

Parshas Shemos – Shovavim Tat – Henry Ehreich

כ"א טבת תשע"ו – 2nd January 2016 – שבת פ' שמות

תת שובבים is an acrostic composed of the initial letters of the names of the first eight Sedras in the book of Shemos. (In an ordinary year it would be שובבים only, the extra two weeks are added in a Leap Year). These weeks, in the middle of winter, between Chanukah and Purim, were highlighted as a period for Teshuvoh and Tikkun (correction) hinted at in Tenach in the verse שובבו בנים שובבים (return backsliding children). The custom was well established to observe three fasts on the Monday, Thursday and Monday (BeHaB) at the start of Marcheshvan and Iyar to atone for any excesses and improper behaviour that may have taken place during the Succos and Pesach holidays, and as a "protection" for the next half year. However in a leap year there is a gap from one BeHaB to the next of more than six months, additional fasts and saying of Selichos was introduced. (see the Levush in Siman 685:1)

Exactly why there are eight fasts is not entirely clear. Some relate the eight weeks to concepts and episodes in the eight Sedras, whilst others suggest that they were to request protection, especially for children and from epidemics, during the unusually long winter period. Kabbalistically it was also considered an auspicious time to revise the laws of Ta'haras Hamishpacha (family purity) and, indeed, one can see posters advertising special Shiurim on this subject as this time. It is also suggested that originally there were four weeks of fasts on Monday and Thursday to correspond for the extra month in the leap year. When it became difficult for people to fast so often, the fasts were spread over eight weeks with fasts on Thursday only. Eliyah Ki-Tov in his sefer "Our Heritage" suggests that the Shovavim Tat fasts were to request that pregnant women should not miscarry. He suggests that the fasts were on Thursday, the fifth day of the week, because the fish were created on the fifth day and were given the blessing "be fruitful and multiply" (Bereishis 1:22). Also in the Sedra of Shemos it states about the Jewish people ".... so did they increase and so did they multiply"

The custom became prevalent to fast on Thursdays and to say Selichos at Shacharis (as on a public fast day) and to read "Vayechal" at Mincha, if ten men were fasting. The North Africa custom was to fast and recite Selichos also on Mondays and the Italian custom was to say Selichos at Mincha on Thursdays. The custom of saying Selichos on Thursdays of the weeks of Shovavim Tat is still maintained today at the Golders Green Beth Hamedrash ("Munks") where the Selichos texts are available in a special booklet. If the Thursday coincided with Rosh Chodesh, or Tu Bishvat fell on a Thursday (both of which occur this year), Selichos is said in the weeks of Vayakhel and Pekuday. The reason why the fast is not made up during the week of Ki Siso is because the Sedra contains the inauspicious episode of the Golden Calf. These Selichos are, in the main, taken from the Selichos before Rosh Hashonoh and during the Asseres Yemai Teshuvah. There is also a Seder Ha-Selihot Shel Shovavim Tat by Rabbi Moshe ben Mordecai Zacuto (who was known as the "Remez") first published in Venice in 1712 (Interestingly, Rabbi Moshe Zacuto wrote a 1000 word poem where every word commenced with an Aleph!) In the Beth Hamedrash Torah Eitz Chaim, "69" Lordship Road N16, Selichos is recited at two Shacharis Minyanim and there are at least ten men fasting and "Vayechal" is leined at Mincha. At this Shul, this year, in the week of Rosh Chodesh, the fast is observed on Wednesday and Mincha includes Yom Kippur Kotton, and in the week of Tu Bishvat, the fast, with Selichos, is on Monday.

Other customs for the Thursdays in the weeks of Shovavim include observing a Ta'anis Dibbur (refraining from unnecessary speaking) and to recite the whole of the book of Tehillim three times (making a total of 450 psalms) The traditional Sefardic Shovavim prayer book is entitle Marpeh L'Nefesh (To Heal the Soul). So we see that the purpose of these days is to use them as another opportunity for Tefilla and Teshuvah and to use them effectively.

[Anyone who wishes to review the Laws of Ta'haras Hasmishpacha can listen to Rabbi Cohn's Shiurim on the subject which are available from our website on application to webmaster@northhendon.co.uk. Rabbi Cohn will also be happy to answer questions on this topic]