

# HALAKHA OF THE SEVENTH DAY

## RABBI YOSEF BITTON

HUQAT - BALAQ | JULY 4<sup>TH</sup>, 2020 – 12<sup>TH</sup> OF TAMUZ, 5780 | VOLUME 1 ISSUE 15



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Parshat HaShavua – Huqat: **The Whip or the Word?**

40 years have passed between last week's Parasha and this week's Parasha, Huqat. We are right now on the last yards of the journey that began when we left Egypt. The generation that had lived in slavery for most of their lives, has disappeared. Those who remain are their children, who, although born in slavery, they have had a lot of time, 40 years, to deprogram their slave mentality and think and act as free human beings. The voices that demanded to return to Egypt, those who preferred a life of oppression as long as there are no responsibilities are not longer there. And unlike their parents, this new generation is not afraid. They are ready to fight and conquer the land of Israel.

### THE QUESTION

Either way, their situation is not that easy. They tried to access Israel thru Edom, by the South-border, that is most direct way into the promised land. But Edom, a people who will be our future neighbor, does not facilitate the way. Israel has to circumvent the land of Edom. The new journey is very long, and people are really tired. In our Parasha we find a very memorable but sad episode. The people complained about the lack of water. HaShem tells Moshe to take his staff (*maté*) and to gather the people in front of a rock. Moshe must speak to the rock and below it a spring of water will emerge. Moshe does everything that HaShem tells him. Well, *almost* everything. The seemingly tiny digression of Moshe from the Divine order is that instead of speaking to the rock, Moshe hits it with his stick. HaShem says to Moshe, without explicitly indicating what was his fault, that he and Aharon are not going to lead the people anymore. Moshe will die in the desert. And Yehoshua will take command and lead the new generation to conquer the land of Israel. All Biblical commentators wondered what Moshe did to deserve such severe consequences. Rashi insists "Moshe should not have hit the rock, he should have spoken to him." But the punishment still seem too much. Was Moshe's error so serious? Especially if we take into account that HaShem asked Moshe *to take* his staff with him when going to talk to the rock ... and also that 40 years ago, in a very similar situation, HaShem told Moshe that Moshe should hit the rock for water to come out. How is such a great punishment justified by such a small deviation, that may well have been a mistake?

### A POSSIBLE ANSWER

Let's go deeper into the symbolic aspect of "hitting" the rock vs. "talking" to the rock. Remember the context: the previous generation was a generation of slaves who were trained to obey by violence. The only way to make slaves react was with the whip or with the stick: physical punishment. In an article called "Slavery, a dehumanizing institution" - Nell Painter explains that in the 16<sup>th</sup> century African slaves were exposed to all kinds of physical and psychological torture, they were branded as animals, mutilated, violated and forced to watch the tortures applied to the members of their family. In Egypt, 3000 years before that, the conditions of the Hebrew slaves could not have been much better .... and all these horrifying experiences left their mark.

But the new generation was different. They had time to adopt their new identity: now they are the people of HaShem, and they know it. They have voluntarily submitted to the instructions of Tora, which includes self-discipline (*qedusha*). This new generation has to be educated and be led with words; not

**Friday**  
**Night**

**Candle**  
**Lighting**  
8:11pm

**שבת**

**Sunrise**  
5:29am

**Latest**  
**Shema**  
(Gra)  
9:14am

**Latest**  
**Shacharit**  
10:29am

**Chatzot**  
12:59pm

**Earliest**  
**Mincha**  
1:36pm

**Sunset**  
8:29pm

**Shabbat**  
**Ends**  
9:19pm

**SBM**  
SEPHARDIC BET MIDRASH

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with whips. Think of the difference between our modern society and the previous generation. Just 40 or 50 years ago, teachers beat their students in class to discipline them. The world, in that aspect, changed radically. Today, in civilized countries, a teacher will never hit her students. A similar phenomenon occurs within families. I know many parents who were raised “with the whip,” and who find it difficult to free themselves from that burden when educating their own children. It is difficult to stop using force as a tool of persuasion when one was not trained in other ways of imposing authority. Younger parents, however, learned to substitute the whip for the word, and to establish their authority by the weight of what they say.

It is possible that in the case that our Parasha brings something similar happened. The new generation had to forget the power of the “whip.” It is as if HaShem had told Moshe “Take the stick, but do not use it! Talk to the rock, and do not hit it! I want the new generation to be free of the heavy inheritance of the whip, and learn to use the word.”

## Fast Days – 17<sup>th</sup> of Tamuz: Summary of the Day

This coming Thursday, July 9<sup>th</sup>, is a day of public fasting (תענית ציבור) that commemorates the 17th of Tamuz. On that day we also inaugurate a period of 3 weeks, until the 9th of the month of Ab, dedicated to mourning the destruction of our Bet haMiqdash (= Temple of Jerusalem) and other tragedies suffered by the Jewish people. Five tragedies happened to the Jewish people on this day.

1. The 17th of Tamuz occurs forty days after Shabu'ot. Moshe ascended Mount Sinai on Shabu'ot and remained there for forty days. The people of Israel made the golden calf on the afternoon of the 16th of Tamuz, when they thought that Moshe was not coming down. When Moshe descended from Mount Sinai and saw the Jews worshipping the golden calf, he smashed the tablets which carried the Ten Commandments.

2. Menashe – a Jewish King, the worst sovereign of the Kingdom of Yehuda – placed on that day an idol in the Holy Sanctuary of the Temple of Jerusalem, around the year 700 BCE.

3. In the time of the First Temple, in 587 BCE, the Kohanim (priests) were forced to discontinue the offering of the daily sacrifice. This sacrifice (qorban hatamid) had been offered by the Jews since the time of the exodus of Egypt. On the 17th of Tamuz of that year this sacrifice could not be offered anymore due to the shortage of animals caused by the siege of the city of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army.

4. Around the year 50 of the Common Era, Apostomus, a Roman captain, seized a Tora scroll and with abusive and mocking language burned the Tora in public. (According

to Maimonides it was Apostomus, not Menashe, who besides burning the Tora placed an idol in the Holy Temple as well).

5. In the year 68 CE the walls of Jerusalem were breached after many months of siege by the Roman army. Three weeks after the breach of the wall, the Bet haMiqdash was destroyed on the 9th of Ab.

Because of these five tragedies we fast on the 17th of Tamuz. We also recite special prayers (tahanunim) which inspire us to mourn and repent for our transgressions and the transgressions of our ancestors.

We fast and elevate our prayers and supplications (tahanunim) to haShem, with introspection and repentance (teshuba). Besides fasting, no additional restrictions apply, such as washing our body, wearing leather shoes, working, driving, etc.

### Who is Exempt from Fasting?

1. Minors: boys under 13 and girls under 12 years old are completely exempted from fasting.
2. Nursing women: According to the Sephardic Minhag, after giving birth, a woman is exempt from fasting for 24 months, even if they are not actually nursing their baby.
3. Pregnant women, are exempted from this fast.
4. A person who is sick, with flu or fever or a person with a chronic chronic disease, for example, diabetes, is excused from fasting.
5. Elders should consult with their physicians if the fast might affect their health. If so, they are exempt (and in some cases, prohibited) from fasting.