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## Stories with a Twist [300]

**...as not to embarrass one who did not have...**  
Insights into Mishna Ta'anit 4:8 & Babylonian Talmud Ta'anit 31a



### Background to Our Story

#### Tu B'Av



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tu\\_B%27Av](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tu_B%27Av)

Tu B'Av (Hebrew: ט"ו באב, lit. 'fifteenth of Av') is a minor Jewish holiday. In modern-day Israel, it is celebrated as a holiday of love (חג האהבה - חַג האַהַבָּה). It has been said to be an auspicious day for weddings.

#### **Historical significance**

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According to the Mishna, Tu B'Av was a joyous holiday in the days of the Temple in Jerusalem, marking the beginning of the grape harvest. Yom Kippur marked the end of the grape harvest. On both dates the unmarried girls of Jerusalem dressed in white garments, and went out to dance in the vineyards. That same section in the Talmud states that there were no holy days as happy for the Jews as Tu B'Av and Yom Kippur. The holiday celebrated the wood-offering brought in the Temple (see Nehemiah 13:31). Josephus refers to it as the Feast of Xylophory ("Wood-bearing").

Various reasons for celebrating on Tu B'Av are cited by the Talmud and Talmudic commentators:

- While the Israelites wandered in the desert for forty years, female orphans without brothers could only marry within their tribe to prevent their father's inherited territory in the Land of Israel from passing on to other tribes, following the incident of the Daughters of Zelophehad. After the conquest and division of Canaan under Joshua, this ban was lifted on the fifteenth of Av and inter-tribal marriage was allowed.
- That same year, the last of the generation of the sin of the spies, which had been forbidden to enter the Promised Land, found that they were not destined to die. For forty years, every Tisha B'Av night, the Jews made graves for themselves in which they slept on Tisha B'Av; every year a proportion of them died. In the 40th year, the fifteen

thousand who had remained from the first generation went to sleep in the graves and woke up the next day to their surprise. Thinking they made a mistake with the date, they did this until they reached Tu B'Av and saw a full moon. Only then did they know they were going to enter the Land of Israel with the new generation.

- The Tribe of Benjamin was allowed to intermarry with the other tribes after the incident of the Concubine of Gibeah (see Judges chapters 19–21).
- Cutting of the wood for the main altar in the Temple was completed for the year.
- King Hoshea of the northern kingdom removed the sentries on the road leading to Jerusalem, allowing the ten tribes to once again have access to the Temple.
- The nights, traditionally the ideal time for Torah study, are lengthened again after the summer solstice, permitting more study.
- The Roman occupiers permitted burial of the victims of the massacre at Bethar during the Bar Kochba rebellion. Miraculously, the bodies had not decomposed, despite exposure to the elements for over a year.

### **Modern times**

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Tu B'Av marks an informal "high" to counter the "low" of The Three Weeks leading up to Tisha B'Av. Tu B'Av does not have many established religious rituals associated with its celebration. However Tachanun is not said—either at mincha the day before or on the day itself—and a bride and groom traditionally do not fast if their wedding falls on Tu B'Av.<sup>1</sup>

In modern times, it has become a romantic Jewish holiday, even among secular Jews who mostly see it as the Jewish equivalent of Valentine's Day, and has been said to be a "great day for weddings, commitment ceremonies, renewal of vows, or proposing". Also, "It is a day for romance, explored through singing, dancing, giving flowers, and studying."

### **Yichus**



<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yichus>

Yichus (יחוס *yichus*), a Hebrew-based Yiddish word meaning "lineage". In some past and present Jewish communities, good *yichus* - meaning descent from a family of high reputation - is necessary for a person to be considered as a potential marriage partner.

### **Order of English Noble Titles**

- King/Queen
  - Prince/Princess
    - Duke/Duchess
      - Marquess/Marchioness
        - Earl/Countess
          - Viscount/Viscountess
            - Baron/Baroness

### **Who is Who in the Yichus Ladder?**

- King

- High Priest
  - Deputy High Priest
    - Priest Anointed for War
      - Common Priest
        - Levites
          - Israel

### **Babylonian Talmud Nedarim 66a**

“The daughters of Israel are pretty, but poverty makes them ugly.”

**?** What do you think about the above statement? Do you think poverty can make someone ugly? If so, how?

### **The Text: Mishna Ta’anit 4:8 & Babylonian Talmud Ta’anit 31a**

#### **Mishna Ta’anit 4:8**

אָמַר רַבִּן שְׁמַעוֹן בֶּן גַּמְלִיאֵל: לֹא הָיוּ יָמִים טוֹבִים לְיִשְׂרָאֵל כַּחַמְשָׁה עָשָׂר בְּאָב וּכְיוֹם הַכַּפּוּרִים, שְׁבִיחַן בָּנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַיִם יוֹצְאוֹת בְּכָלֵי לֶבֶן שְׂאוּלֵינוּ, שְׁלֹא לְבַיִישׁ אֶת מִי שְׂאִין לוֹ. כָּל הַכֹּלִים טְעוּנִין טְבִילָה. וּבָנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַיִם יוֹצְאוֹת וְחוֹלוֹת בְּכָרְמִים. וּמָה הָיוּ אוֹמְרוֹת? בְּחוֹר! שָׂא נָא עֵינֶיךָ וּרְאֵה מָה אֲתָה בּוֹרֵר לָךְ. אַל תִּתֵּן עֵינֶיךָ בְּנוֹי. תֵּן עֵינֶיךָ בְּמִשְׁפָּחָה. “שִׁקֵּר הַחַן, וְהַבֵּל הַיָּפִי, אִשָּׁה יִרְאֵת הִיא תִתְהַלֵּל.” וְאוֹמֵר: “תָּנוּ לָהּ מִפְּרֵי יָדֶיהָ, וַיִּהְלֹוּהָ בְּשָׁעָרִים מְעֻשִׂיהָ.”

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said: There were no days as joyous for the Jewish people as the fifteenth of Av and as Yom Kippur, as on them the daughters of Jerusalem would go out in white clothes, borrowed so as not to embarrass one who did not have her own white garments.

All the garments that the women borrowed require immersion, as those who previously wore them might have been ritually impure.

And the daughters of Jerusalem would go out and dance in the vineyards. And what would they say? Young man, please lift up your eyes and see what you choose for yourself for a wife. Do not set your eyes toward beauty, but set your eyes toward a good family, as the verse states: “Grace is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised” (Proverbs 31:30), and it further says: “Give her the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates” (Proverbs 31:31).

## Babylonian Talmud Ta'anit 31a

תָּנוּ רַבָּנַן: בַּת מֶלֶךְ שׁוֹאֵלֶת מִבֵּית פֶּהָן גָּדוֹל, בַּת פֶּהָן גָּדוֹל מִבֵּית סָגָן, וּבַת סָגָן מִבֵּית מִשׁוּחַ מַלְחָמָה, וּבַת מִשׁוּחַ מַלְחָמָה מִבֵּית פֶּהָן הַדְּיוּט, וְכָל יִשְׂרָאֵל שׁוֹאֲלִין זֶה מִזֶּה, כְּדִי שְׂלֵא יִתְבַּיֵּישׁ אֶת מִי שְׂאִין לוֹ.

The Sages taught: The daughter of the king borrows white garments from the daughter of the High Priest; the daughter of the High Priest borrows from the daughter of the deputy High Priest; the daughter of the deputy High Priest borrows from the daughter of the priest anointed for war, i.e., the priest who would read verses of Torah and address the army as they prepared for battle; the daughter of the priest anointed for war borrows from the daughter of a common priest; and all the Jewish people borrow from each other. Why would they all borrow garments? They did this so as not to embarrass one who did not have her own white garments.

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”בָּנוֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל יוֹצְאוֹת וְחוֹלוֹת בְּכַרְמִים.”

תָּנָא: מִי שְׂאִין לוֹ אִשָּׁה נִפְנָה לְשָׂם.

”מִיּוֹחֲסוֹת שִׁבְהָן הָיוּ אוֹמְרוֹת: בְּחוֹר”, וְכוּ’.

תָּנוּ רַבָּנַן: יְפִיפִיּוֹת שִׁבְהָן מָה הָיוּ אוֹמְרוֹת? תָּנוּ עֵינֵיכֶם לְיוֹפֵי, שְׂאִין הָאִשָּׁה אֶלָּא לְיוֹפֵי.

מִיּוֹחֲסוֹת שִׁבְהָן מָה הָיוּ אוֹמְרוֹת? תָּנוּ עֵינֵיכֶם לְמִשְׁפָּחָה, לְפִי שְׂאִין הָאִשָּׁה אֶלָּא לְבָנִים.

מְכוּעָרוֹת שִׁבְהָם מָה הָיוּ אוֹמְרוֹת? קָחוּ מִקְחָכֶם לְשׁוּם שָׂמִים, וּבְלִבְדֵי שְׂתַעֲטְרוּנוּ בְּזֵהוּבִים.

The mishna also stated that the daughters of the Jewish people would go out and dance in the vineyards.

A *tanna* taught: One who did not have a wife would turn to there to find one.

It is taught that those women of distinguished lineage among them would say: Young man, please lift up your eyes and see what you choose for a wife.

The Sages taught: What would the beautiful women among them say? Set your eyes toward beauty, as a wife is only for her beauty.

What would those of distinguished lineage among them say? Set your eyes toward family, as a wife is only for children, and the children of a wife from a distinguished family will inherit her lineage.

What would the ugly ones among them say? Acquire your purchase for the sake of Heaven, provided that you adorn us with golden jewelry after our marriage to beautify us.



**Explaining the Story** - What is going on in our story? (Explain the sequence of events)

### Comprehension and Analysis Questions

**Bonus ?** What was the goal of the daughters of Jerusalem who went to dance in the vineyards on the 15<sup>th</sup> of Av? How do we know that this was their goal?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

**?** Why would the daughters of Jerusalem go out with white borrowed clothes?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

**Bonus ?** Why do you think the Sages decreed that all the garments required immersion?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

**?** Who do you think the daughters of Jerusalem were who said: *"Young man, please lift up your eyes and see what you choose for yourself for a wife. Do not set your eyes toward beauty, but set your eyes toward a good family"*?

**Bonus ?** Why wouldn't the daughters of Jerusalem borrow clothes from someone higher than them on the yichus ladder?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

**Bonus ?** Why would the daughters of Jerusalem borrow clothes from someone immediately below them in the yichus ladder?

Note: Ordinarily, one borrows from someone of a higher economic and social status. In this case, however, the Sages arranged that the daughter of a man of higher status should borrow from the daughter of someone of lower status, so that nobody would be embarrassed to borrow and everyone would be dressed in similar clothing (*Sefat Emet*).

**Extra Bonus ?** Why do you think this system of borrowing clothes worked out well?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

**Bonus ?** What do beauty and lineage have in common?

**?** What did the ugly women mean by saying “Acquire your purchase for the sake of Heaven”?

**Bonus ?** Why did the ugly women mention golden jewelry in their request?

### **“The Twist” – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from These Texts**

! J-Date Talmudic style: a delicate balance between power and kindness.



The Mishnaic society, not unlike ours, was not an egalitarian one. Young women, as well as their parents, were pretty much aware of their place in the *yichus ladder* of their time. Family lineage, wealth, and beauty played an important role in arranged marriages and young women could do very little to change their inherited circumstances.

Understanding the unfairness of the “marriage market” (which is related to the “unfairness of life”), the leadership of the Jewish people 2000 years ago instituted a dating system, albeit limited and imperfect, to give opportunities to every young woman -and young man- to build a family and find happiness.

The system –the dance in the vineyards with borrowed white clothes- worked out well because the pretty, rich, and well connected young women themselves bought into it, and into the paramount importance of kindness and compassion in building a good thriving society; and because everybody without exception (it takes a village to generate meaningful change) was ready to give up their “advantage” by going one step down the ladder.

Last but not least, the Sages emphasize that the first one to borrow clothes is the daughter of the king, to remind us that the leadership must always lead with the example.

