



Torah Thoughts from the YIGC Community

BeHa"B: Assuming the Burdens of Public Responsibility

Shmuel Stern

The *Shulchan Aruch* (O.C. 492:1, 566:1) codifies an Ashkenazic voluntary *minhag* to assume a series of three fasts following *Pesach* and *Sukkos*. The colloquial name "BeHa"B" comes from the weekdays the fasts are observed: a consecutive set of Monday (Yom **Beis**), Thursday (**Hay**) and Monday (**Beis**) in the months following each of these holidays, *Iyar* and *Marcheshvan*.

It is said that this *minhag* has fallen out of popularity because our generation is "weaker" than those in times past (*Aruch Hashulchan* 492:2). It is unclear whether this weakness refers to physical or spiritual wherewithal. Sometimes the simplest answer is best: who wishes to voluntarily fast even one fast, let alone three?

I would like, however, to briefly explain the *minhag* and then propose a reason we should give *BeHa"B* more consideration. What are we to make of *BeHa"B* and the fact that few keep this *minhag*?

1. A Quick Summary

(i) Initial Sources

If you peek at the Artscroll Siddur commentary on *Selichos* for *BeHa"B*, it mentions that it is an "ancient" custom. The earliest commentary is the *Tosfos* cited below, so, say 700-900 years ago. *Meseches Soferim* (21:1-3, possibly of the 8th Century) records a similar three-day fast in *Iyar* to commemorate the fasts in Esther's time, explicitly pushed past *Nissan* when they occurred.

(ii) Timing

The *Shulchan Aruch* is clear that the fasts are not held within the actual months of *Nissan* and *Tishrei*, but there is some variance as to when they are kept in *Marchesvan*: the *Rema* says immediately from the first Monday in the months of *Iyar* and *Marchesvan*; the *Mahariv* says to wait until after the 17th of *Marcheshvan*, so that the fast is observed on shorter days (*Nitei Gavriel Pesach* 43:4). It is generally accepted that *BeHa"B* does not apply to *Shavuos*, based on the rationales given below (*Shaarei Teshuva* 492:1).

(iii) A Private/Public Affair

Because the fasts are assumed on a voluntary, yet organized, basis, they assume a mix of halachos between private and public fasts. For example, the *halacha* for a private fast requires the person to declare the fast at *Mincha* prior to the fast day (O.C. 562:6). The *BeHa"B* fasts, however, are announced the *Shabbos* before. Look at any siddur with *Selichos* in the back (for example,

most Artscroll *siddurim*) and you will find a *Mi Sheberach* for the *BeHa"B* fasts tucked in after the *Ashrei* before *Shabbos Mussaf*. Saying "*amein*" to this *Mi Sheberach* with the intent to assume the fast is enough; responding without that intent doesn't bind you. *Aneinu*, *Selichos*, and the *leining* for a public fast day take place on *BeHa"B* only if there is a minyan of fasting individuals present. On the other hand, if there is a *bris* or other *seudas mitzvah* at shul that day, you can eat without annulling your vow, though you would need to annul the vow if, for example, you were too ill to fast.

(iv) The Given Rationales

The *Mishna Brurah* explains that the fasts are to atone for sins that may have been committed during all the feasting and rejoicing over the *Yamim Tovim*. This accords with *Iyov's* cited practice to bring *korbanos* following his sons' 'days of feasts' because "אולי וְגַרְבוּ [אֲלֵקִים] בְּלִבָּם - "Perhaps my sons have sinned and blasphemed G-d in their hearts" (*Iyov* 1:5).

Which potential sins are we fasting for on *BeHa"B*? There are many suggestions: *Tosfos* (Kiddushin 81a) states that on *Yamim Tovim*, men and women would come to shul for *drashos*, which could lead to impropriety. *Eliyahu Rabba* (492:3) points out that *Pesach* and *Sukkos* are the two holidays that include *Chol HaMoed*, and the fasts atone for doing too much work - i.e. placing the "*chol*" over the "*moed*". The *Kol Bo* says we atone for overeating. (To be clear, the sin relates to gluttony, not improper nutrition.) Alternatively, the *Levush* (on 492:1) says the fasts strengthen our resolve as the weather is changing seasons. *Sefer Chassidim* (227) suggests that we are asking for *Hashem* to bless the rains (following *Sukkos*) and the crops (following *Pesach*).

2. A Different Perspective

The *Mahariv's* position to wait until after the 17th of *Marcheshvan* reminded me of the *Mishna* in *Taanis* (1:4) that states:

If the seventeenth of *Marcheshvan* came and no rain fell, individuals ("*yechidim*") begin to fast three fasts..

The *Gemara* (*Taanis* 10a-b) identifies the *yechidim*:

Who are these individuals [mentioned in the Mishna]? Rav Huna said: the Sages [who are held to a higher standard and are expected to undertake fasts even when ordinary people do not]. And Rav Huna [further] said: The individuals who fast the three fasts [do so on] a

Monday, [and on the next] Thursday, and [again on the following] Monday.

Sound familiar? The *Gemara* goes on to set a very low bar to qualify as an “individual” and cautions against declaring oneself an ‘individual’ for one’s own glory. Rather, the *Gemara* allows self-declaring in relation to these fasts as the act of fasting is a personal source of pain (i.e. at a personal cost).

I found no source directly connecting *BeHa”b* to the *Taanis*, but from the correlation, I would propose that the reason *BeHa”B* is not widely practiced is that it represents members of the general *kehillah* voluntarily assuming obligations imposed on *yechidim*, who as leaders of the community were responsible for rectifying communal sins. The primary rationales for *BeHa”B* address public morality (inappropriate socializing) and public education (the public’s knowledge of acceptable conduct on *chol hamoed*). This

too accords with the precedent of *Iyov*, who was atoning for the sins of his sons - not for himself.

The correlation may also explain why the *Mi Sheberach* for *BeHa”B* is situated near the weekly *Mi Sheberach* for those involved in *tzarhei tzibbur*. This placement within the public Shabbos morning davening would serve to encourage the masses to assume the mantle of communal responsibilities.

Finding volunteer commitment in time, physical and emotional energy - personal cost - to our community’s public causes is an especially difficult task.

Perhaps *BeHa”B* should be revisited, to use the months of *Iyar* and *Marcheshvan* to inform people of the issues facing us as a *kehillah* and to solicit them to step up, as *yechidim*, to assume the responsibilities of the needs of the community.

[note: all translations from sefaria.org with minor editing]

The Different Sides of Sarah Imeinu

Sarah Rudolph

What do we really know about Sarah, apart from her role as Avraham’s wife?

The *Gemara* (Megillah 14a) identifies the “*Yiska*” mysteriously referred to in Bereishis 11:29 as Sarah, and suggests the root of “*yiska*” (י.ס.ו.), which means “look,” can tell us more about her: “she looked” via prophecy. Sarah, then, was a **seer**, particularly in a spiritual sense. She had a personal relationship with God, signified by a name attached to her even before she was Avraham’s wife. (The *Gur Aryeh* explains that the name “*Sarai/Sarah*” relates to her role as Avraham’s partner, but “she did not have the name *Yiska* because of Avraham, for behold, Avraham was secondary to Sarah in prophecy.” The *Netziv* also highlights the name *Yiska* as a descriptor of Sarah herself, suggesting that the prophetic connection implied by this name tells us why she was a good match for Avraham.)

The *Gemara* also offers an alternative interpretation, though, which relates “*Yiska*” to the same Hebrew root but suggests the “looking” went in the other direction: “everyone looked at her beauty.” Sarah was **seen**, admired for her appearance.

Which is correct? Was she active or passive? Physical or spiritual? Maybe Sarah was both of the above and more; maybe these insights are not mutually exclusive, but point to different qualities of a complex individual.

Indeed, Rashi quotes both interpretations:

“*Yiska*” – this is Sarah – because she saw (סוכה) with *ruach hakodesh* and that all looked (סוכין) at her beauty.

Rashi doesn’t separate the *Gemara*’s two interpretations with “or”; rather, he connects them with “and.” It is possible to be one **and** also the other.

In fact, Rashi adds a third interpretation as well, connecting “*yiska*” with a different Hebrew root:

“And further, “*yiska*” connotes *nesichut* (princeliness) – like “Sarah” connotes *serarah* (rulership).

Sarah was seen and she was a seer; she had personal appeal and a personal connection to God; and as *Yiska*, she brought those qualities to her marriage and shared mission (as Sarah) with the dignity of a true princess.

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