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## How to spend Tish'a b'Av

**Question:** Besides refraining from forbidden activities, how should one spend Tish'a b'Av?

**Answer:** For a few reasons, the answer depends on the individual. As usual, some matters depend on the local minhag. In this case, it is even more individualistic, as different people arrive at the proper frame of mind in different ways. Furthermore, we have to be realistic. Not everyone who will refrain from a given practice will be sitting all day crying about the Beit HaMikdash. I remember a group of people who were careful not to learn Torah on Tish'a b'Av, but they used the afternoon for an annual softball game. A little “leniency” regarding something more suitable might have been better. In any case, we will use halachot to arrive at a general approach to what is appropriate.

There are two major elements to the various halachot that govern activities on Tish'a b'Av (other than those that are directly fast-related). One element is to concentrate on the aveilut (mourning) over the national destruction that the day commemorates. The other is to refrain from things that we categorize as joyful.

The mishna<sup>1</sup> presents two minhagim regarding whether work is permitted on Tish'a b'Av. The main reason not to work is, apparently, in order to keep one's mind on aveilut.<sup>2</sup> The mishna instructs each person to follow the local minhag, as does the Shulchan Aruch.<sup>3</sup> (In the Beit Yosef, he reports a widespread practice of stringency, which some Sephardic poskim accept as a final ruling.<sup>4</sup>) The Rama<sup>5</sup> states that the Ashkenazic minhag is to abstain from work of even a moderately serious nature until chatzot (midday). (The halachot are similar to those of Chol Hamo'ed and are beyond our present scope.) This leads us to the conclusion that until chatzot one should act in a way that keeps his mind on aveilut. This is supported by the minhag to postpone preparing the night meal until chatzot,<sup>6</sup> to sit on or near the floor,

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<sup>1</sup> *Pesachim* 54b.

<sup>2</sup> *Mishna Berura* 554:43.

<sup>3</sup> *Orach Chayim* 554:22.

<sup>4</sup> See *Torat Hamo'adim* 8:24.

<sup>5</sup> *Orach Chayim* 554:22.

<sup>6</sup> *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim* 559:10.


and to recite kinot until close to chatzot.<sup>7</sup>

After chatzot, the main focus is on not doing things that are joyous. Of course, there are different levels of happiness, and there is some distinction between activities that are formally forbidden and those that fall within the realm of the spirit of the law. Torah study is formally classified as something that makes one happy and is forbidden even for those who do not derive from it a strong, conscious joy. Only Torah topics that are objectively sad or aveilut-related are permitted.<sup>8</sup> There are sources and logic that support both sides of the question of whether works of mussar (literally, rebuke) are permitted to be studied on Tish'a b'Av. The matter may depend on the nature of the work (e.g., the extent to which p'sukim, midrashim, and interesting philosophical insights are incorporated<sup>9</sup>).

The spirit of the law is also expressed in the law. The Shulchan Aruch<sup>10</sup> says that one should not stroll in the marketplace, lest he come to frivolity. The Mishna Berura<sup>11</sup> urges those with the minhag to visit the cemetery to do so in small groups to avoid it

turning into “a happening”. These are just a couple of halachot that help set a tone and give a direction to follow.

A practice has developed to have daylong programs of talks on topics of soul-searching. While Tish'a b'Av is intended to be more a day of sadness than of self-improvement, most people are better served by taking part in such forums than staying at home, attempting the difficult task of maintaining the proper frame of mind on their own. Whereas in the morning the focus should be on the kinot<sup>12</sup> (recitation or explanation), the afternoon may be spent on forums of contemplation and soul-searching. Lecturers and participants should do their part to ensure that the content and atmosphere are somber and do not foster socializing, which is against the spirit and halachot of the day.<sup>13</sup>



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<sup>7</sup> *Shulchan Aruch* and *Rama* *ibid.*:3.

<sup>8</sup> See a (partial?) list in *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim* 554:1-2.

<sup>9</sup> See *Riv'vot Ephrayim* I, 386.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*:21.

<sup>11</sup> 559:41.

<sup>12</sup> Mournful liturgy.

<sup>13</sup> *Shulchan Aruch* *ibid.* 554:20.