FAST DAYS

INTRODUCTION TO FAST DAYS

Introduction to Fast Days

Introduction to Fast Days

The purpose of Jewish fast days is to make us reflect on our behavior and improve it by:

- Eliminating negative actions and thoughts, and
- Taking more care in our observance of the commandments.

God told the Jewish people on many occasions that He did not want their pointless sacrifices or fast days but rather wanted the Jews to improve their behavior. If people fast but still have reprehensible behavior, the people have missed the point and purpose of bringing sacrifices and having fast days.
All fast days may be circumvented for health reasons. Consult a *rabbi*.
Fast days come in several varieties:

- Major fast days: *Yom Kippur* and the *Ninth of Av* (*Tish'a B'Av*).
- Minor fast days: There are four minor fast days; see below.
- Fast for First-Born
- Individual Fasts

The Major Fasts

Yom Kippur and the *Ninth of Av* begin before sunset and are both slightly longer than 24 hours. *Yom Kippur* is a festive day while, on the *Ninth of Av*, Jews mourn for the destruction of both Jerusalem Temples (the first was destroyed by Babylonians; the second, by the Romans). On both fasts, it is forbidden to:

- Eat or drink.
- Wear leather shoes (but you may wear any other clothing made of leather).
- Bathe (or even to wash anything more than fingers; you may not use a deodorant--not even a spray type--since it is similar to washing).
- Have marital relations.
- Use cosmetics or body scents.

The Minor Fasts

The four minor fasts begin 72 minutes before local sunrise. They technically end at dark but functionally end after *ma'ariv* (and for the Fast of Esther, after hearing the *megila*). Unlike most times in the Jewish calendar, this 72 minutes is normal time and NOT based on the current length of the day (*sha'a zmanit*):

- ***Fast of Esther*** *(Ta'anit Esther):* Day preceding *Purim* (or sometimes earlier).
- **Fast of *Gedalia*** *(Tzom Gedalia):* Usually the day after *Rosh Hashana*.
- ***Tenth of Tevet*** *(Asara b' Tevet):*
- ***Seventeenth of Tamuz*** *(Shiv'asar b'Tamuz): Beginning of the Three Weeks of semi-mourning before Tish'a b'Av.*

On all fast days, eating and drinking are forbidden. The *Tenth of Tevet* and the *Seventeenth* of *Tamuz* additionally have the same restrictions as the *Nine Days*. So you may wash or bathe on the *Fast of Esther* and on *Tzom Gedalia* but not on the *Tenth of Tevet* and the *Seventeenth of Tamuz.* (See *Nine Days*: Restrictions).

NOTE On a fast day that has been delayed for *Shabbat*, there may be leniencies for:

- The *mohel*, *sandak*, and father of a baby getting a *brit mila* to eat after *mincha*.
- Pregnant or nursing women (this leniency applies to eating throughout the day).

Fast for First Born

Fast for first-born males 13 years old and older, on the day before *Passover*. This includes first-born *cohanim* and *Levites* (*levi'im)*. The fast begins 72 normal minutes before sunrise and ends with *kiddush* at the *seder*. However, the widespread custom is to attend a *siyum* on the day before the first *seder* so that the first-born men do not need to fast on that day.

Personal Fasts

Fast by a groom and bride on their wedding day is an example of personal fasts. This fast begins 72 normal minutes before sunrise and ends with drinking wine under the *chuppa*.

FAST DAYS: TIMING

FAST DAYS: WHEN THEY START

Fasts that Start 72 Minutes before Sunrise

All fasts start 72 minutes (normal time) before sunrise except for the *Ninth of Av* and *Yom Kippur*. These include:

- *17th of Tamuz*
- *10th of Tevet*
- *Tzom Gedalia*
- *Fast of Esther*
- Fast by a groom and bride on their wedding day
- Fast for first-born males on the day before *Passover*. This includes first-born *cohanim* and *Levites* (*levi'im)*.

NOTE Unlike most times in the Jewish calendar, this 72 minutes is normal time and NOT based on the current length of the day (*sha'a zmanit*).

Fast Days and Crossing International Dateline

Your fast-day times are determined by where you ARE, not where you started traveling or where you are heading. This means that when you reach sunset (plus enough time for the sky to get dark), your fast is over.

FAST DAYS: PRACTICES

FAST DAYS: TEETH BRUSHING

Fast Days: Brushing Teeth without Water

You may brush your teeth on *Yom Kippur* and all other fast days without water and without toothpaste**. (**You may not use water to brush your teeth even on *Tenth of Tevet* and *17th of Tamuz*.)

Fast Days: Flossing on Fast Days

You may floss your teeth on *Yom Kippur* as long as your gums don't bleed and on other fast days even if they do bleed.

FAST DAYS: EATING

Fast Days: Tasting Food

You may not taste food (even a minimal amount) on a fast day, even if you are cooking for the end of the fast, such as on *Tish'a b'Av*.

Fast Days: Health Difficulties

You may eat or drink as necessary on the fasts of the *Tenth of Tevet*, *17th of Tamuz*, and *Tzom Gedalia* if you are sick, faint, or dehydrated, but only enough to resolve your health difficulty. Consult a *rabbi*.

Fast Day: Forgetting

If you forgot and broke your fast on any fast day, you may not continue eating after you remember that you should be fasting.

FAST DAYS: PRAYERS

Fast Day: Sim Shalom

Say "*sim shalom*" instead of "*shalom rav*" at *mincha* on a fast day, even if you are not fasting at *mincha*.

Tzom Gedalia: Katveinu

On *Tzom Gedalia*, when saying *avinu malkeinu*, say "*katveinu*" and not "*zachreinu*."

Tenth of Tevet: Friday

When *Tenth of Tevet* occurs on a Friday, you may not start *Shabbat* early in order to cut short the fast. That is, you may not eat until dark, as is normally the case.

Aneinu

On a fast day, if you are not fasting:

- Do not say *aneinu*.
- Do say *Sim shalom*.

VaYechal

If at least six of the men in a *mincha minyan* on a fast day are fasting, read the *Torah* portion *Va'yechal* (*Exodus* 32: 11-14). If fewer than six are fasting, omit it.

THREE WEEKS/TISH'A B'AV

THREE WEEKS: THREE STAGES OF MOURNING

Seventeenth of Tamuz to Tish'a B'Av: Three Stages of Mourning

Before *Tish'a b'Av* we are in a type of mourning so the laws are similar to mourning for a parent. There are three stages:

The "*Three Weeks*": The least severe stage starts *three weeks* preceding the *Ninth of Av*

The "*Nine Days*": The next-most severe stage begins on *Rosh Chodesh Av*.

"Week" of Tish'a b'Av: The most severe mourning is during the "week" of *Tish'a b'Av* (beginning after *Shabbat* preceding *Tish'a b'Av*).

THREE WEEKS: RESTRICTIONS

Three Weeks: Restrictions

Forbidden during the *Three Weeks* :

- Saying *she'hecheyanu*;
- Shaving;
- Haircuts;
- Listening to music (even recorded);
- Getting married.

Three Weeks: Moving into New Dwelling

You may move into a new home or apartment, whether owning or renting, during the *Three Weeks* before *Tish'a b'Av*. Ideally, you should not move into a new place during the *Nine Days* but if necessary, it is permitted.

Three Weeks: Swimming

If you are swimming for:

- Pleasure, you may swim during the *Three Weeks* but not during the *Nine Days.*
- Exercise (you don't particularly enjoy swimming or you are not doing it for fun or to cool off), you may be permitted to swim even during the *Nine Days*. Consult a *rabbi*.

Three Weeks: Socializing

Activities for socializing are not prohibited during the *Three Weeks* before *Rosh Chodesh Av* (but the activities might be prohibited for other reasons such as if they are dangerous).

THREE WEEKS: RISKY ACTIVITIES

Three Weeks: Dangerous Activities

We are discouraged from doing dangerous activities during the *Three Weeks* before and including *Tish'a b'Av* . But since it is forbidden to do dangerous activities anyway, there are few relevant activities that are forbidden. Some people do not travel during this time but it is not forbidden to do so. Non-urgent surgery should be scheduled for after this period.

FIRST NINE DAYS OF AV

Nine Days: Restrictions

Restrictions during the *Nine Days* before *Tish'a b'Av* are the same as for *Three Weeks,* plus:

- You may not eat meat or drink wine.

  EXCEPTIONS

  - You may drink wine on *Shabbat* (but not on *Rosh Chodesh Av* or *erev Shabbat* .)
  - You may drink wine for *havdala* (but ideally give the wine or grape juice to a child between ages 6 and 10).
  - You may eat meat or drink wine at a *brit*, *siyum*, or *pidyon ha'ben*.

- You may not wear freshly laundered clothes, or wear or buy new clothes.

  NOTE You may wear clean socks and underwear. Ideally, throw them on the floor first but, *b'di'avad*, it is OK to wear them even if you did not.

- You may not wash yourself for pleasure.

  NOTE Showering or bathing to clean one's soiled body is permitted (except on *Tish'a b'Av*). So you may bathe or shower during the *Nine Days* if you are dirty, sweaty, or smelly.

- You may not do any activities that involve luxury.
- You may not say *she'hecheyanu* except on *Shabbat*.

  NOTE Therefore you should not buy new fruits or new items that you will enjoy during the *Nine Days*. But if you DO eat a new fruit or buy something new, you must say *she'hecheyanu* anyway.

Nine Days: Court Cases

Try not to be involved in a court case opposing a non-Jew during the *Nine Days*.

REASON The *Nine Days* are considered to be an inauspicious time for Jews. But if you cannot avoid it, it is not forbidden and you may proceed.

Nine Days: Kiddush Levana

If you are not likely to see the moon on any of the days from the 10th to the 14th of *Av*, you may say *kiddush levana* during the *Nine Days*.

Nine Days: New Projects or Investments

You should not start new projects or make investments during the *Nine Days* if they can be delayed without incurring a loss.

REASON The *Nine Days* are considered to be an inauspicious time for Jews.

Nine Days: Painting Your House

You may not paint your house during the *Nine Days*. Ask a *rabbi* for possible exceptions.

Nine Days: Swimming

For laws on swimming during the *Nine Days*, see *Three Weeks*: Swimming.

TISH'A B'AV

Tish'a B'Av: Pre-Fast Meal

You may say *birkat ha'mazon* with a *mezuman* or with a *minyan* during the *Nine Days*. But you may not do so at the meal preceding *Tish'a b'Av* (*se'uda ha'mafseket*).

REASON Only bread dipped in ashes and a hard-boiled egg should be eaten and that is not a meal for socializing or togetherness.

Tish'a B'Av: On Saturday Night

When *Tish'a B'Av* begins on Saturday night, the custom is as follows:

- Say *baruch ha'mavdil* when *Shabbat* ends.
- Say the blessing on the candle after *ma'ariv*.
- Do not say the remainder of *havdala* at all. Instead:
    - Wait until Sunday night, after the fast is over, and then
    - Say only the blessing on the wine and the paragraph of *ha'mavdil* blessings.

NOTE You will not say the blessings on the spices for *havdala* for that week.

Tish'a B'Av: Flying

You should not fly on *Tish'a b'Av*, even if you are flying to Israel to make *aliya*.

Tish'a B'Av: Hand Washing

On *Tish'a B'Av*, as on *Yom Kippur*, if you must wash your hands to remove:

- *Tum'a*, you may wash your hands only up to the knuckle that connects your fingers to the rest of your hand (thumb: second knuckle; fingers: third knuckle).
- Dirt from your hand, you may wash wherever the dirt is on your hand.

Tish'a B'Av: Teeth Brushing

On *Tish'a b'Av*, you may not brush your teeth using water. You may use a dry toothbrush. You may floss your teeth.

Tish'a B'Av: Tefilin

Tish'a b'Av is similar to the day of burial of a person and so *tefilin* are not worn in the morning. The afternoon has a lower level of mourning and so *tefilin* (and *talit gadol*) are worn at *mincha*.

Tish'a B'Av: What To Do until 12 Noon

Activities for *Tish'a B'Av* until *halachic midday*:

- **Thinking:** Until *halachic midday,* you should do things and think about things that will keep you in bad spirits or will make you sad.
- **Sitting:** You may not sit on any kind of seat that is higher than 12 inches (30 cm) above the floor or ground until after *halachic midday*.

Tish'a B'Av: What To Do after 12 Noon

After *halachic midday on Tish'a B'Av*, you may do any activities except the five activities forbidden on *Tish'a B'Av* (washing, anointing, eating/drinking, marital intercourse, wearing leather shoes) or the *Nine Days*. But you may not greet anyone, or reply to someone else's greeting to you, including saying “hello,” “good morning,” “how are you,” etc., until after dark.

© Copyright 2026 Richard B. Aiken | www.practicalhalacha.com