



DAYENU
A Jewish Call to Climate Action



COMMUNAL RESPONSE-ABILITY THROUGH THE LENS OF TA'ANIT

We each have our own journey of awakening to the climate crisis. Some of us have been concerned and active for decades, while others of us have just begun to realize that climate change is a real threat that impacts our lives. Many of us fall in between these two experiences. The body of rabbinic texts called Ta'anit focuses on communal responses to drought and disaster. Mishna Ta'anit introduces us to categories of people and categories of response that help us reflect on our own individual and communal responses to the crisis.

Mishna Ta'anit 1:4

If the seventeenth of the Hebrew month of Marḥeshvan arrived* and rain has not fallen, individuals (*ha'yichidim***), but not the entire community, begin to fast three fasts for rain. How are these fasts conducted? As the fast begins in the morning, one may eat and drink after dark, and one is permitted during the days of the fasts themselves to engage in the performance of work, in bathing, in smearing oil on one's body, in wearing shoes, and in conjugal relations.

**This would be 25 days after Shmini Atzeret, when the community began praying for the seasonal rains to begin.*

***Ha'yichidim literally means "the individuals," but in the context of this mishna it is understood to mean scholars, rabbis, or public figures.*

(ד) הגיע שבועה עָשָׂר בְּמַרְחֶשְׁוֹן וְלֹא יָרַדוּ
גְשָׁמִים, הִתְחִילוּ הַיְיָחִידִים מִתְעַנִּין שְׁלֹשׁ
תַּעֲנִיּוֹת. אוֹכְלִין וְשׁוֹתִין מִשְׁחֻשְׁקָה, וּמִתְרִין
בְּמִלְאָה וּבְרַחֲצָה וּבְסִיכָה וּבְנֻעִילַת הַסַּנְדָּל
וּבְתַשְׁמִישׁ הַמָּטָה:



What crisis is happening in this mishna? Who is responding?

Who might be the modern day equivalent of the *y'chidim*?

What are the *y'chidim* doing and not doing during this fast?

What do you think is the symbolism of fasting as a response to drought?

Rabbi Dr. Julia Watts Belser explores the symbolism of rain fasts in her book [Power, Ethics, and Ecology in Jewish Late Antiquity: Rabbinic Responses to Drought and Disaster \(pp.123\):](#)

The communal fast serves as a form of “truth-telling” by which the community makes manifest the seriousness of their situation. When the community fasts, it anticipates and experiences something of the crisis to come. During the fast, the community enacts and embodies the danger of drought, mapping religious and ecological crisis onto the body. The fasting body becomes a physical site for expressing the physical and spiritual dangers of rain’s absence. Drought will bring famine if left unchecked; it will cause the earth to wither and [her] inhabitants to starve. By deliberately going without food and water while food still remains available, the community highlights the urgency of the crisis, cultivating intentional hunger as a deliberate rehearsal of the starvation that prolonged drought will bring.

According to Rabbi Dr. Belser, what is the symbolism of fasting for rain?

Have you ever “mapped a crisis” onto your body, or known someone who has?
What has been the impact on you, on others, on society?

The next two mishnayot describe increasing intensity of fasts, in the case where rain still does not come.



Mishna Ta'anit 1:5

If the New Moon of Kislev* arrived and rain has still not fallen, the court decrees three fasts on the entire community (tzibbur). Similar to the individual fasts, everyone may eat and drink after dark, and they are permitted to engage in the performance of work, in bathing, in smearing one's body with oil, in wearing shoes, and in conjugal relations.

**13 days later. It has now been 38 days since the expected start of the rainy season.*

ה) הגיע ראש חודש כסלו ולא ירדו גשמים,
בית דין גוזרין שלש תעניות על הצבור.
אוקלין ושותין משחשכה, ומתרין במלאכה
וברחיצה ובסיכה ובנעילת הסנדל ובתשמיש
המטה:

These mishnayot offer us two categories of people who respond to drought: The y'chidim (individuals, perhaps communal leaders), and the tzibbur (entire community). The y'chidim respond first, and if that does not work, the tzibbur starts fasting. Reflecting on your own reckoning with the climate crisis, which category of people do you identify with?

If you were among those who have felt the urgency of the climate crisis for years, what is it like for you now that many more people are alarmed and activated?

If your climate awakening happened more recently, what is your experience?

Mishna Ta'anit 1:7

If these fasts have passed and they have not been answered the court does not decree additional fasts, but the entire community observes the customs of mourning. They decrease their engagement in business transactions, in building and planting, in betrothals and marriages, and in greetings between each person and his fellow, like people who have been rebuked by God. The individuals, i.e., Torah scholars, resume fasting every Monday and Thursday until the month of Nisan ends. After this date they no longer pray for rain, since if Nisan has ended and rains subsequently fall, they are a sign of a curse...

עברו אלו ולא נענו, ממעטין במשא ומתן,
בבנין ובנטיעה, בארוסין ובנשואין ובשאלת
שלום בין אדם לחברו, כבני אדם הנזופין
למקום. היחידים חוזרים ומתענים עד שייצא
ניסן. יצא ניסן ולא ירדו גשמים, סימן
קללה...



As we have experienced during the pandemic, there are two conflicting needs during a prolonged communal crisis: The need to address the crisis, and the need for people to engage in daily life and essential work. How does Mishna Ta'anit balance these needs?

How do you balance these conflicting needs in your own life when it comes to Covid?
How about when it comes to the climate crisis?

Using Dr. Rabbi Belser language, how do you “highlight the urgency of the [climate] crisis” today? Do you dream of doing more? What stands in your way?
What support do you need?

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*Text study by Rabbi Shoshana Meira Friedman, Dayenu's Rabbinic Ambassador,
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