

Limiting Mourning

Our sages taught: When the Temple was destroyed for the second time, large numbers in Israel abstained from eating meat and from drinking wine. Rabbi Joshua engaged them: My children, why do you not eat meat or drink wine? They replied: Shall we eat meat which used to be brought as an offering on the altar now that the altar is gone? Shall we drink wine which used to be poured as an offering on the altar but is no longer poured?

Rabbi Joshua said to them: If that is so, we should not eat bread either, because the meal offerings have ceased. They replied: Well then, we can manage with fruit. Rabbi Joshua said: We should not eat fruit either because there is no longer an offering of first fruits. They replied: Well then, we can manage with other fruits. Rabbi Joshua continued: We should not drink water because there is no longer any ceremony of water pouring. To this they could find no answer.

He then said: My children! Come and listen to me. Not to mourn at all is impossible because the blow has fallen. To mourn overmuch is also impossible because we cannot impose on the community a hardship which the majority cannot endure...

The sages therefore have ordained: A man may stucco his house, but he should leave a little bare. How much should this be? Rav Yosef said that it should be a cubit square. Rav Hisda added that it must be by the door. A man can prepare a full course banquet, but he should leave out an item or two. What should this be? Rav Papa says: The hors d'oeuvre of salted fish. A woman can put on all her ornaments but should leave off one or two. What should this be? Rav said that she should not remove the hair on her temple. For so it says: *If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget; let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not raise Jerusalem as my head joy* (Psalm 137:5). What is meant by *my/head joy*? Rabbi Isaac said: This is symbolized by the burnt ashes which we place on the head of a groom. Rav Papa asked Abaye: Where should those ashes be placed? He replied: Just where the head phylactery/tefillin is placed...

Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha said: Since the day of the destruction of the Temple we should by rights bind ourselves not to eat meat or drink wine except that we do not place a hardship on the community that the majority cannot endure. And from the day that a government has come into power which issues cruel decrees against us and forbids to us the observance of the Torah and mitzvot and does not allow us to enter into the week of the son/ brit milah—according to another version, the redemption of the son—we ought by rights to commit ourselves not to marry and have children. But the seed of Abraham our father would come to an end of itself. Rather, let Israel go their way, being fruitful, and do not bring the matter before them. It is better that they should err in ignorance than presumptuously. (Babylonian Talmud, Baba Batra 60b)