



Month of Av

*“There is nothing
more whole than
a broken heart.”*

—Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk

THEMES OF AV

- *Destruction, sadness, mourning*
- *Love and dancing*
- *Transforming from broken to whole*
- *Honoring pain and the female body*

SPIRITUAL ELEMENTS OF AV

Buckle up, y'all - we're headed for Av, the most emotionally intense month of the Hebrew year.

The first half is all about mourning and grief, culminating in Tisha B'Av, the saddest day of the year for Jews. Soon after, things shift dramatically. Av's second half turns to serious celebration with Tu B'Av, aka Jewish Love Day, which brings warmth, sparkles, and wild dancing.

You ready for this? Because we're strapped in to front row seats on Av's rollercoaster. This month, we're gonna feel all the feels. The drops and twisty turns are okay, great even. All roller coaster rides lead to growth. *If* we can remember to meet our intense emotions with calm awareness and connection to the inner self, that is. During Av, as heat continues to radiate through these longest days of the year, it's on us to stay present, grounded, and non-reactive.

Av invites us to practice living as the best version of ourselves, even and especially during a time when our emotions run high.



The Holidays of Av

TISHA B'AV

Nine days after the New Moon of Av, we commemorate the destruction of the Holy Temples in Jerusalem. The First Temple crumbled on Tisha B'Av (which translates directly to "the ninth day of the month of Av") in 586 BCE at the hands of the Babylonians. The Second Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. Yes, as cosmic coincidence would have it, both Temples were destroyed on Tisha B'Av, hundreds of years apart. Tisha B'Av also marks a number of other unfortunate events in Jewish history¹, which is how it earned its name as the saddest, heaviest day of the Jewish year.

When it stood, The Temple was the Jewish people's holiest place. Today in Jerusalem, The Temple's exterior walls still stand; one is famously known as the Western, or Wailing Wall. For thousands of years, Jews from all over the world made pilgrimages to visit this wall. And Jews in diaspora have (those not living in Jerusalem) traditionally turn their hearts and feet in the direction of this holy wall during specific prayers to better connect with each other and the Divine.

The Divine famously commands the Israelites to "Make me a Sanctuary and I will dwell within/among you" (Exodus 25:8). That building wasn't only a dwelling place for the Divine's presence; The Temple itself acted as a metaphor for the Divine's presence in the world. Within its walls, one could open a direct connection from the physical to the spiritual plane. And when those walls crashed down, it is said that the Divine went into hiding, in diaspora with the rest of the Jewish people.

According to the beliefs of the kabbalah², all the pain and the suffering in the world comes from the rift between the Divine and the physical realms that came into existence when The Temple's walls burned. This destruction also tore apart individuals and communities and thus from that higher, interconnected Oneness that rules the cosmos. Kabbalah says our work in life is to tirelessly work to repair that divide.

WHAT DOES THE MESS OF TISHA B'AV HAVE TO DO WITH MY WELLNESS?

Jewish sages offer a teaching that the Holy Temple was a mirror for our human bodies. Like the structure of The Temple, our bodies are vehicles to house the *neshama*, the soul, which is the Divine essence humans carry within. The Temple's destruction can also be taken as a metaphor for the chasm we create between our bodies and our souls. At The Well is hard at work to help reestablish this important connection between our physical forms and the Divine spark that we each harbor within.

HONORING TISHA B'AV

Traditionally, this day of mourning is marked with a fast, and by reciting ancient tragic poetry (along with any and all other expressions of deep sorrow and grief). Regardless of how you choose to observe Tisha B'Av, pay attention! You might notice yourself a bit more reactive, short tempered, and generally low today³. Listening and finding time to be reflective might help you make it through this cosmically and emotionally charged moment.

One thing you might do on Tisha B'Av: Meditate on the disconnectedness we as individuals feel from our bodies, souls, and communities. Each of us is a bit broken. Often, we run away from that reality because it can be hard to acknowledge the lack of personal harmony our brokenness reveals. This month, don't run or distract yourself from this. Allow yourself to feel all your feelings, look clearly and squarely at your disharmonies, and do so without blaming yourself, or anyone else.

1. Historically, tough things that have happened on Tisha B'Av include: The capture of Bethar, the final defeat of Bar Kokhba's rebellion against the Romans, the Romans' destruction of Jerusalem, King Edward I's signing of the edict that the Jews of England had to leave the country, the Jews' expulsion from Spain, and the start of World War I. Yikes. Was Tisha B'Av good for the Jews? Not so much.

2. A mystical, esoteric, and hip strain of Jewish spiritual thought. Yes, Madonna did study it that one time — that's how we heard about it when our Hebrew School teachers never mentioned the text before!

3. Tisha B'Av begins at sundown on July 31st this year on the Roman calendar.

TU B'AV

Just when you thought the heaviness was too thick to bear, and the deep sadness was too much, Tu B'Av rolls around, sometimes referred to as Jewish Valentine's Day⁴. It's an old trick of the Hebrew calendar — pump up the contrast. This time, we flow straight from the saddest time of the year into one of the happiest.

The celebration of Tu B'Av rolls around on the full moon of Av⁵. According to ancient custom, women dress all in white and run out and dance all night under the full moon, flaunting their moves for prospective mates and celebrating love at the best lunar dance party there ever was. Apparently, many marriages got their starts on Tu B'Av, when people joined together, found joy, and got a lil' freaky.

The Hebrew calendar is beautifully designed. Summer builds in heat, intensity, and light...and then boils over in grief. Then comes a respite to laugh, smile, dance, and play in the moonlight.

The first half of the Av, when the moon is waxing, is a time to delve deep into the innermost corners of the soul, to the dark places in which we know the Divine dwells.

During this time, we feel the brokenness in the world and investigate how it shows up inside of ourselves. After that hard work, the tides turn. It's time to love and celebrate joyously. Let laughter flood your heart.

Why do these holidays, so opposite in nature, come in such close proximity to one another? Well first off, Jewish teachings says there's always light in the darkness and, in the case of these summer months, darkness in the light.

Jewish spiritual heritage also says that in order to feel whole, we must know what it is to feel broken. We experience the brokenness of our souls, meet it with courage, acceptance, and humility, and turn that knowledge into something beautiful, unbreakable, and bright.

As high contrast, the second half of the Av is about meeting the souls of others. All is revealed: It's the inner work of the first half of the month that allows us to be better partners in the exterior world. Because we've encountered the innermost regions of our own hearts, we can offer more empathy, connection, and ease in our love of others.

A photograph of a man and a woman in a field of tall, golden grass. They are seen from behind, looking towards the horizon. The woman is on the left, and the man is on the right. They appear to be in a romantic or contemplative pose. The lighting is warm, suggesting late afternoon or early morning.

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4. To be fair to Judaism, Tu B'Av actually predates Valentine's Day.

5. This year, the full moon shines on August 6th on the Roman calendar..

WHAT WOULD BIBLICAL WOMEN DO

Tisha B'Av and the Female Body

This section is based on a conversation with Dr. Melanie Landau and on Dr. Landau's piece "[For Tisha B'Av, A Feminist Reading of Lamentations](#)."

Jews are deep in it with the written word and with books. True to form, on the holiday of Tisha B'Av, the saddest day of the year, Jews read the Book of Lamentations, a collection of poems that speaks bleakly of mourning, loss, and lament emanating from the destruction of the Temple. The Book of Lamentations is dark; its imagery intends to unsettle the reader. For our purposes, one passage in particular is worth investigation.

LAMENTATIONS CHAPTER 1, VERSE 8-9:

*Sinning she sinned, Jerusalem.
For this an outcast / niddah⁶ she became.
All who honor her despise her,
for they saw her nakedness.
Also her, she is moaning,
turned around backward.
9. Her blood / tum'ah (spiritual impurity) in her skirts,
she didn't remember her end after,
she descended wondrously.
There is no comforter for her.
God, see my poverty, my humiliation,
For an enemy became great.*

At first glance, it might be upsetting to see the functions of the female body employed as a metaphor for the shame and humiliation associated with the destruction of the Temples.

Well Circle Activity: Witness Your Pain

During this month's Well Circle, set aside time to witness each other. Take turns being open and honest about your relationship to your female body. What has your journey been like? When have you felt connected and proud? Ashamed and humiliated? When has your relationship with your physicality been harder?

As a people, the Jews were "naked" and exposed. Is the evocation of menstruation merely an offensive appropriation of a uniquely female bodily function? Or, could we perhaps interpret it as a way to address the reality of the history of oppression of the female body?

How many women on this planet have been sexually violated, through word or deed? How many women felt the humiliation and shame and ascribed those emotions to being female? As we grew from girls into women, how many of us lost connections to ourselves as our bodies changed, becoming ever more convinced that our self worth is inextricably bound up with our physical attractiveness? How many of us have endured eating disorders, mental unwellness, and distortions of our abilities because of the stigmas associated with the female body? How many of us have needed to recover from the generational heaviness of repression and disgust related to menstruation? The relationships women have to their bodies can be painful in myriad ways. As painful, perhaps, as watching one's holiest sanctuary burn to the ground.

Perhaps this year on Tisha B'Av, you'll take the opportunity to tap into the weight of what it has been like to be in relationship to yourself and to the womanhood on Earth.

As individuals and as a collective, women know suffering. But what follows suffering? Healing, redemption, and rebuilding. As At The Well continues to work towards helping women heal and awaken, together we learn to pay attention to our bodies, to love them, and to reclaim the amazing power they hold. Together, with love, we rebuild.

When has it been easier? What caused it to change? Make sure to listen deeply, to witness compassionately, and hold space for each other through the work of rebuilding the holy temples of our own bodies.

6. One element of the Jewish laws of spiritual purity. Niddah refers to the physical status of a menstruator during or immediately after they have bled from their uterus, most commonly during menstruation. The term translates literally to "excommunication," "exclusion," or "isolation." Traditionally, a menstruating, married woman refrains from touching her husband during the length of menstruation and for seven days after.

This poem was submitted by Lena Walker. Lena is honored to be a part of the At the Well community. She works in education and is passionate about textile and literary arts. Brooklyn is her home. She's looking for the moon from there.

DOWNHEARTED

By Ada Limon

*Six horses died in a tractor-trailer fire.
There. That's the hard part. I wanted
to tell you straight away so we could
grieve together. So many sad things,
that's just one on a long recent list
that loops and elongates in the chest,
in the diaphragm, in the alveoli. What
is it they say, heart-sick or downhearted?
I picture a heart lying down on the floor
of the torso, pulling up the blankets
over its head, thinking this pain will*

*go on forever (even though it won't).
The heart is watching Lifetime movies
and wishing, and missing all the good
parts of her that she has forgotten.
The heart is so tired of beating
herself up, she wants to stop it still,
but also she wants the blood to return,
wants to bring in the thrill and wind of the ride,
the fast pull of life driving underneath her.
What the heart wants? The heart wants
her horses back.*



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HEART MEDITATION FOR AV

Leora Fridman (the creator of this guided meditation) is an interdisciplinary artist, ritualist, and educator living in the Bay Area. Find out more at leorafridman.com.

Sit quietly, and close your eyes if you feel comfortable doing so. If you don't want to close your eyes, just keep your gaze soft and gentle. Scan through your body, just noticing what's there right now. Are there any points of tension, tenderness, calm or numbness? What is your breath like right now? Just feel what's there from your head to your fingertips, from your belly to your toes.

After you've scanned for a few moments, bring your attention to the center of your chest, to your heart space. What do you feel there? What do you notice? Warmth or coolness, numbness or tightness? Whatever's there is okay.

Keeping your attention at your heart space, imagine there's a small fire at the center of your chest, your heart fire, the fire of your capacity for connection, intimacy and compassion. Picture that small bonfire in the center of your chest. With each in breath, watch the fire rise, and with each out breath imagine you're blowing on the fire gently, giving it oxygen, feeding it. Breathe in, watch the fire rise. Breathe out, blow on it gently to feed it. Do this for a few moments, keeping your attention on

the fire and allowing it to build or shrink as it may.

Keeping the fire in your chest, bring to mind one thing that's hard for you or for someone you love right now, and bring it into your chest. Let it sit by the fire. Know that this fire is the fire of compassion, intimacy, care, and love. Whatever you bring to the fire of love is fuel for that fire – it only creates more love, more compassion. Let the hardship meet the fire and be transformed into compassion, compassion for you or someone you love, compassion for the suffering that is around us. You can bring whatever you want to the fire. Whatever you bring there is transformed into compassion and love. Breathe in and out, watching what happens to the fire as you bring hardship there, as you bring breath there, as you focus on the fire.

In the last few moments, you can let the fire die down. There's no need to bring effort to it; just observe. Before you open your eyes to consider Av with your circle, feel what's there in the center of your chest. Let it accompany you as you dive into this month of loss and love. Whether you notice it or not, your heart fire will be here.



LITTLE RITUALS OF MINDFUL LOVING

Rabbi Callie Schulman contributed this Av ritual practice. She is dedicated to the work of living in alignment with one's gifts. She is Associate Rabbi at Temple De Hirsch Sinai in Seattle, WA. For more of Callie's work and writing visit www.rabbicallie.com.

In an effort to make sense of the destruction of The Temple, the ancient rabbis do what the Jewish people have done for centuries: they tell a story. The story of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza⁷ tells the tale of two men, too full of pride to stop their hatred for each other from resulting in a national disaster. The hatred begins with a petty feud, and escalates from there as one wronged party uses his power to feed lies to the governing Romans, which spurs them to destroy the Temple. The rabbis teach that "senseless hatred" seeded this

evil. It was a seed that took root and bloomed into the fires of destruction which ultimately razed the Second Temple to the ground.

When The Temple stood, it was considered to be the meeting place between humans and the Divine.⁸ Later kabbalists, mystics who set out to find the Divine in a world without the Temple, came to understand that human beings, not any man-made structure, are the place where heaven and earth kiss. When faced with senseless hatred, it's our job to remember that our very bodies are vessels for holiness. During Av in particular, we hold in our hearts the reality that our actions can either facilitate Divine Love, or unleash the destructive powers of senseless hatred.

Design your own Ritual for Mindful Loving

Ritual helps us navigate the ephemeral and makes concrete that which is theoretical, or passing. We use what I would call Big Ritual to guide us through life's major milestone events (beginnings, endings, transitions, death, etc.). We use ritual to ground us in the present moment and to make significant that which would otherwise be fleeting. There's power in those big moments of shift, but perhaps an even more potent power in elevating mundane, day-to-day tasks from routine to Ritual.

In this exercise, we'll uncover power of the Little Rituals that we already do on a daily basis in order to grow in love (of the self and others) so that there's no place for the destructive power of senseless hatred in our minds or bodies.

1. Sit with a partner and take turns describing the unfolding of an average day in your life.

- *Make particular note of anything that you do on a daily basis (brushing your teeth, making the bed, preparing food, walking the dog), the more mundane the better.*

2. Partners will then ask the following questions:

- *With what attitude do you typically approach these tasks?*
- *How do you feel on days when you forget, or otherwise aren't able to complete these tasks?*
- *If you could get rid of one of these tasks per day, which would it be?*
- *If you could luxuriate in/take your time with one of these tasks, which would it be?*

3. Partners offer help in reflecting upon which of these daily routines could be elevated from "task" to "Little Ritual" for the month of Av. Some thoughts to consider as you choose:

- *Which of these tasks is particularly grounding (helps me get out of my head and into my body)?*
- *Which is particularly softening (helps me to relax and ease up on the controls)?*
- *Which helps me be more loving to myself (bonus points if mind, body, and soul are more easily aligned within one particular task.)*
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4. RITUALIZE IT:

Every day, for the month of Av, turn this task into a ritual. Do it with regularity and with the care you would afford a Big Ritual. You might want to consider a sensory change to your space as well (dim or brighten the lights, burn some incense, play some soft music, make music of your own). At the end of Av, we begin preparations for the High Holy Days. Let this month of Little Rituals ground and expand your heart center as you navigate the rocky emotional terrain of Av. Making a Little Ritual will help you increase your love of yourself and others, and better prepare you for the soul-accounting to come with the next New Moon.

7. Talmud Bavli, Gittin 55b - For all our scholarsess.

8. Ribner, Melinda Kabbalah Month by Month (Jossey-Bass, 2002) p.271



RECIPE

Destruction Almond Oat Clusters

Sofi Pechner devised this recipe. She is a Bay Area native currently completing her training as a natural chef in Berkeley. She is passionate about creating nutritious and delicious foods and capturing them in a creative way with her camera.

With all this talk of sadness, sometimes you just wanna curl up on the couch and eat a box of cookies to mask the pain. But we all know cookies don't heal brokenness, or help us transform. That said, cookies do have their moments; a good cookie can throw off some real sparks of joy. Taking both cookie realities into account, we've created a cookie at the crossroads: tasty enough to take the the edge off destruction, and healthy enough to keep your Holy Temple running on pure love.

These cookies are packed with protein and perfect for a hike or afternoon pick-me-up. The almonds and flax seeds are high in omega-3 fatty acids and the dark chocolate is high in antioxidants. These cookies can easily be made vegan by using an egg substitute, and they're already gluten free! This recipe yields about 32 cookies.

Enjoy!

Ingredients

1 1/2 cup oats (1 cup ground into flour, 1/2 cup whole oats)	2 teaspoons cinnamon
1/2 cup almond meal	1/2 teaspoon salt
1/2 cup almonds, chopped	1/2 teaspoon baking soda
1/4 cup coconut sugar	1/2 teaspoon baking powder
1/4 cup shredded coconut	2 eggs, beaten
1/4 cup dark chocolate, chopped	1/4 cup almond butter
1/4 cup pumpkin seeds, chopped	1/4 cup coconut oil, melted
2 tablespoons flax seeds	1/4 cup maple syrup
	1 teaspoon vanilla

Preparation

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Combine the dry ingredients in a bowl to mix. In another bowl, combine the wet ingredients and stir to incorporate. Pour the wet ingredients into the dry ingredients and mix until fully combined. Scoop 1 tablespoon portions of the cookie dough onto a parchment-lined baking sheet, spacing the cookies 2-3 inches apart. Bake for 10-13 minutes, until the bottoms are golden brown. Let cool before eating. YUM!



GET CREATIVE, GET EXPRESSIVE:

A Love Letter to Yourself

The following activity was submitted by Zo Flamenbaum, a Jersey girl gone Tel Aviv. Zo founded School of Shine, a wellness community for women dedicated to developing inner strength and infusing positive habits for happier, healthier days. Zo believes every woman is powerful in her own way – if only she learns to believe it. Find Zo at <http://www.schoolofshine.com>.

ABOUT LOVE

Love. The greatest experience of all, meant to be explored every day. From best friends to lovers and everyone in between, we spend so much time and energy *giving* love. And sure, we women are GREAT at nurturing others; but we often forget, avoid, or neglect to do a pretty important thing: love ourselves.

No matter your age, place, race or space, you are amazing, capable, special, wise, and caring, even if you suffer from the worldwide epidemic many women struggle to overcome: never feeling good enough.

The truth is that you are exactly enough. You are enough of everything in this very moment. You need nothing else, except of course to **believe and accept** your ‘enoughness’ as truth. Because once you allow these feelings to pulse from within you, you’ll find that you are, in fact, a source of powerful love.

Today, take love into your own hands – and heart – and show some love to yourself, sister!

You effin’ deserve it.

ABOUT THE TASK

When we express ourselves through writing, we get the chance to put our heart on paper. We tap into our deepness and exhale with words.

Words are powerful. How we speak to ourselves is important and often we’re pretty nasty and mean to ourselves, in shorthand and privately inside our own heads. Writing yourself a love letter is a great place to BYOB. Yes, a bottle of wine can help you get lovey dovey, but in this case, BYOB stands for something different: “Be Your Own Bestie.” This exercise offers an opportunity to treat yourself like you would your best friend – with unconditional support and kindness.

WHAT TO DO

Get out a piece of paper and a pen.

Complete this task by yourself or in your Av Well Circle. After you write yourself a love letter, seal these letters tight and read them at the next gathering (or at every gathering!). You could also carry the letter with you and read it whenever you need an instant boost of love. Another option: trade your envelope with a partner and promise to mail it to each other in the next couple of months.

PROMPTS FOR YOU

- *Darling dearest YOU,*
- *I’m writing because...*
- *I love you because...*
- *I appreciate you because...*
- *I am proud of you because...*
- *You should feel accomplished because...*
- *___ makes me feel happy because...*
- *You are fucking awesome because...*
- *You are beautiful because...*
- *You are unlike anyone else because...*
- *I’m thankful to you because...*
- *What I wish for you is...*
- *Let’s make a date to...*

JUST IN CASE

If you feel hesitant to write to yourself, or find this show of love challenging, here are a few ways to jumpstart your self-love.

- Gaze into your eyes in the mirror for 5 minutes.
- Take as long as you need to sit still and connect with your heartbeat.
- Pretend you’re your own secret admirer. Or, channel your inner best friend.



Personal Journal Questions:

- If your tears could speak, what would they say that they cry for?
- What's the biggest heartbreak of your life? How did it feel? How did you find wholeness in your heart again after?
- How was the past month of Tammuz?
- What's the hardest thing about love? What is the hardest thing about self-love?
- What is wholeness to you?
- What's your relationship to your menstrual cycle and to bleeding?
- How do you understand the connection between destruction and love?

SARAH'S INTENTION

A little window into why I share a personal intention: I hope that you are using this material within your Well Circle. I hope that you find spaces to be seen and heard and that you take time to see others. I cannot, however, expect you all to be truly vulnerable unless I first show my vulnerability. This is why every month I open myself up and pour a little piece of my heart out to you all. Thank you for seeing me.

I see my body as whole and holy temple. Its cycles are reflected in nature and in the calendar system of my ancestors. My teachers show me that my body, like The Holy Temple itself, houses something bigger, something closer to the Oneness that unites us all. Because I contain this spark, one of my life practices is to treat myself kindly and with love, no matter where I am in my cycle. Practicing self-compassion is one of the ways I bring healthiness and holiness together.

This Jewish wisdom of brokenness within completeness a powerful notion. In Jewish tradition, there are intentionally designed moments for joy, and intentionally designed moments of sadness. Sometimes I'm happy, sometimes I'm sad, sometimes I have a tightness in my chest. Sometimes I feel an ecstatic current of energy beaming out my body – combined, these feelings and bodily experiences comprise the totality of my human experience.

Jewish wisdom also teaches that there's an inherent brokenness to the world that we must work towards repairing. I think that statement isn't trying to say that WE are broken, or even The Temple is destroyed forever, but that what we DO with our lives

matters. For all my Torah geeks out there, you know that Talmud talks about how it was the Jewish people who sinned against each other and destroyed their own Temple, their own selves, and their own relationships to each other. That means what we say, how we act, even in the smallest moments, what we learn, and the way we think about our relationship to our health and wellness all matter. Enormously. Let's not destroy ourselves again.

In Av, this month of extreme sadness and abundant love, I'm thinking about what it means for me to acknowledge all the different parts of myself and still treat myself with compassion. I'm thinking about the brokenness arising from centuries of oppression of the female body and what my work to heal this brokenness looks like. I'm looking at the destruction I inflict on my own self and working to reframe my internal conversations.

My duty as a Jew is to work towards the repairing of the brokenness of the world. You might know this teaching as Tikkun Olam. This repairing starts with the work we do to repair ourselves.

I'm very proud of what At The Well does to move the world towards wholeness, and how we as a community are able to support each other in our holiness. I feel whole knowing that this is not a solo endeavor – thousands of others around the world are holding each other; we're doing this together. I'm right here with you.

These resources were created by powerful thinkers and writers. We stand on their shoulders:

Landau, Melanie. "For Tisha B'Av, A Feminist Reading of Lamentations." My Jewish Learning, 22 July 2015. Web. 05 July 2017.

Ribner, Melinda. *Kabbalah Month by Month*. Jossey Bass. New York. 2002.

Based on the Teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe Courtesy Of MeaningfulLife.com. "The Dancing Maidens of Jerusalem." Chabad.org, n.d. Web. 13 July 2017.

