



## Understanding The Four Fasts of Zechariah 8:19

The word for “fast” in Hebrew is tzom (צום) and there are scripturally 4 fast times that we observe through the year, each with different historical origins and with different spiritual purposes

On the one hand, at times a *ta'anit* may be instituted (the tractate of **Ta'anit** is devoted chiefly to the fast-days, their practices and prayers.) in response to an immediate tragedy, as "one of the roads to repentance" (*Rambam, Hilkhos Ta'anuyot 1:1*), in order to stir the people to mend their ways and to pray that God rescinds His decree. On the other hand, the four fast days which commemorate the events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem and its two Temples, involve past tragedies, of which we still feel the impact, and were therefore instituted to "stir hearts and opens the way to repentance" (*ibid.*, 5:1) in a more general sense.

According to the Navi Zechariah, not only Tisha B'av, but all four of the fast days (in which we remember Yerushalayim) will one day take on an added dimension and be turned to times of joy!

In the following shiur (*lesson study*), we study that prophecy of Zechariah (chapters 7-8), as it will help us appreciate an important aspect of Tisha b'Av which is especially relevant today, no less than it was over two thousand years ago.

### Introduction: Historical Background

The Jewish custom to fast on Tisha b'Av – to remember the destruction of the Temple, is so ancient that its original source is found in the Bible, in the prophecy of Zechariah (approx 520 BCE).

Zechariah and his contemporary Chagai, were the two prophets who returned to Israel with the Babylonian Exile, and inspired the building of the Second Temple. Their time period, better known as “shivat tzion” – the return to Zion, begins with the famous decree of Cyrus (the first king of the Persian Empire), allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple, after seventy years of exile (see Ezra 1:1-9).

Unfortunately, that first effort to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem immediately upon their arrival was thwarted by the complaints of the local population (see Ezra 3:1-4:5). It was only some twenty years after their original return, when permission to build was finally granted by Darius (the Great), in the second year of his reign.

In that very same year, both Chagai and Zechariah deliver their opening prophecies, encouraging the people that despite their rather pitiful predicament there was hope that this new Beit HaMikdash [Temple] would one day be greater than the first one. [See Chagai chapters 1-2, Zechariah chapters 1-3.]

During this time period of **shivat tzion**, many thousands of Jews had indeed returned to Zion (see Ezra chapter 2), however many thousands more remained in Bavel [later to be known as the 'Jews of the Diaspora'].

### The Big Question

We begin our study with chapter seven of Sefer Zechariah, a prophecy delivered in the **fourth** year of Darius (i.e. two years after construction of the Mikdash began).

The chapter begins as a delegation of Jews from Bavel comes to Jerusalem to inquire in regard to a very important halachic question concerning fasting:

*“Ha’evkeh b’chodesh ha’chamishi – Shall we continue to weep in the fifth month (i.e. Tisha b’Av), do we abstain ourselves as we have been doing all these years?”*

*[See Zechariah 7:1-3.]*

Their query is quite understandable. As implied from their question, their custom in Bavel had been to fast every year in the fifth month, since time of destruction of the First Temple. Now, in the fourth year of Darius, as the construction of the new Temple is almost complete (it was finally completed in sixth year of Darius/ see Ezra 6:15), they are wondering whether it remains necessary to fast!

The delegation, sent from Bavel, goes to Zechariah to find the answer.

### A Better Question, & A Better Answer

For such a simple and logical question, we should expect a straightforward ‘yes or no’ answer. Instead, God fields this question with a complex prophetic answer, spanning two chapters of Sefer Zechariah. Let’s follow God’s response, noting how He follows an ‘ancient Jewish custom’ of answering a question with a question:

*“[And God said to me:] Say to the people...When you fasted and lamented on the fifth and seventh months [i.e. Tisha b’Av and Tzom Gedalya] during the last seventy years, **have I been fasting?! And when you eat and drink (not on a fast day), is it not you who decides to eat or drink?!**”*  
(7:4-6)

Note how God’s rhetorical answer implies that Am Yisrael should not be asking God concerning the laws of the fast days. After all, the fast days are not God’s commands, rather they are customs instituted by the people themselves in order to remember Yerushalayim. Just as the people decide when and what they eat, they too should decide if and when they should fast.

However, in case the people are truly interested in God’s opinion in regard to the rebuilding of the Second Temple, Zechariah takes this opportunity to relay God’s primary message -that deals with issues that are much more fundamental than fasting:

*“Pay attention to the very same things which the earlier prophets [had warned your forefathers] when Jerusalem and its surrounding areas were populated and tranquil [i.e. during the good years of first Temple period]...*

*Execute **true justice**, deal loyally and compassionately with one another. Do not defraud a widow, orphan, stranger, or poor man, and do not plot evil against one another.” (7:7-10)*

God’s answer is very powerful, for in it, He reads ‘between the lines’ of their original question. If the people are fasting on Tisha B’av, it is not only to remember **what** happened to Yerushalayim, but more important, it is to remember **why** the Temple was destroyed.

God takes this opportunity to remind Bnei Yisrael that the first Temple was destroyed because of their wayward behavior, for they did not follow the guidance of their prophets. To make sure the new Temple will be successful, the people must make sure not to repeat those same sins that caused the first one to be destroyed.

In a nutshell, God is not interested in people fasting; rather that they follow His laws properly, especially those of social justice, and not repeat the sins of their forefathers.

Implicit from prophecy of Zechariah is the reason why the first Bet ha’Mikdash was destroyed: God’s anger was kindled primarily due to both a lack of social justice and a lack of fraternity within Am Yisrael (and not necessarily due to religious impiety).

*[See for example Yirmiyahu 7:8-11, 7:21-23, 8:4-9, 9:1-8,22-23 (that’s in the Haftara for Tisha B’av!) A similar theme repeats itself throughout the Later Prophets. The ‘classic answer’ that the first Bet Ha’Mikdash was destroyed due to the sins of idol worship, murder, and “arayot” etc. is based on the Gemara in [Yoma 9b](#) and the puskim in [Melachim II chapter 21](#) in regard to God’s decision to destroy the First Temple due to the sins during the time period of Menashe. However to reconcile these two sources requires a complete (different) shiur.]*

### **What Should Have Been the Question**

Zechariah’s prophecy implies that the primary reason for fasting on Tisha B’av should be to remember **why** Jerusalem was destroyed. In the prophet’s eyes, it would be meaningless to fast simply to remember **what** happened. Instead, God is interested that we remember **why** those tragic events took place.

Should a group come to ask for prophetic guidance, Zechariah would rather hear questions in the like of: ‘What should we do assure that God’s redemption will be complete? What does God expect from us?’

Zechariah would rather the people become ‘participants’ in the process of redemption, rather than ‘spectators’.

With this backdrop, we can better appreciate how Zechariah continues this prophecy. First, he reminds the people that even though God had punished their forefathers with Jerusalem’s destruction for not listening (see 7:11-14), now they must recognize that a new opportunity has arisen:

*“Thus says the Lord: I am very zealous for Zion... I have returned to Yerushalayim, for it will be called **Ir Ha’emet** – the city of **emet** – **truth**, and the mountain of God – **Har Ha’kodesh** – the mountain of holiness... (see 8:1-3)*

Just as God had gone out of His way to punish Jerusalem, now He is going out of His way to help rebuild Jerusalem, but on the condition that it become a city of truth. God can only provide the people with the opportunity, but it is up to **people** to make Jerusalem a city of truth! [Note how this pasuk implies that God's return to Jerusalem is dependant upon Am Yisrael's ability to make Jerusalem a city of justice – a very important 'proviso'.]

### **A Hint for the Diaspora**

Note, that up until this point, God has not answered the delegation itself. Instead, He has taken the opportunity to address the entire nation (see 7:5) regarding the ultimate goal of this redemption, i.e. that Jerusalem become a city characterized by social justice (8:1-3), and the hope that it will soon return to political and economic maturity as well (see 8:4-6).

This is followed by what appears to be a message as well for the Jews in the Diaspora:

*“Thus says the Lord: I will rescue My people from lands of the east and from the lands of west, and I will bring them home to dwell in Jerusalem. They shall be My people, and I will be their God, [on the condition of] in **truth and righteousness** – **b’emet u’b’tzdaka**” (see 8:7-8)*

It could be that Zechariah is 'hinting' here to the Diaspora that instead of worrying about whether or not to fast on Tisha B'av, they should be considering their own return to Tzion, to help their brethren create a Jerusalem of **emet u'tzdaka**, [but this interpretation may be a bit too Zionistic].

This hope for the ingathering of all the Exile in Zechariah's prophecy continues with the hope for a better economy and future prosperity (see 8:9-13).

Finally, after repeating His claim that He is eager to help the redemption of His people (8:14-15), God summarizes His advice concerning how this redemption will be achieved:

*“These are the things that you must do: Speak **truth** to one another, **emet u'mishpat shalom shiftu b'shareichem** – render true and perfect **justice** in your gates. And do not contrive evil against one another, and do not love perjury, for all these things I hate – declares the Lord” (8:16-17)*

### **Back to the Original Question**

Now, after charging the people with His true hopes and expectations from this generation of **shivat tzion**, God finally answers the original question in regard to the future of Tisha B'av and the other fast days for Jerusalem:

*“Thus says the Lord: The fast of the fourth month (17th Tamuz), the fast of the fifth month (Tisha B'av), the fast of the seventh month (Tzum Gedalya), and the fast of the tenth month (10th of Tevet), shall become for the House of Judah days of **joy and gladness** – **happy festivals** – [on the condition that] you must love and follow – **emet v'shalom** – truth and peace. ” (8:18-19)*

[compare **emet v'shalom** with 7:9, 8:3 & 8:16]

God declares that should Am Yisrael fulfill their destiny and establish a nation characterized by justice & truth, there will no longer be any reason to fast. Instead, these fast days will become holidays. [See Further Iyun section for an explanation why they actually become holidays.].

### **The Messianic Dream**

Zechariah finishes his prophecy with an even higher aspiration concerning the future of the Second Temple:

*“Thus says the Lord: A time will still come when the inhabitants of many lands and great nations will come and gather in Yerushalayim to seek and find God’s favor...”*

(see 8:20-23)

Zechariah’s concluding words echo the hope of Yeshayahu’s famous prophecy concerning the ultimate goal for the nation of Israel. [See [Isaiah 2:1-4](#) (& [Micha 4:1-5](#)), see also the parallel ‘partial quote’ at entrance to the United Nations Bldg.]

The reason for this conclusion is quite simple. Should Am Yisrael truly set up this ideal society of **emet v’shalom, tzedek u’mishpat**, then the Bet HaMikdash can fulfill its ultimate purpose to become a beacon by which all nations can find the proper path to God. [See also [Devarim 4:5-8](#) & [I Melachim 8:41-43](#)!]

### **Zechariah Today**

Although Zechariah’s prophecy to the founding fathers of “bayit sheni” (the Second Temple) was in response to a question raised some 2500 years ago, it is no less (and maybe even more) meaningful today, as we are in the midst of a redemption process whose direction is not clear.

If there is prophetic message for Tisha B’av today, which can be agreed upon by every Jew, “chiloni” or “dati”; Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform; in Israel or in the Diaspora – it is that of [Zechariah chapters 7-8](#).

Furthermore, it is a prophecy that recognizes the realities of a ‘less than perfect’ redemption process, yet shows the first step in the path to achieve its highest goals.

Hopefully, this prophecy of Zechariah can help unite Am Yisrael today, and set us in the proper direction to make us worthy enough so that next year we can celebrate Tisha b’Av as a ‘holiday’.