

## 17th Tammuz

By Rabbi Amanda Golby

I have a great interest in the Jewish calendar and my ideal is to live in accordance with it and help others to do likewise. However this is certainly much easier said than done. Something in our personal life can mean we are happy on Tisha B'Av and grieving on Simchat Torah. It is yet another example of ideal and reality, and something I am particularly conscious of this strange summer. Next Wednesday night and Thursday, July 8th and 9th, is the 17th Tammuz with a sunrise to sunset fast, and the beginning of the period known as the 'The Three Weeks' with its restrictions which intensify in the nine days which will culminate in Tisha B'Av. And this year there is the paradox of Jewish restrictions being imposed at a time when, for most, there is a lifting of some of the things which have not been permitted these past months.

Tradition says that many things happened on the 17th Tammuz, including Moses smashing the original tablets when he came down from Sinai and saw the golden calf, the ending of the korban tamid, the perpetual sacrifice in the First Temple and the breaching of Jerusalem's city walls in preparation for the destruction of the 2nd Temple.

In addition, many things in later Jewish history and indeed world history have happened during the three weeks. Perhaps summer has never been without troubles except in the childhood memories of some but how are we going to use this season this year? It seems strange to write about the time of gloom and then quote a verse from a Hallel psalm, but it seems appropriate. The first day of Rosh Chodesh Tammuz is my Mother's Yahrzeit. Probably as part of my interest in the calendar, and the fact that at the time there was a renewed interest in Rosh Chodesh for women, it was the subject of my Rabbinic dissertation, and, in a way it seemed appropriate that she died on Rosh Chodesh. However when at a minyan on a Rosh Chodesh in Jerusalem during my year of avelut, Rabbi Arik Ascherman spoke on his Father's Yahrzeit, and said how difficult he had found it when he realised that Hallel would always be said on that day, and it had taken him time to get used to, I began to think about it. And, of course, very many do have Yahrzeit on days of joy, and I imagine there are a mixture of responses.

This year I thought particularly of verse 5 of Psalm 118: min hameitzar karati ya, ananani v'merchav ya; 'from the straits, I called to the Eternal. The Eternal answered me with a wide expanse'.

Min hameitzar, from the straits, the narrow places, and the Three

Weeks are known as the bein metzarim, within the straits, taken from a verse from Eichah, Lamentations. HaMetzarim becomes linked with Mitzrayim, Egypt, and as well as the collective suffering associated with Egypt, we can think of individual suffering at any time, and perhaps particularly at this time, when, each one of us, even if we have thankfully been spared serious illness and loss within our immediate circle all know those who have suffered, and in some ways we have all been confined to our own narrow place, our personal Egypt, with its aspects of enslavement and darkness. God does not respond by making everything alright. God responds 'with a wide expanse'. As Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz comments: 'When I began my prayer, I felt as though I were in a narrow, constricted space, as if the boundaries of life were closing in on me. But then God answered me with a wide expanse. God answered my prayers not with word, but with action, placing me in a situation that alleviated my sense of distress and confinement' and, of course at this time, it is not just one individual, but all of us and as constricting lockdown hopefully eases, albeit not to life as it was before, we know that for very many the dark times and certainly for all of us, the challenges will continue in a range of ways. Nevertheless, we will hopefully all emerge less confined, physically, emotionally, spiritually, and therefore better able to continue. We will also find challenges as we emerge, but hopefully with the comfort of more space, we will be better equipped to find answers, and this can hopefully give a special focus this year to this part of the Jewish year, as we reflect on the many tragedies linked with this time, but also on our 2020 experience, and carefully consider our response to both.

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[✦ Back](#)