

Chapter 1

1 A positive Scriptural commandment prescribes prayer and the sounding of an alarm with trumpets whenever trouble befalls the community. For when Scripture says, "Against the adversary that oppresses you, then you shall sound an alarm with the trumpets" (Num. 10:9), the meaning is: Cry out in prayer and sound an alarm against whatsoever is oppressing you, be it famine, pestilence, locusts, or the like.

2 This procedure is one of the roads to repentance, for as the community cries out in prayer and sounds an alarm when overtaken by trouble, everyone is bound to realize that evil has come upon him as a consequence of his own evil deeds, as it is written, "Your iniquities have turned away these things, and your sins have withheld good from you" (Jer. 5:25), and that his repentance will cause the trouble to be removed.

3 If, on the other hand, the people do not cry out in prayer and do not sound an alarm, but merely say that it is the way of the world for such a thing to happen to them, and that their trouble is a matter of pure chance, they have chosen a cruel path which will cause them to persevere in their evil deeds and thus bring additional troubles upon them. For when Scripture says, "But walk contrary to Me; then I will walk contrary to you in fury" (Lev. 26:27-28), the meaning is: If, when I bring trouble upon you in order to cause you to repent, you say that the trouble is purely accidental, then I will add to your trouble the fury appropriate to such an "accident."*

17 On each fast day undertaken by a community beset by troubles, the court and the elders should remain in session at the synagogue from the end of the morning service until midday, to examine into the conduct of the citizens and to remove the obstacles to righteous living provided by transgressions.

They should carefully search and inquire after those guilty of extortion and similar crimes, in order to set them apart, and those who act high-handedly, in order to humble them, and after other such matters. From midday until evening should be spent as follows: For the third quarter of the day, the Scriptural blessing and imprecations should be read, in accordance with the verse. "My son, despise not the chastening of the Lord, neither spurn His correction" (Prov. 3:11), with the lesson from the prophets consisting of admonitions having reference to the particular trouble involved. During the last quarter of the day, the afternoon service should be held and everyone, to the best of his ability, should recite supplications, cry out in prayer, and confess his sins.

Chapter 4

1 On each of the last seven fast days imposed on the whole community on account of deficiency of rain, the order of prayer used to be as follows: The Ark was taken out to the town's market place, and the whole population assembled attired in sackcloth. Ashes

were placed upon the Ark and upon the scroll of the Law, in order to intensify the weeping and humble the people's hearts. One of the people then took some of the ashes and placed them upon the head of the patriarch and upon the head of the chief member of the court, at the spot where the phylacteries are worn, to make them feel ashamed and cause them to repent. Then everyone else took some ashes and put them on his own head.

2 Thereupon, while everybody was seated, an elder scholar stood up among them—if there was no elder scholar present, a younger scholar stood up in his place; if there was neither an elder nor a younger scholar present, someone of imposing appearance stood up instead. Addressing words of exhortation to the gathering, he spoke as follows: “My brethren, neither sackcloth nor fasting is of any avail, only repentance and good deeds, as we find in the case of Nineveh, for Scripture does not say of the men of Nineveh, ‘God saw their sackcloth and their fasting,’ but ‘God saw their works’ (Jonah 3:10), and the prophet says further, ‘Rend your hearts and not your garments’ (Joel 2:13).” The speaker then added further exhortations along these lines, to the best of his ability, until he reduced his listeners’ hearts to submission and caused them to repent completely.

3 After the speaker finished his words of exhortation, they proceeded to recite the service, appointing as reader someone eligible to recite the prayers on such fast days. If the speaker who had addressed them with words of exhortation was eligible, he was deputized to act also as reader; otherwise another person was appointed.

4 Who was regarded as eligible to recite the prayers on such fast days? A person who was accustomed to reciting prayers and reading from the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings; one who had small children, yet was without means and was dependent upon his labor in the field; one whose household was free from transgression—i.e., none of whose sons, household members, relatives, or other dependents was a transgressor—and who had a blameless reputation in his youth; a person of humble disposition, and held in favor by the people, and one who understood melody and had a sweet voice. If an elder could be found with all these qualifications, he was given preference; otherwise one who was not an elder was appointed to lead the congregation in prayer, so long as he answered all these requirements.

Chapter 5

1 There are days which are observed by all Israel as fasts because tragic events happened on them, the object being to stir hearts and open the way to repentance, and to remind us of our own evil deeds, and of our fathers’ deeds which were like ours, as a consequence of which these tragic afflictions came upon them and upon us. For as we remember these things we ought to repent and do good, in accordance with the Scriptural verse, “And they shall confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers,” etc. (Lev. 26:40).

2 These fast days are the following:

1. Tishri 3rd, because Gedaliah the son of Ahikam was slain on that day, thus extinguishing the last remaining ember of Israel's independence and making her exile complete.
2. Tevet 10th, because wicked Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, invaded Jerusalem on the day, placing it under siege and in sore straits.
3. Tammuz 17th, on which five things happened: the tables of the Law were broken, the daily burnt offering ceased just before the destruction of the First Temple, the walls of Jerusalem were breached just before the destruction of the Second Temple, wicked Apostomos burned the Law and set up an idol in the Temple.
4. Av 9th, on which five things happened: the decree was issued in the wilderness that the Israelites were not to enter the Holy Land, the Temple was destroyed both the first time and the second time, a great city named Bettar was captured—it contained thousands and myriads of Israelites and had a great king whom all Israel, including the greatest scholars, thought to be the King Messiah, but he fell into the hands of the Romans who slew them all, a calamity as great as that of the destruction of the Temple—and finally, on that day predestined to misfortune, the wicked Turnus Rufus plowed up the Temple site and its surroundings, in fulfillment of the Scriptural verse, “Zion shall be plowed as a field” (Micah 3:12; Jer. 26:18).

9 . . . The practice of the pious men of old, however, was as follows: On the eve of the ninth of Av, each man in his solitude would be served with dry bread and salt, and he would dip this in water and eat it while seated between the oven, and the stove. He would wash it down with a pitcher of water, drunk in sadness, desolation, and tears, like a person seated before his dear kinsman. This procedure, or one very much like it, is the one appropriate to scholars. In all my life, I have never eaten cooked food—even cooked lentils—on the eve of the ninth of Av, unless this day was a Sabbath.

16 A person who beholds the ruined cities of Judea should say, “Your holy cities have become a wilderness” (Is. 64:9), and should rend his garment. If he beholds the ruins of Jerusalem, he should say, “Jerusalem, a desolation” (*ibid.*) and likewise rend his garment. If he beholds the ruins of the Temple, he should say, “Our holy and our beautiful house, where our fathers praised You, is burned with fire” (*ibid.* 64:10), and again rend his garments.

At what point on the approach to Jerusalem is one obliged to rend his garment? When he is past Mount Scopus. Then, when he reaches the Temple, he must rend his garment again. If, however, one comes upon the Temple first, by approaching from the direction of the wilderness, he should rend his garment first for the Temple, and then enlarge the rent for Jerusalem.

19 All the fast days mentioned above are destined to be abolished in the time of the Messiah; indeed, they are destined to be turned into festive days, days of rejoicing and gladness, in accordance with the verse, “Thus says the Lord of hosts: The fast of the fourth month, and the fast of the fifth, and the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth, shall be to the house of Judah joy and gladness, and cheerful seasons; therefore love you truth and peace” (Zech. 8:19).

