

Introduction to Tractate Ta'anit

Drought, famine, and war signal God's displeasure with Israel and occasion acts of repentance and atonement. These acts of repentance and atonement take the form of public fasting and prayer. In times of crisis Israel jointly and severally relates to God through acts of supplication joined to penitence for sin. Among critical events that provoke a response of penitence, drought takes first place. The law in the first section of *Ta'anit* prescribes rules governing this occasion and its rite. A counterpart to these occasions of crisis for ordinary times is presented in the second section by the participation in the cult by a priestly family of a given locale. A delegation of Levites and lay-Israelites would accompany the priests, twenty-four of them, over the course of a year. Then the entirety of the community, meaning non-priests, would participate at home through the recitation and study of verses of Scripture.

- I. Fasts called in order to bring rain
 - A. The sequence of fasts for rain
 - B. The liturgy of the community for a fast day
 - C. Other rules about public fasts
 - D. Other uses of the shofar as an alarm
- II. The delegation [*ma'amad*]: Israelite participation in the cult; various special occasions
 - A. The delegation
 - B. Mourning days for public calamity

The law of *Ta'anit* sets the norms for two distinct relationships, the one in a time of trouble, the other in a time of tranquility. In the one Israel responds to social and political crisis; in the other, to the on-going processes of creation.

Fasting and prayer in time of drought: Prayers for rain are offered from the festival of Tabernacles forward; that is, from when the rainy season ordinarily commences. If the rains do not commence two weeks after the festival, from the beginning of the following lunar month Marheshvan then a series of fasts gets underway. These begin as private fasts, but quickly become public and communal. Other occasions of fasting and mourning for public calamities commemorate specific events in the history of Israel's relationship with God: the breaking of the tablets of the law, the cancellation of the daily whole offering, the breach in the city wall, the profanation of the Temple, and the destruction of the Temple.

The delegation in time of tranquility: The presence of the delegation of Israelites serves to establish all Israel's representation when the offerings are presented. Thus the early prophets made the rule of twenty-four watches, and for each watch there was a delegation (*ma'amad*) in Jerusalem made up of priests, Levites, and Israelites. Israel in the provinces takes up its position in the Temple by sending agents to represent the home community when its representative priests take their turn at the altar.

Israel relates to God through prayerful statements to him on ordinary and natural, as well as on extraordinary and historical, occasions. That is why regular prayers for rain are supplemented by extraordinary prayers and related activities. This occurs when, the

everyday prayer not having sufficed, the rhythm of nature is disrupted so that rain does not come in its season and the orderly gives way. On such occasions Israel responds to the admonition announced by those events by evaluating its relationship with God and identifying the flaws on its part that have provoked divine punishment in the form of drought. Israel relates to God not only in the Temple and through the possessions and goods of those set aside for religious tasks, but also in everyday encounters. Everywhere and all the time, God hears and answers prayer. Thus, when Israel prays and does not obtain its need, e.g., for rain at the proper season, then Israel responds by showing its humility and remorse for sin.