The day on which the deaths in the wilderness ceased – *יוֹם כָּלִים*:

Many commentators cite the following midrash:
Every year, on the eighth of Av, a herald proclaimed in the camp of the Jewish people in the wilderness: Let each individual dig his grave. Everyone dug his own grave and spent the night in it.

The next day, a second herald proclaimed: Let the living separate themselves from the dead, and whoever was still alive would rise up from his grave. Every year about fifteen thousand Israelites died. However, on the ninth of Av of the fortieth year, all those who had lain in a grave rose up again in the morning. At the conclusion of the period of mourning, on the fifteenth of Av, it was decreed: From this day on, no one who was supposed to die indeed perished in the wilderness.

Some explain that the holiday was instituted in commemoration of the end of the bar Kokheva revolt, the Roman emperor Hadrian issued a lengthy series of decrees against Jews and Judaism. These are the so-called decrees of apostasy that are mentioned in many places. One of those decrees was a prohibition against burying those slain in the war. These decrees were in force for at least three years, until Hadrian’s death in 138 CE. The decrees were rescinded only in the reign of the emperor following Hadrian. This dissolution, along with the general cancellation of all the decrees, was commemorated for future generations in several ways.

The speech delivered to me – *הֲרוּגֵי בּוֹ שֶׁכָּלוּ*:

Although God did in fact speak to Moses during the travels of the Jews through the wilderness (see Deuteronomy 2:2), it was only after the last members of the generation of the wilderness had died that the divine revelation took the form of dibur, speech, a more direct form of communication than amima, saying (see Rashi, Meiri, and Rabbeinu Be’er Ha’eyyeh on Deuteronomy 2:16–17).

They may ascend to wherever they wish – *לְאֵיזֶה לָמוּת שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר לָנוּ*:

Rabba bar Hanah said: The fifteenth of Av was the day on which the deaths of the Jews in the wilderness ceased. The entire generation that had left Egypt had passed away, as the Master said: After the sin of the spies, on account of which the Jews of that generation were sentenced to die in the wilderness, as long as the death of the Jews in the wilderness had not ceased, God’s speech did not come to Moses, as it is stated: “And it came to pass, when all the men of war were consumed and dead from among the people, that the Lord spoke to me, saying” (Deuteronomy 2:16–17). This indicates that only then, after the last member of that generation had died, was God’s speech delivered to me, i.e., Moses, but not beforehand. When the Jews realized that the decree that God would not speak to Moses had been lifted, they established that day as a permanent day of rejoicing.

NOTES

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Rav Mattana: There was an additional salvation on this day, as it was the day that the slain of Beitar were brought to burial, several years after the battle at Beitar (see Gittin 57a).

And Rav Mattana said: On the same day that the slaves of Beitar were brought to burial, they instituted the blessing: Who is good and does good, at Yavne. Who is good, thanking God that the corpses did not decompose while awaiting burial, and does good, thanking God that they were ultimately brought to burial.

During his reign. Shalmaneser, king of Assyria, put an end to the kings before him because he removed Jeroboam’s guards, which were stationed to prevent people from ascending to Jerusalem on the pilgrimage Festivals. However, he was evil nevertheless, as he let the people choose whether to go to Jerusalem or attend the kibbutzim sanctuaries in Bethel and Dan. In the Jerusalem Talmud, it is stated that Hoshea was punished for presenting the people of Israel with this choice.

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Rav Mattana is saying that because several joyous events had already occurred on the fifteenth of Av, another joyous event took place on that same date. Moreover, he explains why the day is observed as a semi-holiday even nowadays.

The Sages of the Mishna in Yavne instituted the holiday – *יַﬠֲלוּ בֵּיתָר*:

Some commentators ask: The fifteenth of Av was evidently celebrated as a holiday during the Second Temple period, as the baraita cited below describes how the daughters of the High Priest, his deputy, and the priest anointed for war would each borrow clothing from each other on that day, and these priestly offices ceased with the destruction of the Temple. How, then, could the holiday celebrated on the fifteenth of Av have been instituted to commemorate the interment of the slain of Beitar, a joyous event that took place only after the destruction of the Temple?

The Gemara Ar suggests that the baraita is referring to the celebration that accompanied Yom Kippur, whereas the holiday celebrated on the fifteenth of Av was in fact instituted after the Temple was destroyed. Alternatively, the holiday was indeed instituted in the time of the Second Temple, and Rav Mattana is saying that because several joyous events had already occurred on the fifteenth of Av, another joyous event took place on that same date. Moreover, he explains why the day is observed as a semi-holiday even nowadays.
It is Rabba and Rav Yosef who both say: The fifteenth of Av was the day on which they stopped chopping down trees for the arrangement of wood that burned on the altar, as it is taught in a baraita that Rabbi Eliezer the Great says: From the fifteenth of Av onward, the strength of the sun grows weaker, and from this date they would not cut additional wood for the arrangement, as they would not be properly dry, and they would therefore be unfit for use in the Temple.

Rav Menashya said: And they called the fifteenth of Av the day of the breaking of the scythe, as from this date onward no more trees were cut down, and therefore it was a celebration for the trees. The Gemara adds: From the fifteenth of Av onward, when the days begin to shorten, one who adds to his nightly Torah study will add years to his life, and he who does not add [mosif] will be gathered [yeasef].

The Gemara asks: What is the meaning of the phrase: He will be gathered? Rav Yosef said: It means that his mother will bury him, as he will be gathered to his grave (see Genesis 49:33).

The mishna taught: As on them the daughters of Jerusalem would go out in white clothes, and on the fifteenth of Av they would go out to the vineyards and dance. The Sages taught this tradition in greater detail: 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.

The mishna further taught: All the garments that the women borrowed require immersion, as those who previously wore them before might have been ritually impure. Rabbi Elazar says: Even if the garments were folded and placed in a box [kufsa], an indication that they had not been touched for a long time, they nevertheless require ritual immersion before being worn.

And he who does not add will be gathered – Rabba says: The Torah is called “your life and the length of your days” (Deuteronomy 30:20), one who neglects its study is effectively proving that he does not seek life (Miktam).

The daughter of the king borrows from the daughter of the High Priest – The Torah is called “one who is higher” (Deuteronomy 30:20). 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 (Sifra Emor).

Requirement – Shulchan Arukh, Orach Hayyim 131:6.)

The fifteenth of Av – On the fifteenth of Av, it is the custom not to recite the prayers of supplication that usually follow the Amida, as is the custom on all days of celebration (Shu’han Arukh, Orar Hayyim 131:6).

The strength of the sun grows weaker – The fifteenth of Av can occur on various dates of the solar year, between July 30 and August 21. This coincides with the hottest period of the year, when humidity is low in mountainous regions. From August onward, the strength of the sun grows weaker, i.e., the average temperatures decrease and humidity rises. For wood to dry out sufficiently for use on the altar, a few months of dry climate and low humidity are required. Since moist wood will attract the attention of bugs even after it has been chopped down, during this period the priests would stop cutting down wood for the altar.

Box (kufsa) – From the Greek κυφσα, kupsa, or the Latin capsa, meaning a box or container.

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Most early commentators explain that the clothes the young women borrowed from each other required ritual immersion because they might have contracted ritual impurity by being worn by a woman who was ritually impure. Even clothes that had been folded away in boxes required ritual immersion, so as not to embarrass those women who were indeed ritually impure and whose clothes needed to be immersed.

Furthermore, the Sages wished to avoid a situation in which those who were more meticulous about ritual impurity would refrain from borrowing clothes from those who were less scrupulous in this regard (Rashi; R. Elazar). The Jerusalem Talmud, as cited by the Ravad and others, explains this regulation differently. The Sages enacted that all clothes must undergo ritual immersion so that the young women would be more willing to lend them. Once the garments had been taken out of storage and immersed (Ritva) they were wet (Miktam) and no longer pristine. Therefore, women who would otherwise have preferred not to lend their clothes would be ready to exchange them for others.
The daughters of the Jewish people would go out and dance – בנות ישראל ייצאו וחללו. The commentaries write that this custom is based on the manner by which the daughters of Jabesh-Gilead were permitted to marry the males of the tribe of Benjamin (see Judges 21:13–23; geninim). The commentaries explain at length that this was a special enactment to help those girls who were having difficulty finding a husband. The men would select potential wives, and later, after the families agreed, they would betroth them (see Ritva).

That you adorn us with golden jewelry – תֵּאָסַיָּנוּ בִּזְהוּבִים: The commentaries point out that elsewhere the Sages state: The daughters of Israel are pretty, but poverty makes them ugly (Nedarim 66a). Consequently, once they are adorned with finery, their husbands will find them beautiful and come to recognize their other good qualities. An alternative reading is: That you will be adorned with golden jewelry, i.e., if you marry a woman and them say: Young man, please lift up your eyes and see what you choose for a wife. The Sages taught this practice in greater detail in a baraita: 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.

The tractate concludes with a statement related to the topic of dancing. Ulla of the city of Bira’s said that Rabbi Elazar said: In the future, in the end of days, the Holy One, Blessed be He, will arrange a dance of the righteous,9 and He will be sitting among them in the Garden of Eden, and each and every one of the righteous will point to God with his finger, as it is stated: “And it shall be said on that day: Behold, this is our God, for whom we waited, He might save us. This is the Lord; for whom we waited. We will be glad and rejoice in His salvation” (Isaiah 25:9). God will be revealed, so that every righteous individual will be able to say: This is our God, as though they were pointing at Him with a finger.

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.