

Pinehas and the Three Weeks

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Most years, Parashat Pinehas is read near the beginning of the Three Weeks. While the timing before or after the Seventeenth of Tammuz shifts, the proximity is worth noticing. This minor fast day commemorates the breaching of Jerusalem's walls before the destruction of the Second Temple, marks the beginning of the traditional period of mourning that culminates on Tish'ah Be'av. Both the parashah and the season that follow are unusually concerned with numbers. Pinehas features a wide range of narratives including the reward granted to Pinehas, the daughters of Zelophehad, and the appointment of Joshua as Moses' successor. Yet counting appears again and again. A census records the size of the tribes. The inheritance laws depend upon the distribution of land among those tribes. By the end of the parashah, the Torah has turned almost entirely to the calendar, laying out the offerings for Sabbaths, new moons, and festivals.

The Masorah noticed this numerical character as well. Medieval scribes carefully recorded that the parashah contains 168 verses, 1,887 words, and 7,853 letters. Such figures served a practical purpose—they helped scribes verify copies of the text. But the Masoretes were hardly alone. Rabbinic literature is full of lists and enumerations. Four New Years. Ten generations from Adam to Noah. Thirty-nine categories of labor prohibited on Shabbat.

The second half of Parashat Pinehas provides an especially clear example. Numbers 28–29 presents the sacrificial calendar in careful sequence. The reader moves from the daily offering to the Sabbath offering, from the Sabbath to the new moon, and from there through the cycle of festivals. Days are counted. Months are counted. Sacrifices are counted. The section reads less like a story than like a schedule.

This calendrical material becomes even more interesting when one remembers that the parashah itself occupies different positions within the calendar. In the Diaspora there are four

basic ways in which Pinehas can relate to the Seventeenth of Tammuz. Because of the structure of the Hebrew calendar, Pinehas is sometimes read just before the fast, sometimes just after it, and occasionally within the same week

These variations also affect the way the portion is heard. A congregation reading Pinehas on the nineteenth of Tammuz is already within the period of mourning. A congregation reading it on the fourteenth stands just before it. The text is unchanged, but the setting is not.

That observation leads naturally to the name of the season itself.

In Hebrew, the period between the Seventeenth of Tammuz and the Ninth of Av is known as **בין המצרים**, "between the straits." The phrase comes from the Book of Lamentations: "All her pursuers overtook her between the straits." In its biblical context the image is geographical. Jerusalem has been trapped in a narrow place with no avenue of escape.

Yiddish-speaking Jews often used a different expression. Rather than **בין המצרים**, they commonly spoke of **די דריי וואָכן**, "the Three Weeks." The difference is small, but not meaningless.

The two names describe the same period in different ways. The Hebrew term preserves a biblical image of confinement and distress. The Yiddish term simply counts the time. One speaks in metaphor. The other speaks in weeks.

That contrast brings us back to the Mishnah.

Tractate Ta'anit provides the classic framework for this season. It begins with a numerical scheme that would have felt entirely natural to a rabbinic audience: "Five things happened to our ancestors on the Seventeenth of Tammuz, and five on the Ninth of Av."

The events themselves range across many centuries. Some belong to the biblical period. Others belong to the Roman era. Historians may question whether they occurred on the precise dates assigned to them. The Mishnah's purpose, however, is not chronology. It is organization. A scattered collection of national disasters is arranged into two groups of five.

The chapter then turns to mourning practices associated with the Ninth of Av. At that point the reader might reasonably expect the tractate to conclude with destruction, exile, and grief.

Instead, it takes a sharp turn.

The very next mishnah opens with the declaration: "There were no festivals for Israel like the Fifteenth of Av and Yom Kippur."

The shift is striking. One moment the Mishnah is discussing catastrophe. A few lines later, young women dressed in borrowed white garments are dancing in the vineyards. The movement is so abrupt that it has puzzled readers for centuries.

Scholars including Paul Mandel have suggested that the reference to Yom Kippur may be a later editorial addition. While not everyone accepted Mandel's proposal, the larger question remains: Why conclude a discussion of national catastrophe with courtship and dancing?

That tension brings us back once more to Parashat Pinehas. The portion is remembered for its laws of sacrifice and festivals. The Three Weeks commemorate the destruction of the Temple where those sacrifices were offered. The Mishnah counts the disasters associated with that destruction and then ends, unexpectedly, with a festival.

Throughout these sources, counting remains a constant. The objects counted change—letters, sacrifices, days, weeks, or disasters—but the habit itself throughout.

Seen in this light, Pinehas occupies a distinctive place in the annual cycle. It stands near the point where several systems of counting converge: the Masorah's count of letters and verses, the Torah's count of sacrifices and festivals, the calendar's count of days, and the Mishnah's count of historical disasters.

There is a lesson in that fact, though not an especially complicated one. Human beings count what they do not wish to lose. Communities do the same thing. They count their dead, their festivals, their years, and their sacred texts. Counting is one way of marking something as worthy of attention.

The rabbis who shaped the observance of the Three Weeks could not rebuild the Temple. The Masoretes who counted the letters of the Torah could not restore the world in which much of that tradition had first developed. What they could do was refuse to let things disappear without a trace.

This observation may help explain the ending of Tractate Ta'anit. After all the disasters, mourning practices, and discussion of destruction, the Mishnah turns to young women dancing in the vineyards. The editors knew perfectly well that the Temple had been destroyed. Yet they chose not to give destruction the final word.

The weeks between the Seventeenth of Tammuz and the Ninth of Av ask us to remember losses that span centuries. Yet remembrance is only part of the task. We also must notice what remains: the communities we sustain, the traditions we inherit, the texts we study, and the responsibilities we carry forward.

May we learn to count wisely, giving our attention to what is worthy of it. May we remember the past without becoming trapped within it. And may the days that now lead us toward mourning also lead us, in time, toward consolation, renewal, and peace.

May it be Your will that we be comforted from Heaven for all the disasters that have befallen us, and may we merit to hear once again voices of joy and gladness in Judah and the outskirts of Jerusalem, speedily in our days. Amen.