On Tisha B’Av, Jews traditionally recite a series of elegiac poems, known as kinot, after the evening and morning prayers. These poems mourn the destruction of both the First and Second Temple in Jerusalem and other tragedies in Jewish history, including the Crusades, the Expulsion of Jews from Spain and the Holocaust. The kinot are recited on the night of Tisha B’Av after reciting the Book of Lamentations, which was also called “Kinot” in the Talmudic era before it assumed its more familiar name of “Eicha.”
What are the Kinot?

As we mourn the destruction of the Beit HaMikdash on Tisha B’Av, Jews customarily gather to recite kinot – liturgical poems that reflect upon themes of tragedy and loss. Kinot are recited aloud and often in unison as a way of somehow communicating with or beseeching G-d, and of feeling the spirit of mourning. There are nearly 50 kinot for Tisha B’Av (customs differ by tradition – e.g. Ashkenazi v. Sephardi and other differences). The kinot are usually referred to either by their number (e.g. Kinah #24) or by their first few words (e.g. אֵיכָה יָשְׁבָה, “How Is It That It Sits Alone”).

Who wrote the Kinot?

The oldest kinot were composed by Rabbi Elazar HaKalir, who likely lived in the 6th-7th centuries. His kinot resemble the structure and content of Megillat Eicha. For example, one of his kinot begins each stanza with the word אֵיכָה. He often writes stanzas in the alphabetical acrostic, similar to the first four chapters of Eicha. The style deals primarily with the destruction of the Second Temple, similar to Eicha which mourns the destruction of the First Temple.

Rabbi Judah HaLevi completely changed the nature of the kinot with his compositions. There is no pain or despair over the tragedies of the distant or near past, but rather a longing for returning to Jerusalem, as in his poem, צִיּוֹן הֲלֹא תִשְׁאֲלִי.

Solomon ibn Gabirol, an 11th-century Andalusian poet and Jewish philosopher in the Neoplatonic tradition, wrote kinot mourning the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and the plight of Israel. Gabirol wrote with a pure Biblical Hebrew diction that would become the signature style of the Spanish school of Hebrew poets and he popularized the strict Arabic meter in Hebrew poetry, originally introduced by Dunash ben Labrat.

Eleazar ben Judah (Sefer HaRokeach) wrote a kinah following the murder of his family during the Crusades.

What are the “new” Kinot added?

A whole new wave of kinot were written to commemorate another set of tragedies – the Crusades, describing the violence that medieval Jews suffered at the hands of the zealous Crusaders making their way to the Holy Land. The events of the Crusades occurred roughly 1,000 years after the destruction of the ancient Temple.

Some collections of kinot contain even newer kinot – 20th-century compositions that focus explicitly on the horrors of the Holocaust.

Why were the “new” Kinot added?

In the words of Rabbi Kalonymus ben Yehuda, the author of Kinah #25: “Since one may not add a new day of mourning... On Tisha B’Av, my mourning I will arouse, and I will eulogize and I will wail and I will weep with a soul that is bitter.”

In other words, although Tisha B’Av was originally construed as a day of mourning for only the five tragic events listed in the Mishna, Rabbi Kalonymus ben Yehuda sees it as the “source,” in some sense, of all the tragedies that have befallen the Jewish people throughout history.

How can I connect to the Kinot?

Many of the kinot are written in a poetic style that is hard for even native Hebrew speakers to understand and are full of references to Tanach, Talmud, and Midrash. To give yourself a better understanding of what you are saying, try to follow along using a translated version. Additionally, if you have time (whether before Tisha B’Av or on the day itself), perhaps choose a few kinot to truly study in-depth to help make the recitation more meaningful. And of course there are plenty of online shiurim and other resources too. Some communities also host people who provide commentary in between the different kinot. This year especially, look out for online educational events on Tisha B’Av.