

FASTING

BY JULIUS J. PRICE

THE withholding of natural food from the body for a determined period, for moral or religious purposes found favorable acceptance in all religious systems. The motives and forms, however, of this involuntary self-affliction, vary with the different creeds and nationalities. There are various conflicting theories regarding the origin of this institution. According to Smith, fasting was originally merely a preparation for the eating of the sacrificial meal. Spencer, however, is of the opinion that it rose from the custom of providing refreshments for the dead. Others again, attribute the custom to a desire on the part of the worshippers to humble themselves before their God, so as to arouse His sympathy; while still others think, that "It originated in the desire of primitive man to bring on at will certain abnormal nervous conditions favorable to those dreams which are supposed to give to the soul direct access to the objective realities of the spiritual world."

The belief strongly prevailed amongst the Rabbis that fasting was a form of sacrifice. The loss of strength and tissue meant that a man gave up part of his very self in atonement for his sins. Rav Shesheth, when fasting, and after having repeated his usual prayer, used to say, "Lord of the worlds! it is revealed before Thee that when the Temple stood a man who sinned brought a sacrifice, and only the fat and blood of the same was offered, and thus was atonement made; now I am fasting and my fat and blood are being diminished in consequence, may it please Thee that my fat and blood thus diminished be accepted as if offered on the altar before Thee, and be Thee reconciled to me."

Considerable stress is laid upon fasting in post exilic literature. There is a solemn fast after Ezeras' reading of the law. He himself had proclaimed a fast before he left Babylon, "That we might

humble ourselves before God to seek of Him a prosperous journey." Nehemiah on hearing the evil news of Jerusalem's degradation, "sat down and wept and mourned certain days and fasted and prayed before God and Heaven." David set his face on the Lord, God, to seek for prayer and supplication with fasting and sack cloth and ashes.

The phrase used in the Torah for fasting, "You shall afflict or humble your souls," implies the chastening of the appetite; the disciplining of the will. The soul be reached though through the body.

The Rabbinic idea with regard to the institution of fasting, was that man gave up part of his physical enjoyments as a token of the sincerity of his grief and contrition. The predelection of the Rabbis for fasting as an act of outward piety, is frequently alluded to in the Talmud.

The Jewish calendar originally had few fixed fast days. The law of Moses ordains only one fast day, but this was later increased to four to commemorate the disasters that befell the nation during the period of captivity. These were the fast of the fourth month (Tammuz), of the fifth month (Ab), of the seventh month (Tishri), and of the tenth month (Tebeth).

Rabbi Simon ben Yochai said, "Four things have been expounded by Rabbi Akiva which I do not expound like his, and this is one of them: The fourth fast was on the ninth of Tammuz, when the city was broken up, as it is said (Jer. iii. 6, 7): "And in the fourth month, in the ninth day of the month, the famine was sore in the city, so that there was no bread for the people of the land. Then the city was broken up.' Why was it called the fourth fast? Because it was in the fourth month. The fifth fast was on the ninth of Ab, when the house of God was burned. Why was it called the fifth fast? Because Ab is the fifth month. The seventh fast is on the third of Tishri, when Gedaliah the son of Ahikam was slain by Ishmael the son of Nethania, which teaches that the death of the righteous is equal to the burning of the house of our God. Why is this called the seventh fast? Because Tishri is the seventh month. The tenth fast is on the tenth of Tebeth, when the king of Babylon set himself against Jerusalem, as it is said (Ezek. xxiv. 1,2): 'Again in the ninth year, in the tenth month, in the tenth day of the month, the word of the Lord came into me, saying, Son of man, write thee the name of the day, even of this very day the king of Babylon set himself against Jerusalem (upon) this day.' Why is it called the tenth fast? Because Tebeth is the tenth month," etc., etc. In Baby-

lonia, however, "there is no other public fast day observed except the ninth of Ab."

As time went on, however, many other fasts were decreed in memory of certain trouble that befell Israel. Frequently fasts were imposed upon the community when great calamities threatened the people. It is related that the elders journeying from Jerusalem homewards, once ordained a fast because two children were devoured by wolves beyond the Jordan. Rabbi Yossi said, "Not because wolves devoured the children but simply because wolves had made their appearance." In the following cases an alarm is to be sounded even on the Sabbath day: A city being besieged by Gentiles, or threatened by an inundation, or a ship about to be wrecked at sea. Rabbi Yossi said, "The alarm may be sounded as a call for help, but not as a mere alarm." Shimon the Temanite said, "On account of pestilence also the alarm may be sounded on a Sabbath," but the sages did not agree with him in this. On account of every calamity—may none even happen!—the alarm may be sounded on the Sabbath, except on account of much rain. It is related that Choni ho-Maagol was asked to pray for rain. "Go," said he, "and gather in the ovens (in which the paschal lambs were roasted), that they may not be softened by the rain." He prayed, but no rain came. Then tracing a circle on the ground, and placing himself in the center, he exclaimed, "Lord of the Universe! Thy children are steadfastly looking to me, for I am before Thee as one of Thy household. I swear by Thy great Name that I will not stir from this place until Thou showest mercy to Thy children!" At this juncture raindrops began to fall. "I have not asked for such a rain as this," said he, "but for such as would fill wells, cisterns, and pits." Then the rain came down in torrents. "No!" exclaimed he, "nor even for such a rain as this did I ask, but for genial and beneficial showers." The rain abated, and Israel had to leave Jerusalem for the Temple Mount, on account of inundation. Then said they to Choni, "As thou hast prayed that rain should fall, now pray that it should leave off raining." "Go and see," said he, "if the Inquiry Stone is submerged." Shimon ben Shetach sent the following message to Choni: "If thou wert not Choni, I would excommunicate thee. But what could I do against thee? Thou art like a spoilt child with his father before God, and He does thy will as a father indulges the whims of a spoilt child. It is with reference to thee that Scriptures says (Prov. xxiii. 25), 'Thy father and thy mother shall be glad, and she that bare thee shall rejoice.'"

Twenty-four fasts were observed by the men of the Great Synagogue, in order that the writers of books, phylacteries and mezuzahs (doorpost charms) might not grow rich, lest in becoming rich they might be tempted not to write any more.

According to tradition, these fasts were accompanied with many solemn ceremonies. The shrine (the chest in which the scrolls of the Law were deposited) is to be brought into the open street of the town and ashes to be strewn upon it, and upon the head of the prince, and also upon the head of the chief magistrate; every individual also is to take of the ashes and place them upon his own head. The Elder among delivered a solemn speech, saying, "My brethren, it is not said of the people of Ninevah: and God saw their sackcloth and their fasts, but God saw their works that they turned from their evil way" (Jonah iii. 10). And in the tradition (of the prophet) it is said, "Rend your heart and not your garment" (Joel ii. 13).

Fellow citizens do not salute one another on fast-days." If one is saluted by an amhaaretz (illiterate), they are to respond with a weak lip and a heavy head (i. e., in a subdued tone and with a slight nod of the head). They are to wrap themselves in their veils and sit on the ground as mourners and as excommunicated persons who are rebuked of God, until they obtain mercy from Heaven.

According to the Rabbis, a fast day is not to be named a fast day upon which the sun does not set. Eating and drinking is forbidden until the sunsets and two stars at least become visible.

Fasting on the Sabbath is forbidden. On the eve of the Sabbath (Friday), as also at the exit of the Sabbath (Saturday night), they did not fast on account of the honor due to the Sabbath. Some say it was on account of the additional soul given to Israel between the lights on Friday evening, and after the Sabbath was over it was again taken away from them. Another reason for not fasting on Sunday is on account of the idolaters, that they should not be able to say, "because we rejoice on the first day of the week, they fast." But the sages have said, there was no concern about the hatred of the idolaters at the time of the Standing Orders in the Temple, but on account of what is written (Exod. xxxi. 17): "He was refreshed, or alas! because of the soul." The only fixed day that may be celebrated on the Sabbath is the day of Atonement. All the others, if they fall on the Sabbath are postponed until the following day. Our Rabbis strictly taught on the Sabbath it is forbidden to go without food until midnight, except when one is accustomed to eat late in the day and would injure himself by changing his custom.

Private fasts were frequent among the Jews from earliest times. Individuals may take it upon themselves to fast on certain days, either in memory of certain personal events, or in expiation of sins, or in time of trouble to arouse God's mercy. Many of the Rabbis, however, discouraged such abstinence. Samuel said, "He that fasts is called a sinner, for he holds with a certain Tanna who taught that Rabbi Eleazer Hakkappar bar Rabbi cited the words (Numb. vi. ii), 'Make an atonement for him (the Nazarite), for that he sinned against the soul,' and asked, against whose soul has he sinned? It is because he abstained from wine that he mortified his own soul. This is deduced inferentially from minor to major. If he is called a sinner who mortifies himself by abstaining from wine only, how much more does he deserve to be called a sinner who abstains from everything else?" Rabbi Eleazar, however, said, "On the contrary, he is called a saint, for it is said (Ibid., ver. 5), 'He shall be holy, and shall let the locks of the hair of his head grow.' If he mortified himself by abstaining from one thing only and is called holy, he who mortifieth himself by abstaining from all things, how much more is he to be called holy!" Resh Lakish said, "A disciple of the wise is not permitted (habitually) to fast, because he will become weakened in his heavenly occupation."

Fasting was positively forbidden in the case of a scholar who might be disturbed in his study.

The Talmud records many instances of personal fasts. The Rabbis have taught that when Adam first noticed the gradual shortening of the day, he soliloquised, "Woe to me! It may be because of my sin that darkness is gradually gaining ground, and the world is being brought to chaos and confusion again, and that this is the death I am subjected to." Thereupon he gave himself up to fasting and prayer for eight days. But when, after the season turned, he observed that the days gradually lengthened, he remarked, "This was only the order of nature." He then celebrated eight days of festivity. He instituted them to the honor of idols. . . . The Rabbis have further taught, when Adam for the first time saw the sun setting, he exclaimed, "Woe to me! It may be, because of my sin, that darkness is gradually gaining ground and the world is being brought to chaos and confusion again, and that this is the death I am subjected to." Thereupon he and Eve fasted and cried the whole night long: but when the day began to break, he observed that it was merely the order of nature. He then offered to sacrifice an ox whose horns

had been formed before his hoofs; as it is said (Ps. lxxix. 31), "It shall please the Lord better than the ox with horns and hoofs."

It is also related that Adam when he observed that the decree of death was occasioned by him; he fasted a hundred and thirty years, and all this time he abstained from intercourse with his wife.

Rabbi Zadok fasted forty years that Jerusalem might not be destroyed and he became so emaciated that whenever he ate anything it might be seen going down his throat.

Rabbi Zira, when he returned to the land of Israel, fasted a hundred times to the end that he might forget the Babylonian Talmud.

It is related that Rav Hunnah fasted forty days because the leather thong of his phylacteries happened to be turned inside out.

It is related of Rabbi Joshua that his teeth were quite black because of his many fasts. The Rabbis again have taught, whoever is fasting because of some calamity and it passes over, or on behalf of a sick person and he meanwhile recovers, must complete his fast. If one goes from a place where there is no fast (being observed) to a place where there is a fast, let him take part therein. If vice versa, let him complete the fast. If, having forgotten the fast, he has partaken of food let him not appear in public nor indulge himself further.

Fasts undertaken in consequence of an evil dream, have peculiar significance according to Jewish tradition. Rabbi Joshua, son of Rav Iddi, happened to call at the house of Rav Ashi. They prepared for him a third calf (the first and second calf a cow bears is not so healthy as the third—Rashi). When he was asked to eat, he said, "I am fasting." "And does my master not consider what Rav Mehudah says? For he says a man may postpone his fast for another day." He replied, "It is a fasting in consequence of a bad dream, and a fast for a bad dream is as fire applied to flax, says Rav Chamma; and Rav Chasda says that on the very same day of the bad dream the dreamer must fast, and Rav Yoseph says even if that day happens to be a Sabbath."

Although fasting on the Sabbath day is forbidden, he who on account of having had a bad dream fasts on the Sabbath-day, the judgement is against him, though it be of seventy years' standing, shall be torn up and abolished; nevertheless, he shall be called to account, and punished for omitting to enjoy himself on the Sabbath (which was his bounden duty). And how is he to remedy this? Rav. Nachman bar Yitzchak says, "Let him fast for having fasted," i. e., to fast on Sunday for having fasted on the Sabbath when he

ought to have enjoyed himself by eating large fish, the best of garlic, and a dish of beetroot, or even small fish strewed with flour and cooked in vinegar.

With regard to the fasting of children, Rav Yitzchak says, "That they are bound to observe the usual fasts in full. A girl, however, is to fast after she is twelve.

The giving of charity on a fast day was much encouraged by the Rabbis. Fasting renders our sympathy with want and privation, more keen and more real, and the Rabbinic saying, "the reward of the fast day is in the amount of charity distributed, is in accordance with the thought of Mar Zutra, who says, "The reward of a fast-day is in the giving of alms."

The Rabbis also ordained that man should fast not only for his own personal welfare, but the Jew is requested to fast for the welfare of his fellowman, and as a result, we read in the Talmud, The Rabbis have taught that the men of the watchpost, or men of the order of the course, used to pray that the sacrifices to their brethren might be favorably accepted, and the men of standing used to assemble in the synagogue and fast four days, Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays; on Monday they fasted on behalf of those that voyaged by sea; on Tuesday, on behalf of those that travel in the desert; on Wednesday, that quinsy might not befall little children; on Thursday, they fasted on behalf of pregnant women and nursing women—that the former might not miscarry, and that the latter might be able themselves to nurse their children. On Friday they did not fast because of the honor due to the Sabbath; and of course, they never fasted on the Sabbath-day. And why not upon a Sunday? Rabbi Samuel bar Nachmaini says because it is the third day from the formation (of Adam). Resh Lakish says because of the additional soul given to man on Friday, and taken away again at the close of the Sabbath, as it is said (Exod. xxxi. 17). "He rested and was refreshed" (playing on the word by dividing it into half), i. e., having rested, alas! the additional soul is lost.

In time, many other fasts in memory of certain troubles that befell Israel were added to those which had already existed. These, however, were not regarded as with that same necessity of obligation as the other facts which we have spoken about, and as a result they found little acceptance among the people. The list with few exceptions as given in the Shulhan Aruk, Crah Hayyim, is as follows:

1. First of Nisan: The sons of Aaron were destroyed in the Tabernacle.

2. Tenth of Nisan: Miriam the prophetess died; the well that followed the Israelites in the wilderness disappeared.
3. Twenty-six of Nisan: Joshua the son of Nun died.
4. Tenth of Iyar: Eli the high priest and his two sons died, and the Ark was captured by the Philistines.
5. Twenty-ninth of Iyar (twenty-eighth): Samuel the prophet died.
6. Twenty-third of Sivan: The Israelites ceased bringing the firstlings to Jerusalem in the days of Jereboam.
7. Twenty-fifth of Sivan: R. Simeon, son of Gamaliel; R. Ishmael, son of Elisha, and R. Hahina, the superior ("segan") of the priests were executed.
8. Twenty-seventh of Sivan: R. Hanina, son of Teradion, was burned while holding a scroll of the Torah.
9. Seventeenth of Tammuz: The tablets were broken; the regular daily sacrifice ceased; Apostemus burned the law, and introduced an idol into the holy place; the breaking into the city of the Romans (Ta'an. 28b).
10. First of Ab: Aaron the high priest died.
11. Ninth of Ab: It was decreed that Jews who went out of Egypt should not enter Palestine; the Temple was destroyed for the first and second time; Bether was conquered, and Jerusalem plowed over with a plowshare (ib. 29a).
12. Eighteenth of Ab: The western light was extinguished in the time of Ahaz.
13. Seventh (seventeenth) of Elul: The spies died in a pestilence.
14. Third of Tishri: Gedaliah and his associates were assassinated in Mispah (II Kings xxv. 25).
15. Fifth of Tishri: Twenty Israelites died, and Akiba was imprisoned and afterward executed.
16. Seventh of Tishri: It was decreed that the Israelites should die by the sword and by famine on account of the affair of the golden calf (see Meg. Ta'an. ad. lo., ed. princeps, Mantua. 1514).
17. Sixth (seventh) of Marheshvan: Nebuchadnezzar blinded King Zedekiah after he had slaughtered the latter's children in his presence.
18. Seventh (twenty-eighth) of Kislev: Jehoiakim burned the scroll that Baruch wrote at the dictation of Jeremiah.

19. Eighth of Tebeth: The Torah was translated into Greek in the time of Ptolemy; there was darkness in the world for three days.
20. Ninth of Tebeth: Incident not explained (death of Ezra, as mentioned in "Kol Bo").
21. Tenth of Tebeth: The siege of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar began (II Kings xxv. 1; Jer. lii. 4).
22. Eighth (fifth) of Shebat: The righteous (elders) that were in the time of Joshua died.
23. Twenty-third of Shebat: The Israelites gathered to war with the tribe of Benjamin (Judges xx.).
24. Seventh of Adar: Moses died.
25. Ninth of Adar: The controversy between the house of Shammai and that of Hillel.

Although fasting was regarded as of paramount importance amongst the Jewish people, and in spite of the fact as we have noted above, that the Rabbis have decreed that the Jew may even fast on the day of atonement when that day happens to fall on the Sabbath, yet there are thirty-five days in the Jewish calendar on which public mourning and public fasting was forbidden. The thirty-five days commemorate memorial events which the Jewish nation either performed or witnessed joyful events.

The days in question as they are enumerated in Megillat Ta'anith (scrolls of fasting), are:

I. NISAN

1. From the first day of the month Nisan, and to the eighth of it, it was settled about the daily sacrifice (that it should be paid out of the Temple treasury)—mourning was prohibited.

2. And from the eighth to the end of the Feast (the 27th) the Feast of Weeks was re-established—mourning is interdicted.

II. IYAR

1. On the seventh Iyar the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem—mourning is prohibited.

2. On the fourteenth is the day of the sacrifice of the little (the second) Passover—mourning is prohibited.

3. On the twenty-third, the sons of Acra issued from Jerusalem.

4. On the twenty-seventh the imposts were removed from Judaea and Jerusalem.

III. SIVAN

1. On the seventeenth Sivan the tower of Zur was taken.
2. On the fifteenth and sixteenth the men of Bethshean and of the plain were exiled.
3. On the twenty-fifth the tax-gatherers were withdrawn from Judah and Jerusalem.

IV. TAMMUZ

1. On the fourteenth Tammuz the Book of Decisions ("aggravating ordinances") was brogated—mourning is prohibited.

V. AB

1. On the fifteenth AB the season of wood-offerings (for the Temple use) of priests—mourning is prohibited.
2. On the twenty-fourth we returned to our Law.

VI. ELUL

1. On the seventh of Elul the day of the Dedication of Jerusalem—mourning prohibited.
2. On the seventeenth the Romans withdrew from Judaeah and Jerusalem.
3. On the twenty-second we returned to kill the apostates.

VII. TISHRI

1. On the third Tishri the mention of the Divine Name was removed from public deeds.

VIII. MARCHESHVAN

1. On the twenty-third Marcheshvan the Sorigah (a partition-wall in the Temple supposed to have been erected by the heathen, (comp. 1 Macc. iv. 43-46), was removed from the Temple-court.
2. On the twenty-fifth the wall of Samaria was taken.
3. On the twenty-seventh the meat-offering was again brought on the altar.

IX. KISLEV

1. On the third the Simavatha (another heathen structure) was removed from the court of the Temple.
2. On the seventh is a feast day.
3. On the twenty-first is the day of Mount Garison—mourning is prohibited.

4. On the twenty-fifth the eight days of the Feast of Lights (Chanuka) begin—mourning is prohibited.

X. TEBETH

1. On the twenty-eighth the congregation was re-established according to the Law. (This seems to refer to the restoration of the Sanhedrin after the Sadducean members were removed, under the rule of Queen Salome. See the historical notices in Appendix IV.)

XI. SHEBAT

1. On the second a feast day—mourning is prohibited.

2. On the twenty-second the work, of which the enemy said that it was to be in the Temple, was destroyed—mourning is interdicted. (This seems to refer to the time of Galigula, when, on the resistance of the Jews the statue of the Emperor was at first not allowed to be in the Temple.)

3. On the twenty-eighth King Antiochus was removed from Jerusalem (supposed to refer to the day of the death of Antiochus, son of Antiochus Ephiphanes, in his expedition against the Parthians.)

XII. ADAR

1. On the eighth and the ninth days of joy on account of rain-fall.

2. On the twelfth is the day of Trajan.

3. On the thirteenth is the day of Nicanor (his defeat).

4. On the fourteenth and on the fifteenth are the days of Purim (Feast of Esther)—mourning is prohibited.

5. On the sixteenth was begun the building of the wall of Jerusalem—mourning is prohibited.

6. On the seventeenth rose the heathens against the remnant of the Scribes in the country of Chalois and of the Zaoedaeans, and Israel was delivered.

7. On the twentieth the people fasted for rain, and it was granted to them.

8. On the twenty-eighth the Jews received good tidings that they would no longer be hindered from the sayings of the Law—mourning is prohibited.

On these days every one who has before made a vow of fasting is to give himself to prayer.