



ICJW Bea Zucker Calendar Study Series

“Feminist Inspiration for Living on the Jewish Cycle”

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Fast of 17th of Tammuz—From Altar to Table

Context

During the years following the Exodus from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the desert, and receiving the Torah, the young Jewish nation dedicated much of its creative, social, and spiritual effort toward public sacred service. The biblical *Mishkan*-Tabernacle was the transportable sanctuary during the desert wanderings, the precursor to two stone Jerusalem Temples.

Historical events twice led to the destruction of the Temple. Shifting Jewish loyalties among imperial forces from Babylon to Egypt brought on the siege against [First Temple Jerusalem](#) by the Babylonian army under Nebuchadnezzar in 587 B.C.E. Against the backdrop of corruption of the priestly elite, class warfare, and excessive zealotry during the Jewish rebellion against the Roman occupiers, the Romans under Titus laid siege to [Second Temple Jerusalem](#) in 70 C.E. As the siege tightened, resources diminished, and strife increased. Both sieges ended with invading forces destroying the sacred Temple. Both times the ancient Jewish People in the land promised to our ancestors suffered brutal defeat, were massively slaughtered, enslaved, and uprooted from home.

The fast on the 17th of Tammuz highlights the vulnerability of the Temple service for it was ruptured.

According to tradition, on the 17th of Tammuz, sacrifices of animals ceased. The custom to desist from eating at our own tables alludes to the empty Temple altar. In this unit, we pay attention the table—the altar for the performance of sacred ritual. The table evolves into a potent Temple symbol and accumulates significance as a location for sacred rituals at home.

Background

According to a mishna (Ta'anit 4:6), the pre-dawn to sunset fast on the 17th of the Hebrew month of Tammuz commemorates traditions about a number of calamities that befell the Jewish people on that day -

1. Moshe broke the stone tablets of the covenant when he came down from Mount Sinai and saw the Israelites worshipping the Golden Calf.
2. During the Babylonian siege, the daily sacrificial offerings stopped (Ta'anit 28b). Rashi offers two possible reasons for the discontinuation of the sacrifices: the enemy prohibited the sacrifices (comment on Ta'anit 26b); the priests ran out of sheep during the siege and no one was entering or exiting the city walls (comment on Arachin 11b).

Well before the Second Temple was actually destroyed, the talmud recounts the following story about how two brothers warring for control of the Judean kingdom brought about the cessation of the sacrifices—

Our sages taught: When the members of the Hasmonean dynasty were fighting one another, Hyrcanus was inside and Aristobulus outside [the city wall]. [Every day, those who were inside] used to let down to the outside a basket of coins, and [in return] sheep were sent up for the regular sacrifices. There was, however, an old man [among the besiegers] who had some knowledge of sophistry who said to them: 'So long as the others [are allowed to] continue to perform the service of the sacrifices they will not be delivered into your hands.' On the next day when the basket of coins was let down, a pig was sent up. When the pig reached the centre of the wall, it stuck its claws into the wall, and Eretz Yisrael quaked over a distance of four hundred square parasangs [4 miles/6 km.] (Baba Kamma 82b)

The pig signals the end of the supply of sheep and the cessation of the daily order of Second Temple sacrifices. In a different passage, the talmud attributes the dating of this event on the 17th of Tammuz to a traditon (Ta'anit 28b).

3. The breach of the walls of Jerusalem. According to one passage in the talmud (Ta'anit 28b), the Babylonians breached the walls of Jerusalem in 586 BCE on the 9th of Tammuz and the Romans breached the Second Temple city walls in 69 CE on the 17th of Tammuz.
4. According to a tradition in the Talmud (Ta'anit 28b), on the 17th of Tammuz, Apostomus burned a Torah scroll. Apostomus might be a confusion of the name of the oppressive Syrian-Greek Epiphanes, or a Roman military leader prior to the Bar Kokhba revolt.
5. The Romans erected an idol in the Jerusalem Temple (Ta'anit 28b).

This list compiles diverse moments of destruction, a complex of misdeeds among Jews and in relation to the Divine, and incursions by foreign powers that desecrate the sacred domain.

Identifying the anniversary of historical breaches of the sacred domain raises the question about how to commemorate them meaningfully and in a constructive manner. The sages were concerned with developing suitable observances of mourning the destruction while enabling Jewish life to move forward. The following text from the period of the Second Temple destruction indicates the deep struggle among communities to negotiate how to deal with the losses and how to grieve for the demise of the potent ritual center of Jewish life in its time.

Tosefta Sotah 15 11-15	תוספתא סוטה טו ה,
<p>From the time of the destruction of the Temple, the Pharisees multiplied in Israel, and they neither ate meat nor drank wine. R. Yehoshua said to them, "My children, do you not eat meat?" The Pharisees replied, "We will eat meat when every day it is offered on the altar, but now it is annulled." R. Yehoshua said, "Why do you not drink wine?" Pharisees, "We will drink wine from which libations are poured onto the altar, but now it is annulled." R. Yehoshua: "Also figs and grapes we will not eat because from them they used to take firstfruit offerings on the festival of Sukkot/ Atzeret. Bread we will not eat because we used to lay the Showbreads out in the Temple. Water we will not drink because from it they used to pour libations on the Festival (Sukkot)." The Pharisees fell silent.</p>	<p>משחרב בית [האחרון] רבו פרושין [בישראל שלא [היו אוכלין בשר ולא שותין] יין נטפל להם ר' יהושע אמר להם מפני מה [אין] אתם אוכלים בשר אמרו לו נאכל בשר שבכל יום היה [תמיד קרב לגבי מזבח ועכשיו בטל אמר להם לא נאכל ומפני מה אין אתם שותים יין אמרו לו יין נשתה שבכל יום היה מתנסך ע"ג המזבח ועכשיו בטל אמר להם לא נשתה אמר להם א"כ לחם לא נאכל שממנו היו מביאין שתי הלחם ולחם הפנים מים לא נשתה שמהן היו מנסכין מים בחג תאנים וענבים לא נאכל שמהן מביאין בכורים] בעצרת שתקו אמר</p>

R. Yehoshua, "Do not mourn excessively, the edict has already been passed, and more mourning is too much. So the sages taught, plaster your house, but leave a small area unplastered in memory of Jerusalem; make your feast, but leave off a small part in memory of Jerusalem, wear your jewelry, woman, but leave off a small detail in memory of Jerusalem, as it says, "If I forget you, o Jerusalem, forget my right hand, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy." (Ps.137). Every person who mourns for Jerusalem in this world rejoice with her in the world to come, as it says, "Rejoice in Jerusalem and celebrate in her all those who love her, celebrate her joyously all who mourn" (Isaiah 66).

להם בני להתאבל יותר מדאי אי אפשר
 [ושלא להתאבל כלל אי אפשר] אלא כך
 אמרו חכמים סד אדם את ביתו בסיד ומשייר
 דבר מועט זכר לירושלים עושה אדם [עסקי
 סעודה] ומשייר דבר מועט [זכר לירושלים]
 עושה אשה כל תכשיטיה ומשיירה דבר מועט
 זכר לירושלים שנאמר (תהילים קלז) אם
 אשכחך ירושלים תשכח ימיני תדבק לשוני
 לחכי אם לא אזכרכי וכל המתאבלים עליה
 בעוה"ז שמחים עמה לעוה"ב שנא' (ישעיהו
 סו) שמחו את ירושלים וגילו בה כל אוהביה
 וגו

This text suggests the extent to which the Temple intersects with the domestic home. Resonances of the loss of the Temple were palpable in people's everyday life—meals, clothing, and celebrations. Many of the same materials are used, foods—meat, wine, water, bread, fruit. Indeed, many of the preparations, implements, activities are also similar—washing, baking, roasting, eating. The Temple was the *beit hamiqdash*, the "sacred home," a ritualized, sanctified enactment of familial daily acts of sustenance.

While the Temple resembled the domestic home in so many aspects, materials and functions, there is one key gender distinction. An hereditary caste of men exclusively operated the Temple. When the *Kohanim*-priests performed the daily service of preparing food—meat and bread, dealt with fruit, wine and oil, kindling fire for cooking and roasting, they used sanctified implements within a sacred *home*. This men's work was considered sacred. Women's parallel work at *home* did not partake of the Temple sanctity. Women were categorically excluded from performing the sacred Temple service (along with men who descended from the non-kohanic tribes).

In the aftermath of the destruction, the Temple became a model for home and synagogue where we replicate many of its objects and rituals. In the analogy between home and Temple, the table is the altar where food is consumed. The following text challenges people to relate to the dinner table as a place for sacred service. At this dinner table envisioned by the talmudic sages, Torah study replaces the highly corruptible priestly sacrificial service at the altar -

Rabbi Shimon said: If three have eaten at one table and have not spoken over it words of Torah, it is as though they had eaten of the sacrifices of the dead, for it is written (Isaiah 28:8) "All tables are covered with filthy vomit; no place is clean." But if three have eaten at one table and have spoken over it words of Torah, it is as if they had eaten from the table of God, for it is written (Ezekiel 41:22) "He said to me, "This is the table that stands before the Lord." (Pirkei Avot 3:4)

Explaining the same proof text from Ezekiel about how the table takes the place of the sacred altar, the following talmudic passage contributes another dimension to the analogy.

Rav Yehudah taught: Three things lengthen a person's days and years. Extending one's time at prayer, extending one's time at the table, and extending one's time in the bathroom...

[Why is] extending one's time at the table [worthy of reward]? Perhaps a poor person will come, and you will be able to give him/her [something to eat].

[How do we know that a table has the power to lengthen one's life?] Since it says in Scripture: *...in front of the Shrine was something resembling a wooden altar three cubits high and two cubits long, with inner corners. Its length and its walls were made of wood. And he said to me, "This is the table that stands before God."* (Ezekiel 41:21-22)

The Torah first called it an "altar" and then called it a "table" [thus equating the two: our table is like an altar, and altars serve to lengthen a person's life]. [Noting this similarity between tables and the altar] Rabbi Yohanan and Rabbi Eleazar both taught: "During the time that the Temple stood, the altar atoned for Israel. And now, a person's table atones for him/her." (Berakhot 54b-55a)

Here, the sages suggest an ethical aspect of the sacredness of the dinner table—a reason for dwelling at the table is to increase the possibility of hosting a hungry person to a meal. A contemporary study substantiates this approach to addressing social inequity. In her book, [Eating Together: Food, Friendship, and Inequality, the social dynamics of shared meals](#), Alice Julier argues that dining together can radically shift people's perspectives. It reduces people's perceptions of inequality, and diners tend to view those of different races, genders, and socioeconomic backgrounds as more equal than they would in other social scenarios. According to the passage above, time at the table "lengthens one's life"—as a reward for generosity. Welcoming needy people to partake of our food in our home, at our table, is an element of sacred service.

Rather than becoming obsessed with mourning, the sages press forward to revolutionize Judaism. They succeed to reformulate Temple practices for the reality of dispossession and exile. They obligate every Jew in the core commandments that replace the Temple: prayer and study. Every Jew anywhere has the possibility to build a home in which s/he can perform sacred service. Every Jewish community anywhere has the possibility to build a synagogue in which to perform sacred service.

The breach of the walls and the events of the 17th of Tammuz that mark the process of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temples bring sadness and warrant fasting. They also call to attention the innovation sparked by indomitable will to respond productively to extreme challenges. The Jerusalem priestly system of centralized ritual with exclusive hereditary power was more vulnerable—to internal corruption and external assault—and less resilient, dynamic, and creative than the bold rabbinic model. The sages inaugurated a trend toward more inclusivity and a broader distribution of obligations, privileges, and authority according to merit.

Until the Modern period, most Jewish communities understood that public sacred service remained exclusively male, under male authority and control. However, the revolution of rabbinic Judaism that began the democratization of sacred service and put it into the hands of the entire Jewish People continues today in the diverse forms of feminist Judaism. Women's entry into study halls and synagogues as full participants and leaders, contributors to the ongoing project of Judaism progresses.

During the fast when we mourn the breach of the sacred, we can also focus on the struggle ahead in all streams and movements to render our sacred domain more complete and whole. In our time, we continue the rabbinic momentum toward fuller mobilization of Jewry—to seamlessly integrate women's voices and bodies, interpretations, innovations, and authority into all realms of sacred service.

Observances and Practices

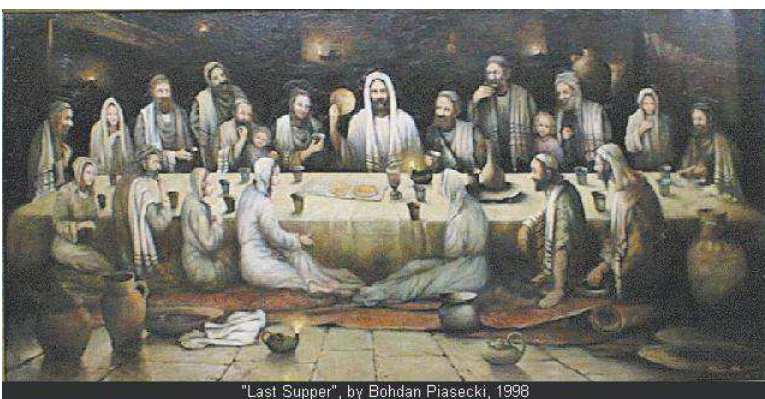
The main observance of the 17th of Tammuz is fasting from just before dawn until nightfall. Some Ashkenazi communities begin to observe their mourning customs of the Three Weeks on the 17th of Tammuz, refraining from listening to music, public entertainment, and haircuts, for example.

Discussion Questions and Resources

- Explore how you might experience the household work and acts of daily sustenance as sacred—cooking and eating, laundering, home-maintenance. How can your table be an altar—a place of sanctification?
- Insofar as the table is the altar where we share with the needy, the food we bring to it can also enhance the holiness of the process. Investigate the options to food shop with moral conscience – consider buying [fair trade products](#) and [community-supported agriculture](#) produce.
- The dinner table has been a subject of fascination to artists for centuries. Analyze the paintings below to interpret the significance of the dining scene—who participates, where is the focus, what kind of meal is being consumed, what are the gender, age, and class dynamics, what kinds of interactions are transpiring, etc? Do you witness a sacred element in the paintings? Explain.



Perhaps the most famous dinner scene in Western art is the [Last Supper](#). This is a version modelled on Leonardo da Vinci's epic by Giovanni Pietro Rizzoli (1520).



In order to counter Leonardo's powerful image of the Last Supper, Brothers and Sisters in Christ ([BASIC](#)) Praying and Working for the Ordination of Women in the Roman Catholic Church commissioned the eminent Polish artist Bohdan Piasecki to paint the [Last Supper](#) as a Jewish Passover meal with women and children present. The

painting is oil on canvas measuring 20" by 48" (50 by 120 cm). BASIC seeks to present the painting to as wide an audience as possible through a public launch and placing it on public display both in Ireland and in other countries.



These are two renditions of American Thanksgiving dinner provocatively juxtaposed in an [exhibit](#) at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth Texas. On the left, Norman Rockwell's famous painting, *Freedom from Want* (1943), on the right is David Bates's *Thanksgiving Dinner* (1982).



This [photo](#) by Mary Thorman captures a contemporary child's rendering of a Shabbat family table.



This is a still shot from a video rendering of Rockwell's Thanksgiving scene in the context of a Jewish lesbian family. See "[J&J and Tylenol](#) Have a New Take on Norman Rockwell's America: Campaign Shows Asian, Lesbian and African-American Families Around Table."



About Nicole Eisenman's *Seder* (2010), Aldrin Valdez [comments](#), "In *Seder*, collaging and riffing from the repertoire of those history-made men, Eisenman reworks and reinvents the pre-existing, male-dominated modes of representation, as if to say: yeah, this is the language and history we're taught, but we'll do with it what we want and need to do. The traditions and conventions handed down to us—*Seder* meaning "order" or "arrangement" in Hebrew—might inform our identity, but they do not limit us. Despite their different

textures and styles, what connects the sitters is a shared Jewish identity. This unites them as much as the geometry of the table unifies the composition, creating a pictorial whole that merges together these various ways of painting.

Few families share meals together in our busy cultures. See "[The Importance of Eating Together](#)," There are movements to restore the ritual of meal-time and its positive effects. From the "[Family Dinner Project.org](#)" -

Sharing a family meal is good for the spirit, the brain and the health of all family members. Recent studies link regular family dinners with many behaviors that parents pray for: lower rates of substance abuse, teen pregnancy and depression, as well as higher grade-point averages and self-esteem. Studies also indicate that dinner conversation is a more potent vocabulary-booster than reading, and the stories told around the kitchen table help our children build resilience. The icing on the cake is that regular family meals also lower the rates of obesity and eating disorders in children and adolescents.

See this Irish [study](#), "Gender Inequalities in Time Use - The Distribution of Caring, Housework and Employment among Women and Men." How do gender-specific roles or expectations about what labors you perform at home inhibit or enhance your sense of the sacred? Experiment with better gender distributions of housekeeping responsibilities and opportunities among men and women, boys and girls. Sharing in home labors engenders more happiness among all participants, particularly women who are over-burdened.

The Temple vessels and implements, invested with tremendous care and craft, were looted and ruined during the destructions of Jerusalem. Choose and/or prepare special vessels and implements that contribute toward the sanctity of your kitchen and table.

Kiddush cup by Ottawa artist/sculptor Micahel Parkin



Summary of Issues

The terrible historical events surrounding the fall of the second Temple mark the breakdown of the previous order of the Jewish People and pose a massive challenge to the Jewish People. Fasting every year on the 17th of Tammuz to mark the breach in the intactness of our sacred structure proposes introspection about the tumult of our tradition and prompts us toward renewal in our time—to create more sustaining, compelling Jewish life. The sages reinterpret defunct priestly Temple functions and symbols to sanctify daily life and make their sacred meaning accessible throughout the dispersions of the Jewish People. Fasting in commemoration of the process of the destruction of the Temple, the sacred home, we learn to attribute sacredness to our own home sphere, to women's and men's nurturing activities, in the kitchen and at the dinner table.

Methods & Observations

While the observance of the 17th of Tammuz is fasting, this unit explores eating, and the dining room table as the altar. Fasting prompts us to become more conscious of the vulnerability of sacredness and the historic breach of the defenses surrounding Jerusalem. We hunger for more wholesome and whole sanctifications in our daily lives that honor and continue to develop the sacred practices that were once fulfilled in the Jerusalem Temple. Whereas men's priestly Temple service was holy, and women's similar domestic work was not, in this paradigm, home is sacred; both women and men are the priestly functionaries.

Contact

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