Tzom and Ta’anit

Hebrew has two words that both mean fast (abstaining from food): tzom, צום, and ta’anit, תאנית. What is the difference between them? The primary difference is that צום is a biblical word (appearing 26 times in Nevi’im and Ketuvim, although never in the Torah), and תאנית is primarily found in Rabbinic Hebrew (it does appear once in the Bible – Ezra 9:5).

However, צום does derive from a Biblical root: צומ (or the related root צ-מ-ר). That verb is the root of the word used to command us to fast on Yom Kippur: תַּעֲנִית (Vayikra 16:31). That phrase literally means “you shall afflict your souls.” Yet, the sense of fasting is clear from the context, and is also found in parallel to צומ in another Biblical verse: לָמָּה צומ ע-נ-י, meaning “affliction.” Other words that derive from that root also indicate suffering and distress. “Why, when we fasted, did You not see? When we afflicted our souls, did You pay no heed?” (Yeshayahu 58:3)

Other words that derive from that root also indicate suffering and affliction: anav(ך), צומע – “humble,” ani, צומ – “poor,” and inui, צומע – “torture.” Another word that is possibly related is inyan, צומע. Today it means “matter, subject,” but in Biblical Hebrew, it meant “occupation, task.” Some linguists think that it originally meant “toilsome occupation” and derived from the root צ-ר-ר meaning “affliction.”

 Jazeera, as we said, also means “to fast.” Surprisingly, it is not clear if it is related to the word tzama, צמא – “thirst.” The cognates to each in other Semitic languages (like Aramaic, Arabic and Akkadian) don’t point to an obvious connection. That said, there does seem to be an interesting pattern, where many words that begin with the two letters צ-ר mean “to draw together, to contract.” In addition to צומ (in which one restrains oneself), and צומא (where the tongue and throat contract from lack of water), here are a few others:

- צומע – to join, couple. From here we get the words צומע, צומא – pair, and צומאיד, צומא – bracelet, something “bound on the wrist.”
- צומע – lock or braid of hair, also a veil. The hair is drawn together.
- צומע – to press, reduce, contract. From here, Rashi coined the word צומצום, צומצום – restriction, limitation, which was later adopted by the Kabbalah.
- צומע – to shrink, shrivel. Raisins in Hebrew are צומקוס, צומקוס.
- צומע – one meaning is “to join, attach, contract.” From here the word צומט, צומט – juncture. Another meaning is “to oppress, subdue, destroy,” and is the root of the word צומתם, צומתם – “finality.” The meaning of “pressure” is identified with the sense of contraction we see in other words with this root.

In modern Hebrew, צומ is used for all kinds of fasts, including medical ones. צומע is restricted to the religious realm, and can also refer to refraining from other things, like from speaking (a ta’anit dibbur).

Bein HaMetzarim

The three-week period between the 17th of Tammuz and Tisha B’Av is known as bein hametzarim – literally, “between the straits.” The origin of the phrase is from Eichah 1:3: כל הדרים שהשנחו, ובם המצרים, “All her pursuers overtook her in the narrow places.”

The word for “narrow places, straits” is meitzar, מיצר. Others translate the phrase as “when she was in distress.” Both meanings derive from the root צ-ר-ר – “to be distress.” A third opinion is that the word means “border.” According to this understanding, whenever the Jews would flee to the border, their neighbors would hand them over to their enemies.

מיצר meaning “border, boundary” is also possibly an origin of the Hebrew word for Egypt – מיטריאים, מイトריים. Egypt was divided into two lands – Upper and Lower Egypt (which can explain the plural form, with the suffix -ים). And why was Egypt referred to with the word for border? Either because the meaning extended from border to “region,” or because the Egyptians were known for having strict borders.

Perhaps due to association with the word צarah, צרה – “trouble, sorrow,” these weeks are known as days of sadness. But we should remember that the original meaning referred to a narrow strait or a border area. May our sadness be limited to this time of year, and in the future, may these weeks become days of joy.

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