

HALOCHOSCOPE



This week's question:

Someone mentioned out loud that he intended to undertake to fast *Bahab*, Monday Thursday and Monday in *Iyyar*. However, he verbalized that this was *bli neder*. Early in the morning of the first Monday, he forgot, and drank something. Should he complete the fast? What about the other two fasts?

The issues:

A) *Bahab*

B) Undertaking the fasts

A) *Bahab*

The observance of *Bahab* is not recorded by the Talmud. However, it is a time-honored *minhag*, and various explanations are offered by the poskim. The very fact that it has no direct Talmudic reference opens the door to different interpretations. Accordingly, it is common to find people undertaking it for their own personal reasons, loosely connected to the reasons offered for the original institution. In addition, there is a reference to *Bahab* in an extra-Talmudic text, implying that the fasts were observed in Nissan, and due to desecration of Hashem's Name. Since there is another tradition that precludes fasting during *Nissan*, some poskim interpret this as a reference to *Bahab* as we know it. Accordingly, there is indeed an ancient source, with a reason open to interpretation.

The word *Bahab* is an acronym, in Hebrew, for the letters *bais-hey-bais*, or two-five-two. This refers to the days of the week. These days are always considered *ais ratzon*, a time of appeasement to Hashem. This is based, in part, on the times that Moshe ascended Har Sinai to plead for the Jewish people following the sin of the golden calf, and to receive the second set of *luchos*. Accordingly, whenever a day has to be chosen for extra prayer, these are the best choice. The same applies when there is a need for communal fasting. In former times, fasts could be instituted for rains. There was a series of fasts, usually beginning on a Monday and following this pattern. The reason that they did not begin on a Thursday was due to preparations for *Shabbos*. If the hungry people would buy extra food following the fasts, the store-keepers would take advantage and raise prices. This would create hardship for *Shabbos*. However, once the series began, Thursday would become a part of them. Indeed, under certain circumstances, Thursday is considered a better choice in its own right, rather than Monday.

During the months of *Tishrei* and *Nissan*, due to the festivities on *Yomtov*, there is a tendency toward laxity in certain areas of social behavior. This is not to say that serious transgressions actually take place. For such, a much more serious remedy would be in order. However, the very laxity must be rectified. Furthermore, it is considered a communal lapse. Thus, this requires *teshuva*, repentance, on a somewhat communal scale. The ideal

time for *teshuva* is as close to the violations as possible. Thus, the best time for this would be immediately following *Yomtov*. Since these months are reserved for festivities, it is improper to institute fasts and *selichos* during these months, even following *Yomtov*. It was therefore pushed off to the following months. The first opportunity for this is the first series of these three days in those months. However, these fasts were not imposed compulsorily by the Rabbis. Those who volunteer to fast should be blessed by the entire community. Therefore, a special prayer is recited for them on the *Shabbos* preceding the first of the fasts. Some point out that this announcement is needed because the dates of the fasts are not fixed. Rather they occur whenever the Monday, Thursday and Monday occur. The poskim actually debate a *minhag* to announce all fasts on their preceding *Shabbos*, with the exceptions of *Yom Kippur*, *Tisha b'Av* and *Purim (Taanis Ester)*. Once again, this announcement/prayer should not be recited during the festive months, or on *Rosh Chodesh*, should it fall on *Shabbos*. Accordingly, it is common to delay these fasts well into *Iyyar* and *Cheshvan*. While many people do not observe these fasts nowadays, it is more common for certain communities to recite special *selichos*.

The *selichos* that have gained the most widespread acceptance are printed in *sidurim*. From a simple reading of their content, it will become clear that they do not refer exclusively to the *teshuva* for the laxity that we have mentioned. Rather, they focus on troubles, poverty, and a general health and welfare theme. There are indeed some references to the lack of *chasidim* and *tzadikim*, righteous people in our midst, who would influence us and help protect us as a group. However, there appear to be other themes to these fasts. In addition, there should be a similar practice following other *Yomim Tovim*.

The poskim suggest a few of the other possible reasons. *Pesach* and *Sukos* include *Chol Hamoed*. This part of the *Yomtov* is often treated with some disrespect, based on the notion that it is not really *Yomtov*. The Talmud has sharp words of condemnation for one who disgraces *Chol Hamoed*. Furthermore, many people honestly do not know the proper *halachos* of *Chol Hamoed*. Therefore, to atone for the possible violations, desecrations, or disgracing of *Chol Hamoed*, these fasts were instituted.

These two *Yomim Tovim* are during the months of *Aviv* and *Tekufah*, the changes in seasons. At these times, it is customary to pray for a successful season. Some of these *tefilos* are said during the *Yomtov* itself. However, a fast would not be allowed then. Furthermore, these *Yomim Tovim* are also days of judgment. [*Shavuos* is also the day of judgment for trees. Thus, this part of the explanation will not answer that part of the question raised earlier. Nonetheless, a *minhag* is cited that the righteous observe *Bahab* after *Shavuos* as well. The majority view is that since *Shavuos* is one day, there is less concern for the indiscretions mentioned.] Just as *Rosh Hashanah* is followed by *Yom Kippur*, these days are followed by these fasts, to assure a good judgment.

The seasonal change is also connected to the changeover, in Israel, between the wet and dry seasons. It is a time for prayer for appropriate weather. Too much or too little rain, or rain in a dry season, is not good. There is even a view that *Bahab* in *Cheshvan* should be delayed to the 17th of the month. This is the day, in *Eretz Yisroel*, by when rains should have arrived. It signals the beginning of the fasting series. We do not follow this view, but it shows the validity of the seasonal connection. This explains the connec-

tion to livelihood that is mentioned in the *selichos*.

At the changeover in seasons, the fluctuations in weather increase the chances of sicknesses. This requires *teshuva* and prayer. By repenting, the hope is that one exacts a favorable judgment for health.

It has been suggested that after the festival season there is a period of distancing. The *Moadim* are a time of 'meeting' between Hashem and Israel. Afterwards, there is a separation. Accordingly, this is the time that we feel the pressures of the exile more than at other times. This explains the focus on the general troubles. [See Rosh Hashanah 16a Taanis 2a 10a 12b 15b Kidushin 81a Baba Kama 82a, Poskim. Tur Sh Ar OC 429 492 529:4 550 563 (MA) 568:2 572:1 YD 220:18 (Shach 31), commentaries.]

B) Undertaking the fast

The established fasts are incumbent on all Jews. There is no need to undertake them personally. A personal fast cannot be counted as such unless one verbally undertook to fast prior to the actual fasting. Ideally, a fast should begin at the beginning of the Jewish day, which is nightfall the evening beforehand. However, the Talmud does not require this for most fasts, including personal fasts. Nonetheless, once the Jewish date has begun, it is too late to verbally undertake the fast. One who refrains from eating that day might have done a nice gesture, but cannot count it towards his specific personal regimen. Thus, the latest time to undertake the fast is before evening. The common practice is to make a statement at the conclusion of one's personal *shemone esrai* at *mincha* on the previous day. The poskim debate exactly when the commitment is made. The Talmud says "at *mincha*". We follow the view that it may be made at any time on that day, or even a few days earlier. Once it was made, the commitment has the force of a *neder*, and is binding.

Bahab is not really a personal fast. It is an established *minhag*. There are certain fasts that are considered so widespread that one need not verbalize an undertaking to consider it binding. This means that though not all people fast, it is considered similar to a communal fast in this respect. However, *Bahab* seems to fall in the category of a personal fast in this respect. The poskim discuss one who was present when the *mi shebairach* blessing those who would fast was recited in *shul* on *Shabbos*. If he answered *amein* to the *mi shebairach*, the consensus is that he need not make a specific *kabalah*, undertaking, later on. As long as he had in mind to fast when he said *amein*, this is his *kabalah*. Nonetheless, since he did not verbalize a *kabalah*, it is not automatically binding. He may change his mind. Accordingly, it appears that his *amein* works to validate the fast if he follows through with it. Furthermore, if there should arise a reason to suspend the fast due to eating at a *seudas mitzvah*, he need not be concerned. The *kabalah* is based on the *minhag*. The *minhag* was not adopted for these circumstances. If, however, he feels unwell, this would depend on his standard practice. If he usually fasts without feeling unwell, he could not have foreseen this circumstance. Therefore, he cannot claim that he had an inbuilt dispensation, and he must absolve his *neder*.

Saying *bli neder* means that one serves notice that his vow is not binding. It is a sincere undertaking, to do a good thing. However, he does not wish it to be counted as a *neder*, and to commit himself to the consequences thereof. Such notice is made in a general way on *Erev Rosh Hashanah*. That notice specifically excludes *nidrei taanis*, the ka-

balh in our case. Therefore, if one wishes to keep this option for a fast, he must verbalize it at the time of the *kabalah*.

However, this for of *kabalah* is very controversial. The concept does not appear in early sources. It seems to have been introduced later, and found its way into *sidurim*. Many poskim question its validity. Since the fast is meant to be like an offering, how could one make it provisional? Thus, most contemporary poskim maintain that a *kabalah bli neder* does not count towards a proper taanis. Rather, there are other terms that can be used to insert a condition on the *kabalah*. He may say "... if I am able to!" Rather than making the entire commitment provisional, it makes it conditionally binding.

It is possible that for *Bahab* the *kabalah* can work this way. We have already cited the ruling that *amein* can be considered a *kabalah*, yet that one may retract it. Perhaps a *kabalah bli neder* has a similar effect. The poskim debate whether a single *kabalah* can work for a series of fasts. For *Bahab*, it seems to work, based on the *amein* mentioned earlier. The bigger question would be whether one who said *amein*, fasted the first Monday, and then had second thoughts for Thursday. Could he retract his *kabalah* retroactively? If so, what does the first fast mean for him? Or is the *kabalah* like three separate undertakings? Could one retract the *kabalah* for the first fast, and then fast on the other days, based on the original *amein*? It would seem that in our case, the person only meant to undertake the first fast with his *kabalah*. Since the object of the *minhag* is to fast a series, his question is whether he has lost that object. Since the *minhag* applies in a quasi-communal way, it would seem that he may still gain from joining the others who fast on the other days. Furthermore, those who break their fast on one of these days, for example for a *seudas mitzvah*, still fast for the other days.

One who ate on a communal fast, or on a personal fast that was specified to be observed on a particular day, must still fast the rest of the day. He loses the full effect of the fast. For a communal fast, he cannot make it up on another day. However, the poskim debate this with regard to a personal fast. *Bahab* is somewhere in-between. As we have mentioned, the poskim consider it somewhat of a communal fast. It is observed on specific days, but not necessarily specific dates. [See Taanis 12a-b, Poskim. Tur Sh Ar OC 492 562:6-8 12 563 568:1-2, Birur Halacha, commentaries.]

In conclusion, accordingly, taking into account the factors discussed, it would seem that our questioner need not make up the fast, but should finish this fast. He may continue with the series, but should probably verbalize a conditional commitment.

On the Parsha ... *The Land shall give forth its produce, and you shall eat [it] to satisfaction. And you shall dwell securely on [the Land] [28:19].* You will be spared the shame of hunger. You will not need to go to the lands of others to procure food [*Sforno*]. Fasting is a way to show, through self-deprivation, our state of exile. This follows and contrasts with spending *Yomtov* 'in the company of Hashem', celebrated by eating to satiation!

Sponsored for the *zechus* of a *refuah shelaimah bimehairah* for Yosef Yitzchok ben Yehudis

Chaya, with all other *cholei Yisroel*.

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