

The *Minhag* of Reciting *Kinnos*

It is commonly thought that, in general, the procedures of our daily and seasonal practices are “etched in stone” and this is the way it has always been. While the general framework of many practices remains the same over the millennia, e.g., we have always kept *Shabbos* and we have always donned *tefillin*, however, numerous details of practices and *minhagim* have changed over the course of time.

A classic example of this is one of the central customs of *Tisha Be’Av*, the *minhag* of reciting *kinnos*. The *minhag* did not exist during the time of the *Gemara* and only came into being during the era of the *Geonim*. However, its original format was vastly different from current day practice. This week’s article will examine the development of the recital of *kinnos*. But first, we will study the practice of reading *Megillas Eicha*, which is the original book of *Kinnos*. Indeed, in several places, *Chazal* refer to *Eicha* as *Kinnos* (*Mo’eid Katan* 26a; *Bava Basra* 14b; *Eicha Rabbah*, *Pesichos* #27).

Early Sources

The earliest source for the custom of reading *Eicha* on *Tisha Be’Av* is the *Midrash Eicha Rabbah* (3:5): “They sit and they read the laments and wails of *Eicha*.”

We also find a more detailed report in *Meseches Sofrim* (18:4,7,8): “There are those who read *Eicha* at night, and there are those who delay it until the morning, after reading from the Torah. In the morning, the *chazzan*, whose head and clothes are covered in earth, arises and reads *Eicha* with tears and lament.”

Here we see that the *chazzan* stood during *Eicha*, perhaps similar to other public readings. The commentators on *Meseches Sofrim* discuss this. Also, it must be taken into account that there are variant texts of *Meseches Sofrim*. In any event, the generally accepted custom nowadays is to sit while reciting *Eicha* and *kinnos* (see *Shulchan Aruch*, *Orach Chayim* 559:3 and *Taz* #4).

Meseches Sofrim continues: “If he (i.e., the *chazzan*) knows how to translate it, this is preferred. If not, he should give it to someone who knows how to translate well. This is in order that everyone, including the women and children, should understand. This is because the women are obligated to hear the reading like men.”

During the time of *Chazal*, the custom was to translate the public readings of the Torah and *Haftarah* into Aramaic, the spoken language of the general populace. We see that this *minhag* extended to *Eicha* as well, since the custom at the time was for women to come hear the reading of *Eicha*. It is interesting to note that the *Ramban* in *Toras Ha’adam* (*Shaar Ha’eivel* #109) cites this passage from *Meseches Sofrim* and writes: “They were accustomed that one would read ‘*Megilas Kinnos*’ (this is how *Eicha* is referred to in *Chazal* and the *Rishonim*) and everyone would listen, in the same way that *Megilas Ester* is read, and he (i.e., the *baal kri’ah*) would recite the *bracha* of ‘*al mikra megilah*’ before reading it.”

Baruch Dayan Ha'emes

Meseches Sofrim continues: “[Before beginning to read], he says, ‘*Baruch Dayan Ha'emes*.’”

It is important to keep in mind that during the time of *Chazal*, in general, there was no appointed *baal kri'ah*. Rather, every person who received an *aliyah* was expected to read it himself for the benefit of the congregation. Thus, when *Meseches Sofrim* states that “he says...,” it refers to each of the three individuals who are given *aliyos*.

There is some discussion concerning who recites the *bracha* of “*Dayan Ha'emes*.” The *Ramban (Toras Ha'adam)* writes that it refers to the one reading *Eicha*, and he therefore recites two *brachos*, “*Al mikra megillah*” and “*Dayan ha'emes*.” However, the passage could also mean that each person who reads from the Torah should recite this *bracha*. Indeed, the *Beis Yosef (Orach Chayim 559)* writes that before reading from the Torah, the *oleh* recites this *bracha*. The *Darchei Moshe* (ibid.) writes that this is not the custom among *Ashkenazim*.

The Torah on the Floor!

Meseches Sofrim continues: “There are those who place the *Sefer Torah* on the ground wrapped in black, and say, ‘The crown of our heads has fallen’ (*Eicha* 5:16).”

Several authorities, including the *Tur (Orach Chayim 559)*, have a variant text, “There are those who place the *case* of the *Sefer Torah* on the floor.” (The practice of storing the *Sefer Torah* in a case is still followed today by the *Sefardic* communities.) This was (and perhaps still is) followed by several communities. One of these is *Tunis*, as recorded in *Alei Hadas* (14:19), a compilation of their customs.

Other communities would not place the case on the floor, but rather on a special reading surface or table that was lower than usual. They would cover this table with black cloth, place the *Sefer Torah* on it and read from it in a sitting position (see *Alei Hadas* 14:19).

Other Minhagim

Meseches Sofrim continues: “They tear their garments and eulogize like a person whose dead lies before him. Some would change their location [in the *beis haknesses*], and some would lower themselves downward from their seats (i.e., they would sit on the floor or a low stool). Everyone would cover themselves with dirt. They would not say ‘*shalom*’ to each other the entire night and the entire day and they completed *kinnos*, i.e., *Megillas Eicha*. During the time of reciting *kinnos*, one may not say anything [to another person] or go outside, so as not to divert his attention from the mourning. Certainly one should avoid speaking to a non-Jew.”

These passages from *Meseches Sofrim* are cited by several *Rishonim* and *poskim* and serve as the foundations for many of the practices that are codified in the *Shulchan Aruch* in *Hilchos Tisha Be'Av*. The *Ramban (Toras Ha'adam)* points out that these practices were only *minhagim* and not requirements. Of course, now that we have the rulings of the *Shulchan Aruch*, these practices are considered *halacha*.

Testimony from the Era of the *Amora'im*

As long as we are on the topic of *Tisha Be'Av* practices during the era of *Chazal*, it is appropriate to cite the eye-witness account of a non-Jew during the era of the *Amora'im* some 1,500 years ago, concerning how the Jews commemorated *Tisha Be'Av* in Yerushalayim. The source of this description is a *sefer* called “*Igros Eretz Yisrael*” (pp. 44-45), which has been cited in several *Charedi* publications in *Eretz Yisrael*. I found it in “*Kinnos LeTisha Be'Av Hamevu'ar* ([*Mesivta* edition], *Pirkei Mevo*, page 3):

“Until this very day, it is forbidden for the traitorous residents of the city (i.e., the Jews) to come to Yerushalayim. They are given permission to enter only to lament, and they must purchase the right to cry over the destruction of their country. They are forced to pay the cost of their tears; even the right to cry is not given to them for free. On the day that the city was captured and destroyed by the Romans, one can see the gathering of the miserable people; weak old men and women wearing tattered rags, whose outer appearance demonstrates the anger of G-d. Their eyes still flow with tears. They lament over the Temple that was reduced to ashes; over the altar that was destroyed; over the fortified cities that once stood; and over the tall towers of the Temple.”

During the Era of the Geonim

The passages of *Midrash* and *Meseches Sofrim* that we have cited deal primarily with the reading of *Megillah Eichah*, which was read sorrowfully and mournfully. This *minhag* is similarly mentioned by Rav Amram Gaon (*Seder Rav Amram Gaon*, page 132), Rav Tzemach Gaon (quoted by *Hamanhig* #28) and Rav Hai Gaon (*Seder Rav Amram Gaon*, page 132, *He'aros* 99.3).

During the era of the *Geonim*, the *minhag* in *Bavel* (current day Iraq) was to recite *selichos* and the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy, in the same way that they are recited on other public fasts (*Otzar HaGeonim, Taanis*, page 49). Rav Saadyah Gaon, in his *siddur* (page 319), cites eleven *selichos* for *Tisha Be'Av*. This is in contrast to other fast days when they recited only two *selichos*.

A fascinating difference between the era of the *Geonim* and nowadays concerning *selichos* on fast days is when in the *davening* they are recited. Nowadays, *selichos* are recited after *chazaras hashatz* and before *tachanun*. During the era of the *Geonim*, *selichos* were recited during *chazaras hashatz* during the *bracha* of *Selach Lanu* (*Seder Rav Amram Gaon*, page 132).

The Minhag Changed

Although we saw that the *minhag* in *Bavel* had been to recite *selichos* on *Tisha Be'Av*, apparently over the centuries this changed. We find that Rabbeinu Tzidiyahu ben Rav Avraham Harofei, a thirteenth century Italian *Rishon*, writes in his *Shibbolei Haleket* (#269) that the custom in *Bavel* was not to recite *selichos* and the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy, but rather to recite “*pizmonum shel kinnos*.” Presumably, he is referring here to the types of *kinnos* that we are accustomed to recite.

The Custom in Germany

As we have seen, the custom in *Bavel* during the time of the *Geonim* was to recite *selichos* on *Tisha Be'Av*, just as on any other fast day. This was not the *minhag* in Germany. The *Raavyah*, who lived in twelfth century Germany, mentions the *minhag Bavel* and then justifies the German custom. He explains that *Tisha Be'Av* is referred to as “*mo'eid*,” and just as we do not recite *tachanun* on *Tisha Be'Av* because it is called “*mo'eid*,” so too we do not recite *selichos*, as it is inappropriate to recite *tefillos* associated with a fast on such a day (*Raavyah* #891).

The Minhag of Reciting Kinnos

As the earliest mention of the *minhag* to recite *kinnos* is found in the writings of the *Geonim*, it would seem that the *minhag* did not exist during the time of *Chazal*, and began only sometime during the era of the *Geonim*. When *kinnos* were introduced, those communities that recited *selichos* added *kinnos* in addition to the *selichos*. As the *minhag* changed over the centuries and reciting *selichos* was abandoned, only the *kinnos* remained, forming the basis for our current day custom.

A Word about Piyutim

Before we proceed, we need to briefly discuss *piyutim*. *Piyutim* are poetic *tefillos* composed with the intent that they be recited on various occasions throughout the Jewish calendar. One of the most famous and prolific *pytanim* (composers of *piyutim*) is Rabbi Elazar Hakalir. There are numerous suggestions as to when he lived, some dating him as early as the *Tannaim*, whereas others date him much later, at various times of the *Geonic* era or perhaps even shortly before the time of the *Rishonim*.

Nowadays, the *piyutim* inserted into the *davening* are all called *yotzros*, no matter where they are inserted. In actuality, the group name of the *piyutim* is dependent on which part of *davening* it is recited. Since the subject of this article is not *piyutim*, I will suffice with only a few examples, although there are many more:

- 1) *Piyutim* recited in the *bracha* “*yotzeir ohr*,” (i.e., the first *bracha* of *birchos Kri's Shema* in the morning) are called *yotzoros*.
- 2) Those recited prior to “*ein Elokim zulasecha*” (i.e., before “*ezras avoseinu*” in the *bracha* of “*emes veyatziv*”), are called *zolchos*.
- 3) Those recited before “*ga'al Yisrael*” before *shemonah esrei* are called *geulos*.
- 4) Those recited during *chazaras hashatz* are called *kerovos*. It is interesting to note that this word became mangled and it is more commonly known as “*kerovetz*.” Some communities still recite all the various *piyutim*.

Concerning *kerovos*, there are two types:

- a) Where *piyutim* are added to every *bracha* of *chazaras hashatz*, such as in the *krovetz* of *Purim*.
- b) Some communities have the custom during the *Yomim Nora'im* to add *piyutim* only to the first three *brachos* of *chazaras hashatz*. These types of *kerovos* are called *kedushta*, as they conclude with the *bracha* of *Hamelech Hakadosh*.

Let us now return to our topic.

Everything in *Chazaras hashatz*

The original *minhag* of reciting *selichos* and *kinnos* on *Tisha Be'Av* was to recite both during *chazaras hashatz*, as they were both incorporated into the special *kerovos* recited on that day. In fact, there were *kerovos* recited on all of the public fast days, with additions made to every *bracha*. On the fast days, the *kerovos* associated with the *bracha* of *Selach Lanu* were lengthier and incorporated the *selichos* and the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy. This is similar to the *kerovos* recited on other special days that have a unique feature. For example:

- 1) The *piyutim* in the *bracha* of *Mechayeih Hameisim* at *musaf* on the first day of *Pesach* are related to *tefilas tal*.
- 2) The same is true with the *piyutim* at *musaf* of *Shemini Atzeres* as they are associated with *tefilas geshem*.
- 3) The *piyutim* of *Shabbos Hagadol* teach the laws of kashering the house for *Pesach*.

On *Tisha Be'Av*, in addition to the *selichos* recited in *Selach Lanu*, many *kinnos* were incorporated into the *kerovos* associated with the *bracha* of *Boneih Yerushalayim*.

It is interesting to note that many of the *kerovos* that I have mentioned here can be viewed by those who have access to the editions of *Machzor Roma* and *Machzor Romania*.

The earliest known *kerovos* and *kinnos* for *Tisha Be'Av* were composed by Rebbi Elazar Hakalir. Those *piyutim* associated with the *bracha* of *Boneih Yerushalayim* were the *kinnos* that they said. Anyone who has taken the time to examine his *piyutim* and *kinnos* can discern certain patterns that he incorporated into the text. A common and easily recognized pattern that he used is to follow the order of the *aleph-beis*. Namely, the first or second word in consecutive stanzas or stitches begin with consecutive letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

The *Tisha Be'Av kerovos* of Rebbi Elazar Hakalir, entitled “*Zachor Eicha anu*,” can be found in “*Machzor Keminhag K”K (Kehillah Kedosha) Roma (Rome)*” and is available in the *Otzar Hachachmah* database. When studying these *kerovos*, one can immediately see that the second word in each stanza added to each *bracha* begins with a consecutive letter of the *aleph-beis*. Thus, the first *kinnah* in the *bracha* of *Boneih Yerushalayim* begins with the words “*Shavas – Suru meni*,” with the second word starting with a *samekh*. This *kinnah* is the first *kinnah* that we recite on *Tisha Be'Av* morning. This is why the second word in each subsequent stanza continues the *aleph-beis* sequence from *samekh*, as it had been a continuation of the original *kerovah*.

After this *kinnah*, many other *kinnos* were recited as part of the *kerovah*, as they appear in the *Machzor* cited above.

The *Minhag* Changes

It is unclear exactly when the recital of the *kinnos* was transferred from *chazaras hashatz* as part of the *kerovah* to after *shemonah esrei*. According to some, this occurred automatically when the *minhag* to recite *kerovos* was dropped. Others contend that it happened earlier, and this was for one of two reasons:

1) Due to the adding of additional *kinnos*, it became too tedious to recite them as part of *chazaras hashatz*.

2) It was decided that it was more appropriate to recite the *kinnos* while seated on the floor (see *Kinnos LeTisha Be'Av Hamevu'ar* ([*Mesivta* edition] *Pirkei Mevo*, chap. 1).

Once this occurred, they began reciting them while seated on the ground. Furthermore, at this time, the recital of *kinnos* was prolonged so as to finish at *chatzos*. This was to dissuade people from involving themselves in other matters prior to *chatzos* which might cause them to divert their attention from the mourning.

Weighing Sins

In the beginning of *parshas Shelach*, we learn about the sad incident where the *meraglim* spied out *Eretz Yisrael* and came back with a negative report. The *pasuk* (*Bamidbar* 14:1) tells us that *Bnei Yisrael* cried that night, and it was therefore decreed that they would not enter *Eretz Yisrael*, but rather wander in the desert for forty years.

The *Gemara* (*Sanhedrin* 104b) tells us: “It was the night of *Tisha Be'Av*. Hashem said to the Jews: ‘You cried a *bechayah shel chinam*, a needless cry; I will establish for you a crying for generations.” Rav Yerucham Levovitz, the Mirrer *mashgiach* (*Daas Chochmah Umussar*, vol. I, #111), used this incident to demonstrate how measuring the greatness of a sin is finely nuanced based on the circumstances.

The simple understanding of the *Gemara's* statement is that had *Bnei Yisrael* not cried a “*bechayah shel chinam*,” the *Beis Hamikdash* would not have been destroyed. We thus see that had the entire incident of the *meraglim* occurred just as it did, but one small detail changed, e.g., they did not get sufficiently upset to cry a *bechayah shel chinam*, the *Beis Hamikdash* would not have been destroyed. We see from here how when weighing and measuring a sin, the slightest change can make a world of difference. The extra bit of distress on the part of the Jews which caused the *bechayah shel chinam* carried such a heavy price – the destruction of the *Beis Hamikdash*.

This also serves as the source for the words of the *Rambam* (*Hilchos Teshuvah* 3:2): “No creation has the capability to comprehend the measurement and weighing of sins, and they can be weighed only by the G-d of knowledge (“*Keil Dei'os*”). This is because no mortal being has the capability to discern such fine nuances of levels of sin.

Do you want to receive these articles via email? Send a request to avraham.rosenthal@gmail.com.