26:14 ff.) "But if you will listen to Me."

R. Natan bar Yosef says, (BaMidbar 14:11) "How long will this people despise Me?"

And some say, (Ibid. 27) "How long shall I bear with this evil congregation?"

**Abaye said, "Nowadays, the custom has been accepted to read (Devarim 4:25-40) 'When you shall bear children...' and for the Haftora (Yirmiyahu 8:13) "I will utterly Consume them".**

The section mentioned by **Abaye** is found in **Parshat VaEtchanan**, and therefore establishes the link between the overall Parsha and the day commemorating the destruction of the Temples. When reflecting upon why **specifically Devarim 4:25-40** has become the custom for the **Tisha B'Av** public Tora **reading**, the obvious connection are the predictions found in **4:26-28**. These verses describe how if the Jews engage in idolatry, their presence in the land of Israel will come to an end, they will be scattered among the nations of the world and they will be exposed to the forces of assimilation and the worship of additional false gods, accurate **depictions** of the **Jewish experience following the destructions** of the Temples.

According to R. Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, ZaTzaL,[1\[2\]](#) Tisha B'Av includes elements associated with both mourning and public fast days. Whereas the manifestations of mourning are equated with the recitation of Eicha, Kinot and the Haftora of Yirmiyahu, the public Tora reading follows the pattern of public fast days. Such days emphasize repentance rather than sadness, and the portion of VaEtchanan that is read on Tisha B'Av describes a scenario for the repentance process.

### **Devarim 4:30-31**

When you are in distress and all of these things have come upon you in the end of days, and you turn to the Lord your God, and listen to His Voice.

For the Lord your God is a Merciful God; He will not Forsake you nor Destroy you, nor Forget the Covenant with your fathers that He Swore to them.

Communal fast days in general are designed to utilize the refraining from the pleasures of eating and drinking as a means of engendering personal introspection that will hopefully lead to repentance from the types of sins that may have at least in part led to the tragedies which we sadly commemorate on these days. This is the essence of exhortation to the community on a fast day declared because of a drought.

### **Ta'anit 16a**

(Mishna) The elder amongst them addresses them with words designed to humble them.

(Gemora) The Rabbis taught:... "Our brothers! The sackcloth and the **fasting** are **not** the **keys to changing** our difficult **situation**, but rather only **repentance** and **good deeds**. For so we find regarding the people of Nineveh, about whom it is not said, 'And God Saw their sackcloth and their fasting,' but rather (Yona 3:10) 'And God Saw their actions, that they had repented from their evil ways, and God Altered His Plan concerning the evil that He has Spoken to do to them, and He did not Do it.'"

Another link between the Parsha mentioned by the Shulchan Aruch and Tisha B'Av could be the specific theme of **idolatry**. Parshat VaEtchanan contains several references, including one as part of the Ten Commandments, to HaShem's harsh Reaction to any infidelity on the part of His People:

### **Devarim 4:23-4**

Guard yourselves carefully lest you forget the covenant of the Lord your God that He Undertook with you, and you make for yourselves an idol or a picture of anything that HaShem has Commanded you (not to make).

Because the Lord your **God is a consuming fire, a jealous God**.

### **Devarim 5:7-9 (the Second [3] of the Ten Commandments)**

You shall not have/believe in other gods before My Face.

You shall not make for yourselves an idol, any picture of an entity that might be in the Heavens above or on the earth below or that is in the water beneath the earth.

Do not bow down to them and do not serve them because I am the Lord your God, **a jealous God**, Who Visits the iniquities of the fathers on the sons to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me.

### **Devarim 6:14-5**

Do not follow in the paths of other gods from among the gods of the nations that are around you.

Because the Lord your God is a **jealous God** in your midst, lest you cause anger in the Lord your God against you and He Destroys you from upon the face of the earth.

Idolatry, which is the context for these three sections of VaEtchanan and the catalyst for HaShem's Anger, is listed as **one of the three major sins** that led up to the **destruction** of the **First Temple** in 586 BCE.

### **Yoma 9b**

The First Temple, why was it destroyed?

Because of three things that were associated with Jewish society at that time: **Idolatry**, Sexual misconduct, and murder...

But as for the Second Temple, whose contemporaries were engaged in Tora study, the fulfillment of Commandments and the performance of good deeds, why was it destroyed?

Because there was connected to its time needless hatred.

The common fate of the Two Temples comes to teach you that **needless hatred is equivalent** to the other three sins, **Idolatry**, Sexual misconduct and murder.

Continuing to focus on the Ten Commandments as the possible reason for connecting Parshat VaEtchanan to Tisha B'Av, we note in addition to explicit prohibitions against **murder**<sup>[4]</sup> and **sexual misconduct**<sup>[5]</sup> the very fundamental sin of **not coveting** the possessions of another<sup>[6]</sup>, a most common root cause of **needless hatred**. Consequently, it is possible that the Temples were destroyed as a result of the Jewish people's overlooking fundamental principles of the Jewish religion as articulated in the Ten Commandments, and revisiting the Decalogue via the reading of Parshat VaEtchanan following the period of intense mourning over the destructions of the Temple would hopefully galvanize future conformity with Tora law.

However, **Bi'ur Halacha**, commenting upon Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 428:4 cited above, appears to **retool** the simple **understanding** of what **R. Yosef Karo** originally stated, i.e., the Tora reading that the Rabbis intended to associate with Tisha B'Av is in fact the Parsha **preceding** VaEtchanan:

And the reason (for "Tisha B'Av always preceding Parshat VaEtchanan") is in order that they read **Parshat Devarim**, which consists of the **rebukes of Moshe, before Tisha B'Av**, so that the Haftora read on that Shabbat is "Chazon" (Yeshayahu 1:1-27) which is made up of the rebukes of Yeshayahu concerning the destruction of the Temple, as well as Nitzavim before Rosh HaShana since it contains within it themes of repentance.

**Bi'ur Halacha** maintains that not only must correct action, in the form of the Ten Commandments be undertaken going forward in order to avoid a repetition of the harsh Divine Punishments that the Jewish people have experienced in the past, but rebukes against wrongdoing must also be given and hopefully taken to heart. While post-"Churban" (destruction) directives—VaEtchanan—face the future, pre-"Churban" warnings—Devarim—dredge up past shortcomings and iniquities in order to draw attention to them and thereby guarantee that they are not repeated.

While commentators have accounted for the ostensibly redundant list of place names in Parshat Devarim 1:1 by interpreting them as veiled rebukes to the people, Moshe

thereby reminding them of locations in which they acted poorly,[1\[7\]](#) the most well-known rebuke in Parshat Devarim appears in 1:12.

“**Eicha**” (how) can I (Moshe) bear by myself your trouble, your burden and your disagreements?[1\[8\]](#)

The obvious “Gezeira Shava” (lit. an equal utterance; when the same or similar word appears in two locations in the Biblical text and it is concluded that these two locations must share something in common indicated by the repetition of this particular word) is driven home even more sharply by the custom for the “Ba’al Koreh” (the congregation’s appointee to read the Parsha on their behalf during the Shabbat morning synagogue service) to cantillate the Tora reading of this word using the same melody employed for the reading of the Book of Eicha[1\[9\]](#) on Tisha B’Av evening.[1\[10\]](#) Furthermore, the very word “Eicha”[1\[11\]](#) is a quintessential form of rebuke—“**How** could you have done...?”

But an even more striking rebuke becomes apparent in Parshat Devarim when a well-known Rabbinical tradition is considered:

### **Ta’anit 26a-b**

(Mishna) Five misfortunes befell our ancestors on the 17<sup>th</sup> of Tammuz and five on the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av...

On the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av:

- 1) it was decreed that our ancestors should not enter the land,
- 2)+3) the Temples were destroyed the first and second times,
- 4) Bethar was captured,
- and 5) Yerushalayim was ploughed under.

### **Ibid. 29a**

(Gemora) “On the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av it was decreed that our ancestors should not enter the land”

What is the basis for this?

For it is written, (**BaMidbar 10:11**) “And it came to pass in the second year, in the second month, on the 20<sup>th</sup> day of the month (i.e., **Iyar 20**), that the cloud lifted up from over the Tabernacle of testimony.”

And it is further written, (**Ibid., 33**) “And they traveled from the mountain of HaShem (Mt. Sinai) three days journey (**Iyar 22**),” and R. Chama bar Chanina explained this means that on this day they turned aside from following after HaShem. (The Amora’s conclusion is based upon not only understanding 10:33 literally, i.e., that they left the geographical location known as HaShem’s Mountain, but also figuratively, that they turned their backs and removed themselves from HaShem’s Instruction regarding their beliefs and lifestyle.)[1\[12\]](#)

And it is further written, (**Ibid. 11:4**) “And the mixed multitude that was among them began to be filled with strong desire, and the children of Israel also wept with longing...”

And it is further written, (**Ibid. 20**) “But a whole month...”

That brings us up to the **22<sup>nd</sup> of Sivan**.

And it is further written, (**Ibid. 12;15**) “Miriam was quarantined outside the camp for seven days.”

That brings us up to the **29<sup>th</sup> of Sivan**.

And it is further written, (**Ibid. 13:2**) “Send for yourself men.”

And it is taught, "Moshe sent out spies on the **29<sup>th</sup> of Sivan**.

And it is further written, (**Ibid. 25**) "And they returned from spying out the land after 40 days." (**8<sup>th</sup> of Av**)

But is this not 39 days? Abaye replied: Tammuz of that year was a full month (30 days), for it is written, (**Eicha 1:15**) "He has called a solemn assembly against me to crush my young men."[1\[13\]](#)

**(Therefore it is appropriate to assume that the spies returned on the 8<sup>th</sup> rather than the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av.)**

And it is further written, (**BaMidbar 14:1**) "And all the congregation lifted up their voice and cried, and the people wept all night."

Rabba said in the name of R. Yochanan: That night was the **9<sup>th</sup> of Av**.

The Holy One, Blessed Be He Said: **You have wept without cause**, therefore **will I Set this day aside** for a **weeping (with cause)**, i.e., for something truly tragic as opposed to the imagined tragedy of the inability to conquer the Land of Israel) throughout the generations to come.

If we accept the Talmud's derivation that the decree calling for the generation of the Exodus to die in the desert rather than enter the land of Israel occurred on the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av, then the appearance of strong references to the incident of the Spies in Parshat Devarim may be more than a coincidence from the perspective of those who see connections between Tisha B'Av and the contents of the Tora reading on the Shabbat before. 25 of Parshat Devarim's 105 total verses (about 24%) are devoted to the sin of the spies (Devarim 1:19-36). Moshe delineates with stark simplicity the nature of the sin that underlay the resistance of the people to enter the land once they heard the spies' report:

**Devarim 1:26-27, 29-32**

Yet you would not go up, but rebelled against the Commandment of the Lord your God.

And you murmured in your tents, and said, "Because the Lord Hates us, He has Brought us out of the land of Egypt

Then I said to you, "Dread not, neither be afraid of them.

The Lord your God Who Goes before you, He will Fight for you, in the same manner that He Did for you in Egypt before your eyes,

As well as in the desert, where you have seen how the Lord your God has Carried you, as a man bears a son, in all of your travels, until you have come to this place.

**Yet you did not believe the Lord your God, Who Went in the way before you, to Search out a place for you to pitch your tents, in fire by night, to Show you the way where to go, and in a cloud by day.**

But what might the objective of associating Parshat Devarim with Tisha B'Av and thereby suggesting that the sin of the spies on the one hand, and the sins leading to the destructions of the two Temples on the other have something in common, other than being major tragedies in Jewish history? MaHaRaL MiPrague[1\[14\]](#) presents an intriguing approach to explaining how these sins are interrelated. The commentator contends that had the Jewish people proceeded to enter the land of Israel without hesitation, thereby fulfilling God's stated purpose in taking them out of Egypt in the first place—

**Shemot 3:8, 17**

And I will Go down to **Save** him (the Jewish people) **from** the hand of **Egypt** and to **Bring** him up from that land **to** a good and wide **land**, a land flowing with milk and honey...

And He Said: I will **Bring** you (the Jewish people) **up from** the affliction of **Egypt** to the **land** of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Emorite, the Prizite, the Chivite and the Yevusite, to a land flowing with milk and honey—

they would never have suffered exile. However, because of their strong reluctance when the opportunity to cross the Jordan first presented itself, the bond between the people and the land became and remained only tentative, and subject to disruption when they would prove spiritually and morally undeserving. Consequently, it could be argued that the exiles that followed on the heels of the destructions of the two Temples were outgrowths of the Jews' original refusal to realize their Divine Destiny and take up residence in Israel. According to MaHaRaL, the lesson of Parshat Devarim combined with Tisha B'Av becomes a cautionary tale with regard to our general ability to recognize and seize once-in-a-lifetime opportunities, as well as our specific relationship with the land of Israel. It goes without saying that the direct cause of our exiles have been evil doers and powerful empires. But by means of the juxtaposition between Parshat Devarim and Tisha B'Av we are being instructed to believe that these evil forces would not have been able to gain the upper hand against us, had we been living up to HaShem's Expectations in terms of Mitzva fulfillment, and love of "Eretz Yisrael." Once our commitment, our lifestyle, and our devotion turn egocentrically inwards, as they did regarding the sin of the spies as well as the destructions of the two Temples, when we clearly worry more about our personal comfort, and success and acceptance within a greater non-Jewish society in which we might find ourselves, than the need to unabashedly act as God's Nation in accordance with His Tora, we become vulnerable to disaster and exile. Parshat Devarim's association with Tisha B'Av reminds us that as terrible as the loss of the Temples have proven for our spiritual welfare, even more devastating has been our inability to remain in our Jewish homeland, a situation that happily today we can do a great deal to rectify, if we only have the will and resolve.

Shabbat Shalom, and may the lessons of Parshiot Devarim and VaEtchanan, combine with meaningful introspection and Teshuva on Tisha B'Av to make this the last Tisha B'Av during which we will be forced to mourn.

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[1\[1\]](#) The whole discussion is of course rendered moot both with respect to properly spacing the Parshiot in order to complete them annually, as well as seeking out connections between the Parshiot and the time of the year in which they are read, if a tri-annual cycle of Tora readings indicated in **Megilla 29b** with respect to the Israeli Jewish community during the Talmudic period were being followed.

[1\[2\]](#) Part I of a taped presentation dealing with Tisha B'Av given in Boston in 1979.

[1\[3\]](#) The prohibition against idolatry might in fact be the First of the Ten Commandments if Devarim 5:6 "I am the Lord your God Who Took you out of Egypt, the house of slavery..." is considered a postulate upon which all other Commandments are based, rather than a Commandment to believe in HaShem in its own right.

[1\[4\]](#) Devarim 5:17.

[1\[5\]](#) Ibid.

[1\[6\]](#) Ibid., 18.

[1 \[7\]](#) See <http://www.kmsynagogue.org/Masei5765.html>

[1\[8\]](#) For a fuller discussion of this verse, see <http://www.kmsynagogue.org/Devarim.html>

[1\[9\]](#) "Eicha" is not only the name of the entire Megilla, but it appears an additional three times besides in the quite short book's opening verse, for which the Megilla is named: 1:1; 2:1; 4:1,2.

[1\[10\]](#) Sections of the Haftora for Parshat Devarim are also read with the melody of Eicha, further solidifying the connection between the Parsha and Tisha B'Av.

[1\[11\]](#) The letters spelling the word "Eicha", "Alef" "Yud" "Chuf" "Heh", could also be pronounced "Ayeka" (Where are you?), the first question/implicit rebuke that God posed to Adam in the Garden of Eden following his eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil—Beraishit 3:9.

[1\[12\]](#) A similar point of view underlies the comment in Yalkut Shimoni, Parshat BeHa'alotcha, #529:

The Jews were only told to travel the journey of a single day, and they traveled a journey of three days. They were fleeing Mt. Sinai because they had been there 11 days short of an entire year. Each day they were given additional Commandments. Therefore when Moshe said to travel away from there the distance of a single day's journey, they went a distance of three days and one night, **like a young child who gets out of school and runs.**

R. Baruch HaLevy Epstein, in Tora Temima, explains that since Sinai is never referred to as "Har HaShem" anywhere else in the Tora, the unique name appearing here was intended to convey the impression that they were not only leaving the mountain, but also HaShem Himself, so to speak.

[1\[13\]](#) The "solemn assembly" is a reference to the public commemoration of the destroyed Temples that was deliberately orchestrated to take place on the same day that HaShem Decreed that the Generation of the Exodus would die in the desert.

[1\[14\]](#) Netzach Yisrael, Chapt. 8.