



The Final Four of Judaism

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Last week I was bombarded with the March questions – Have you filled out your bracket? Who do you have in the Final Four? Who's going to win the National Championship? (Bet you thought that I was talking about, "So have you started cleaning for Pesach yet?")

All good questions, I thought to myself. After all, College Basketball is of a national, religious importance. It is the High Holidays of the sports world.

Thinking about which teams to choose, who the upsets would be, and ultimately who would win it all, made me think – How does college basketball relate to Judaism? What if there was a bracket to determine the most significant aspect of Judaism? I therefore created a March Madness, bracket of significant aspects of Judaism.

In order to create the 64 team (aspect) tournament, I put down my 16 seeds and four divisions. Each seed had to correspond to a symbol dealing with that number (for example the 10 seeds are – Ten Commandments, Plagues, People needed for a Minyan and Days of Repentance; the 3 seeds are – Pilgrimage holidays, Years before a child gets his first haircut, Times a day we pray and Forefathers). Some seeds were more difficult to determine than others and there were many "bubble" teams that were left out of the tournament.

- (1) Alef
- (16) Days for the Shofar Regalim outside of Israel
- (8) Days till a Brit Milah
- (9) Tisha B'Av
- (5) Books of the Torah
- (12) Age for a Bar Mitzvah
- (4) Holy cities in Israel
- (12) Mideot
- (6) Fast days during the year
- (11) Million people killed during the Shoah
- (3) Pilgrimage Festivals
- (14) Steps in the Passover seder
- (7) Days in a week
- (10) People needed for a Minyan
- (4) Toraim - one written, one oral
- (15) Tu B'Shvat
- (1) God
- (16) Chapter in Exodus where Manna first appears
- (8) Days of Chanukkah
- (9) Months of Pregnancy
- (5) Number of Megillot
- (12) Stones in the High Priest breastplate
- (4) Names of Pesach
- (13) Age for Bar Mitzvah
- (6) Orders of the Mishna
- (11) Tribes that were given land in Israel
- (3) Age that a child receives his first haircut (Upsharin)
- (14) Day in Adar for Purim
- (7) Weeks of the Omer
- (10) Plagues
- (2) Loaves of Challah on Shabbat
- (15) Tu B'Av

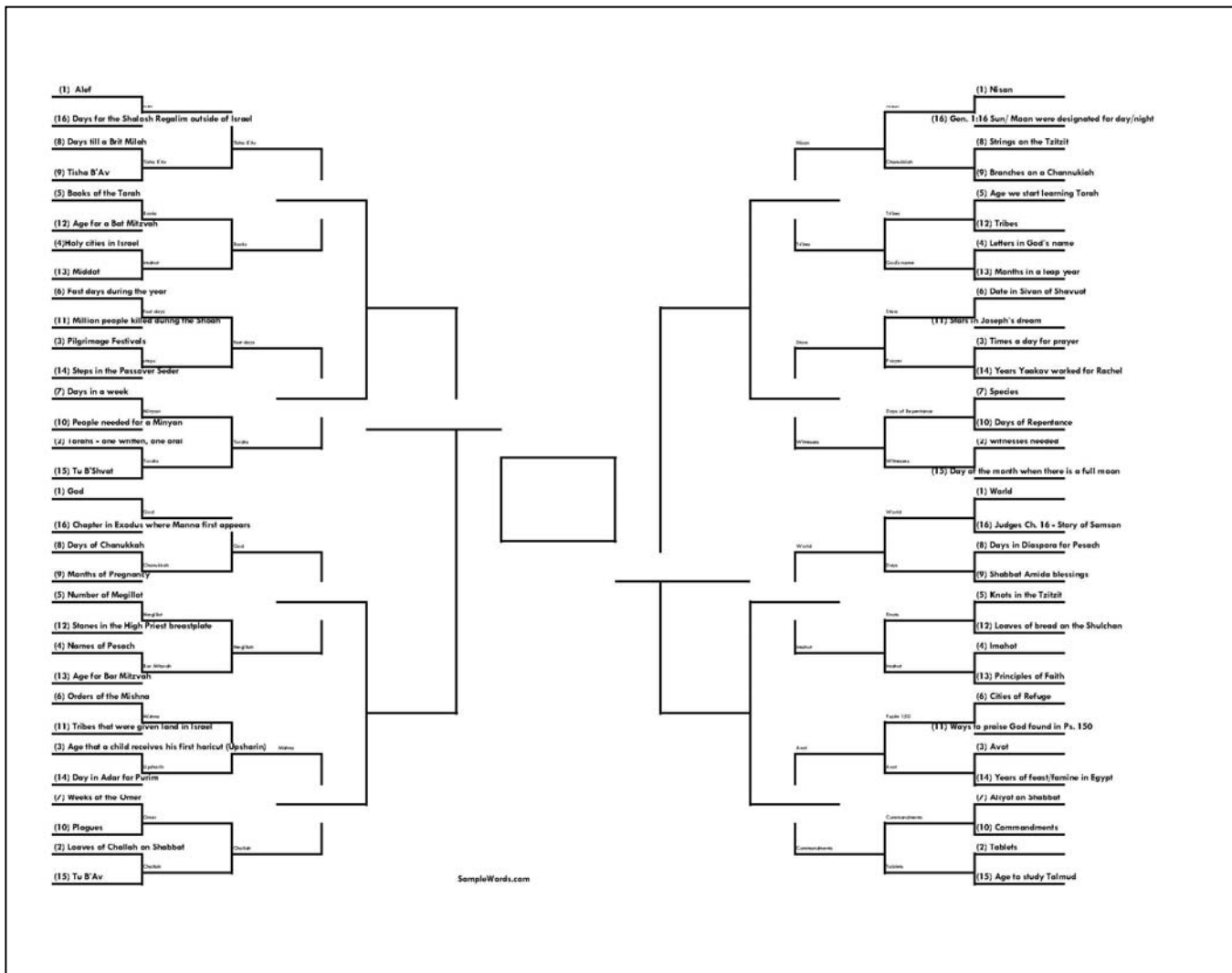
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- (1) Nisan
- (16) Gen. 1:16 Sun/ Moon were designated for day/night
- (8) Strings on the Tzitzit
- (9) Branches on a Chanukiah
- (5) Age we start learning Torah
- (12) Tribes
- (4) Letters in God's name
- (12) Months in a leap year
- (6) Date in Sivan of Shavuot
- (11) Stars in Joseph's dream
- (3) Times a day for prayer
- (14) Years Yaakov worked for Rachel
- (7) Species
- (10) Days of Repentance
- (4) witnesses needed
- (15) Day of the month when there is a full moon
- (1) World
- (16) Judges Ch. 16 - Story of Samson
- (8) Days in Diaspora for Pesach
- (9) Shabbat Amidah blessings
- (5) Knots in the Tzitzit
- (12) Loaves of bread on the Shulchan
- (4) Imahot
- (13) Principles of Faith
- (6) Cities of Refuge
- (11) Ways to praise God found in Ps. 150
- (3) Avot
- (14) Years of feast/famine in Egypt
- (7) Aliyat en Shabbat
- (10) Commandments
- (2) Tablets
- (15) Age to study Talmud

After I did the seeding, I played the tournament out three different ways. First I sat down with a few friends and made our picks for the entire tournament. There were some definite “Cinderella stories” (for example, we have God playing against the creation of the sun and moon in the finals, a One seed against a sixteen).

Next, I sat down with my Seventh grade class and played out the tournament with them. I was shocked by some of the decisions that they made and questioned them on their logic. What ensued was a remarkable conversation dealing with God (the overall number One seed) and the eleven million people who died during the Shoah (keep in mind that we have been learning about the Shoah for a number of weeks). In my mind this should have been a blow out (I didn’t even have the eleven million make it out of the first round). One student made an interesting point that game me some insight into the mind of 13 year olds. We focused our discussion on the “belief” in God vs. the physical fact of eleven million. The student felt that when it comes to the practice of her Judaism, she is more inspired to be the person that she is by the eleven million lost souls than by God. Her feeling – “I am more inspired to pray on behalf of 11 million who can’t pray anymore, than I am about God.” I hadn’t considered this logic before and appreciated a new and unique perspective.

I then played it out based on the results of the actual NCAA tournament’s first two rounds. This helped me determine the Sweet Sixteen (there were some definite upsets). I then made my picks for the final games of the tournament.



What follows are my predictions for the remainder of the tournament based on this week's Parsha, Tzav and our upcoming celebration of Pesach.

(9) Tisha B'Av vs. (5) Books of the Torah

We are now in the third book of the Torah, Vayikra, a book that focuses its attention on the sacrificial service. It is the "Complete Idiot's Guide" to sacrificing. All of the gory details are included. Pesach is the only holiday of the Shalosh Regalim (festival pilgrimage holidays) on which we brought an animal sacrifice and needed to eat the sacrifice. Sacrificing brought us closer to God.

Tisha B'Av and the destruction of the Holy Temple ended our bringing of sacrifices. It must therefore win this match-up.

(6) Fast Days vs. (2) Torahs – One written, one Oral

The fast of the first-born, in which first born sons are required to partake in occurs the day prior to Pesach. If one participates in a Siyyum (completion of study) he does not need to continue fasting. The fast of the first born is not one of the six fasts of the year (since not everyone needs to fast). The fast commemorates the first born son's original position of working in the Mishkan. The first born sons were replaced by the Kohanim and Leviim. The fast days are days of national mourning. In Biblical and Talmudic times, we would sit in sack-cloth and ashes reading dirges that focus on our loss of the Holy Temple. How do we know all of this? How do we get to the rules of fasting? It is found in the Oral Torah. Winner of this match-up – 2 Torahs

(1) God vs. (5) Number of Megillot

This is probably the easiest match-up.

Megillat Esther only alludes to God, He is not named in it.

Shir HaShirim (Song of Songs) is a love song to God. Shir HaShirim is read during Pesach to remind us of the beginning of our relationship with God.

Megillat Ruth is the story of a convert's love of God and dedication to Judaism.

Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) reminds us that there is a season for everything and that God controls the seasons.

Eicha (Lamentations) reminds us of the severing of an aspect of our relationship with God due to the loss of the Holy Temple.

Since each Megillah reflects our relationship to God, God wins this match-up.

(6) Orders of the Mishna vs. (2) loaves of Challah

While the Mishna is divided into six orders, it is further divided into over 60 sections. In Mishna Pesachim we learn of two loaves of Challah that are put on the roof of the portico of the Holy Temple to tell people when they could/could not eat Chametz (as Pesach was approaching). Two Challot symbolized that we were in the clear to eat. One challah meant that it was time to burn our chametz and no Challot meant that we had to be chametz free.

Based on the importance of Challah – even during Pesach, 2 Challot win.

(1) Nisan vs. (12) Tribes of Israel

Nisan is the first month (according to the Torah) it was the month of our freedom, the month that we became the Jewish nation. On the downside, Nisan is also the name of a Pagan god in Babylon.

The twelve tribes were the sons of Yakov. Together they went to Egypt as a family and left as a nation (during the Exodus). Each of the tribes was assigned a different area of the land in which to live. Tribes would not intermarry with each other (until the restriction was lifted while wandering in the desert). The tribes remained united, until a split during the reign of Solomon's son Rehoboam. As a result, 10 tribes were lost. In basketball a team has twelve players. If ten break away, you can't field a team. Therefore, Nisan wins this match-up.

(11) Stars in Joseph's dream vs. (2) witnesses needed

Without two witnesses spotting a new moon we cannot determine Rosh Hodesh, or the calendar as a whole (we wouldn't know when the 15th of a month occurred and therefore would not start Pesach on time). Without two witnesses, people could not get married, business transactions could not occur. Joseph dreamed that his brothers would bow down to him and they did, but they also represent how terribly his brothers treated him. In this match-up, I go with witnesses.

(1) World vs. (4) Imahot – Matriarchs

When it comes down to it, I could argue that both should be four seeds. According to Kaballah there are four worlds. One of the worlds is the world of creation in which our matriarchs played a vital role. To many, it was our Imahot that kept Judaism strong and vibrant. It is through the mother as to how we get out religion. The Imahot win this match-up.

(3) Avot vs. (10) Commandments

I had anticipated a match-up of the Imahot and Avot, the results of which would be lose - lose for me (I can only imagine the emails that I would receive). That notwithstanding, I choose the 10 commandments. The Commandments serve as our moral compass. During Pesach, we are supposed to imagine as though each of us played a role in the Exodus from Egypt. We are all supposed to relive the experience. The belief is that each of us was present at the Mt. Sinai when the 10 commandments were given. If that is the case, it must be something that is innate in each of us.

Ninth of Av vs. Two Torahs – winner, Two Torahs

God vs. Challah – winner, God

Nisan vs. witnesses – winner, Nisan

World vs. Commandments – winner, Commandments

In the finals I have God against the 10 commandments. A one seed against a 10 seed. How can I not choose God? Didn't I expect God to ultimately be the winner anyway? Truth is that without believing in God, even if we can't see, feel or smell Him, that the rest lacks purpose. Without God, Parshat Tzav would be irrelevant (who would we be sacrificing to?). Without God, the Passover story would not have occurred (we would still be slaves in Egypt). In fact, in each of the other 63 teams in the tournament, God plays a vital role.

AS A FAMILY:

- Use the brackets that I have created and play the tournament at home. Really debate each match-up. Research each in order to determine where your loyalties lie. Do you have any “upsets”. Who/What wins for your family?
- If you are really daring – next year match your tournament bracket to the choices that you make with this bracket.
- Make your own brackets

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THIS WEEK’S PARSHA, TRY TO ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS:

1. What is the Aish Tamid?
2. Who ate the sacrifices? Where were they eaten?
3. What is Pigul?
4. How were Aaron and his sons inaugurated?