

"Halacha Sources" Highlights - The Weeks of "Shovevim"

Question: What do the Halacha sources say regarding the weeks of "Shovevim"?

Answer: There is a very old *minhag* to treat these weeks between Chanukah and Purim as a time for *teshuvah*, especially in a Jewish leap year. As usual, we will discuss it in three steps:

- (1) the *earliest source* (that I found) - the *Hagahos Sefer HaMinhagim* (and the Levush)
- (2) the *central authorities* - the *Magen Avraham*, the *Ba'er Heiteiv*, and the *Sha'arei Teshuvah*
- (3) a *contemporary application* - condensed from the *Divrei Yatziv* [the Klausenberger Rebbe]

Part 1: The *Earliest Source* (that I found) - The *Hagahos Sefer HaMinhagim* (and the Levush)

The *Sefer HaMinhagim* was compiled by *Rabbeinu Yitzchak* of Tirna (Austria), circa 1400. Contemporaries of his wrote glosses to it, which are known as "*Hagahos Sefer HaMinhagim*". In their *Minhagim* of Purim (section 1), we find:

In [the Jewish] leap year, the usual [practice] is to establish fast [days] corresponding to the mnemonic "Shovevim", [i.e. the weeks whose parshiyos are] SH"mos, V"a'eira, B"o, B"shalach, Y"isro, [and] M"ishpatim, and some add "Tat", i.e. [the weeks of] T"rumah [and] T"tzaveh [as well]. [Accordingly,] every Thursday [of those weeks] "they" [i.e. the congregation] fast, and "they" read the weekly parsha [during] Shacharis, and say [the prayer] "Shomer Yisrael" etc. [Furthermore,] at Mincha ["they" read the parsha of] "VaY'chal" [with the "haftarah" of] "Dirshu" and [add to the Shemoneh Esray the prayer of] "Aneinu" [i.e. all three being standard for formal fast days].

As for why "they" fast [specifically then], [it is] because the year is [unusually] long, and [consequently] there is more than half a year between the "Behab" fasts after Sukkos and the "Behab" fasts after Pesach. [See Shulchan Aruch, volume Orach Chayim, siman 492.]

The Levush [R. Mordechai Yaffe, 1530 - 1612, in his expanded version of the *Shulchan Aruch* volume *Orach Chayim*] writes the same, adding a few points:

(1) His version is the full "*Shovevim Tat*". He explains that these eight Thursdays correspond to a full "*Behab*" style sequence of fasts, i.e. every Monday and Thursday, throughout the four weeks of the extra month [of Adar] added in the Jewish leap year. (He explains that the fasts were spread out so as not to be too difficult for people.)

(2) He adds: "I also heard another reason, as follows: The early [authorities] saw that pregnant women were [more] prone to miscarry in [Jewish] leap years, and [therefore] they instituted to fast these eight fasts, corresponding to all of the Mondays and Thursdays of the 'leap month' [i.e. as above], for the sake

of the pregnant women - that they not miscarry. [So,] according to this reason, it seems to me quite appropriate that the fasting begins with the *parsha* of *Sh'mos*, because that *parsha* speaks of the 'fruitfulness and multiplication' of Israel - how they became a great and numerous nation, as it is written (*Sh'mos* 1:7): 'And the children of Israel were fruitful,' etc.; accordingly, we, too, pray that now, as well, 'they' [i.e. the children of Israel] be fruitful and multiply - and not miscarry. In addition, it's possible [to explain] that it's for this reason as well that the *minhag* is not to read the *parsha* of a fast day (i.e. '*VaY'chal*') in the morning, but rather the weekly *parsha*, so as to read that first *parsha*, *Sh'mos*, on the first fast day (and having started in this way - the *minhag* is to do the same [throughout] all the fasts)."

We seem to see clearly from the above that the original *minhag* of "*Shovevim*" applied only in a Jewish leap year. Has this changed?

Part 2: The *Central Authorities* - The *Magen Avraham*, the *Ba'er Heiteiv*, and the *Sha'arei Teshuvah*

There is no mention of the *minhag* in the *Shulchan Aruch*, or even (more significantly) in the *Rema* [R. Moshe Isserles, ~1525 - 1572, in his Ashkenazic "emendations"]. Still, in probably the most important commentary on the *Shulchan Aruch*, the *Magen Avraham* [R. Avraham HaLevi (Avli) Gombiner, ~1637 - 1683] brings the *minhag* (citing the above Levush), with a slight addition: he says that "some" include the weeks of *VaYakhel* and *Pekuday* as well.

Following this, in the widely accepted compendium of the chief commentaries, the *Ba'er Heiteiv* [R' Yehudah ben Shimon Ashkenazi, 1730 - 1770] quotes this *Magen Avraham*, and adds that "it is obvious that the "*chazzan*" [prayer leader] says "*Aneinu*" [lit. "answer us", the supplement added on fast days] during [the *Shemoneh Esray* of] *Shacharis* and *Mincha*. [The *Bi'ur Halacha* to O.C. 566:2 writes that there is some basis for reading "*VaY'chal*" on such days, but only when there is no other Torah reading (i.e. similar to the above Levush).] Then, the *Ba'er Heiteiv* cites the more well-known reason for the entire *minhag*: "The Arizal writes in [his] commentary on the Torah that these days have potential for 'correcting' the sin of emissions (i.e. more than [the rest of] the entire year) for those who fast then. This is why one starts from *parshas Sh'mos*, for the slavery - [because of] which the emissions of the first man were "corrected" - began then; and [it is likewise fitting that the period accordingly] ends with the *parsha* of "If you will buy a Hebrew servant" [i.e. *Mishpatim*]." Most of these words are of course unclear to us, since they are obviously rooted in the mystical teachings of *kabbalah*, but they now fall into the category of "*kabbalah* sources which have been accepted into the mainstream halachic literature" [a phenomenon whose nature and details is far beyond the scope of this article].

The *Mishnah Berurah* writes that regarding our subject, one should refer to the above *Ba'er Heiteiv*. He also refers one to the *Sha'arei Teshuvah* [R. Chaim Mordechai Margalios, ~1770 - 1820, in his commentary to the *Shulchan Aruch*], who writes that the *minhag* of his country was: "In a regular year [we keep] only '*Shovevim*', and in a leap year we add '*Tat*'." (The *Sha'arei Teshuvah* also cites a disagreement about what to do if one of the fasts is "pushed off" [*"midcheh"*].)

Part 3: A Contemporary Application - Condensed from the *Divrei Yatziv* [the Klausenberger Rebbe]

The *Divrei Yatziv* [responsa of the Klausenberger Rebbe, R. Yekusiel Yehudah Halberstam, 1904 - 1995] explains that the *essential* nature of this period is its being a time for *teshuvah* [i.e. repentance] (which is well known to be the main purpose of fast days in general), as seen from the following ['condensed', and not a direct translation of his words].

"It is the obligation of someone who knows that he sinned such a sin [i.e. emissions or the like], who actually needs to fast, to at least return to Hashem with all his heart, soul, and power, and to accept the Torah upon himself for its own sake. Indeed, it is written that to afflict oneself with '*prishus*' [i.e. 'asceticism', 'separateness'] and purity and studying [Torah] is better than all the fasts in the world, and also that the most important [of them all] is '*hasmadah*' [i.e. 'time-efficiency' and 'continuity'] in [studying] Torah.

"As for the the fasting, however, our many sins have weakened our strength, and because of our many sins this would be a 'decree that most of the people cannot bear.' Rather, to recite *Tehillim* on Shabbos is definitely very appropriate, and the fasts can be 'redeemed' with money. (The Rema, O.C. 568:2 and 334:26, has codified as halacha that such a 'redemption' has a fixed amount, but the *Magen Avraham*, *siman* 568, says that a rich man has to give according to his wealth, because the reasoning of such 'redemption' is that the difficulty of giving the money is equivalent to the difficulty of the fast, so it is my position that we cannot make calculations nowadays based on anything that was written about 'redeeming' fasts, and all we have to go by is each person, place, and time - how much would such a person be willing to give up in order to eat and not have to fast; for example, if he was in a prison, and had the choice for punishment of having to fast from eating or drinking or a monetary fine, or the like.)

"One should 'redeem' 84 days [of fasting] to 'correct' the sin, as the writings of the Arizal say is appropriate. This money should go to the Heaven-fearing who study Torah, who need this in order to be able to be involved in Torah (similar to Yissachar and Zevulun), and the 'redemption' is thereby both Torah and charity.

"In addition, someone who wants to 'correct' his soul should fast some hours all of the forty days [taught by the *kabbalah* sources], i.e. as much as he is able to; and in keeping with the *pasuk* "Know Him in all your ways" - certainly also his necessary eating and drinking should be for the sake of Heaven (as the *Shulchan Aruch* explains in *Orach Chayim siman* 231). Finally, it should be mentioned that the greatest *teshuvah* is [the maxim]: "At [the end of] a meal where your pleasure is great - hold yourself back [from fully indulging]." (See the *Mishnah Berurah* in *siman* 571.)

"Again, the most basic thing for purifying the soul from all its disease and filth is through the learning of Torah. So if one is a Torah scholar whose Torah is his occupation - he should sit in the tent of Torah day and night (turning it over and over) so that the light of Torah will give him life; and for someone who cannot - at least he should learn a considerable amount."

[It should be noted that many communities hold lectures and study groups to review the *halachos* of topics related to the relevant subject matter, such as the halachos of *niddah*, during these weeks of *Shovevim* every year.]

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