

2005 Yom Kippur – Day

A traditionally practicing Jew comes to a rabbi. “I committed a sin,” he says, “and I want to know what I should do to make teshuvah, to repent.”

“What was the sin?” the rabbi asks.

“It happened once,” the man answers, “that I did not wash my hands and recite the blessing before eating bread as required before every meal.”

“OK, so if it really only happened once,” the rabbi says, “that’s not so terrible. But why did you neglect to wash your hands and recite the blessing?”

“Well I felt awkward doing it, Rabbi. You see I was eating in a non-kosher restaurant.”

The rabbi arched his eyebrows. “And why were you eating in a non-kosher restaurant?”

“I had no choice. All the kosher restaurants were closed.”

“And why” asked the Rabbi, “were all the kosher restaurants closed?”

“Because it was Yom Kippur.”

Yom Kippur is not an easy day. We are required to engage in deeply personal and uncomfortable introspection. We are commanded to ask forgiveness, not only from G-d but from all those people we have wronged in the past year. And of course we must fast, denying our physical desires, whether in a kosher or non-kosher restaurant. If blowing the shofar is the most identifiable practice connected to Rosh Hashanah, then fasting is the most identifiable tradition of Yom Kippur. Indeed, in the bible Yom Kippur is identified as a day of atonement and “self-denial,” such self-denial including refraining from work, marital relations, and of course food. But as with the shofar, the bible does not specifically explain the precise purpose of such fasting and self denial in the context of Yom Kippur. It is clearly connected to the atonement that is the primary purpose of this day, but how does it actually help in our efforts to atone and seek forgiveness for our sins? How, in short, does starving ourselves for a day make us better people, rather than just hungry people?

Perhaps the most common answer is that by denying our physical needs for this one day, we are not distracted by our base material and physical desires and can focus our minds and souls on the spiritual matters at hand. In refraining from physical concerns that occupy us the rest of the time, we are thus freed to concentrate on reviewing our sins and refining our souls. However, even as a child – or perhaps particularly as a child – I always wondered whether this really worked. After all, by the end of the day on Yom Kippur, most of us are probably focusing more on the break-the-fast dinner than on confronting our sins. And, of course, if fasting gives you headaches or makes you feel

weak, you're much more likely to be concentrating on the pain in your head than the pain you have caused others in the past year.

But there is a larger point being made. Judaism is generally a religion of action. The spirit is important, but our tradition has always recognized that, as physical beings, we are best able to connect with the spiritual through physical deeds – whether by way of traditional ritual or acts of kindness. Thus we begin and end Shabbat with the lighting of candles, and every festival, with the obvious exception of Yom Kippur, is connected to a particular food. We celebrate every Jewish holiday with a festive meal, and every stage of life is commemorated by a ritual. But while we traditionally focus on the physical, it is also important to remember that Judaism still places primary importance on the spiritual. Indeed the rabbis note that this world, the physical world, is like a corridor leading to a larger more important room, the spiritual world and the afterlife. We are not focused on the material world because the spiritual is unimportant, but because it is in the physical world that we act and experience our lives, and we can only interact with the spiritual via the physical.

On Yom Kippur, for one day in the year, we are asked to put aside the material, physical matters that occupy our daily lives and concentrate on what really matters – on our morality, on our relationships and emotional connections with others, and on our connection to God. We are reminded that while we may interact with the world on a physical level, we are to do so as a means to achieve the more important spiritual, emotional, and moral goals that Judaism commands us to aim for.

Fasting on Yom Kippur also reminds us of a vitally important, if somewhat unpopular, truth – in order to prosper, indeed to just function in society and in life, one must be willing and able to practice a certain level of self denial. We live in a society where denying oneself anything is considered almost perverse. We are bombarded with a deluge of ads telling us that we can and should have everything we want, and we should expect it as quickly and as much as we want. And in recent years we have seen a rash of corporate executives who think nothing of ruining the lives and pension plans of millions because they cannot deny their rapacious appetite for more and more wealth. We in the western world, and particularly in America, do not like to think about denying ourselves anything. But in reality we must, and mostly do, deny ourselves on a daily basis for our own sake, the sake of others, and the sake of the greater societal good. In order to function in any group or relationship, we have to curtail our own wants and needs to some extent. No marriage, friendship, or business arrangement can function if all parties insist on having everything they want at all times. Each one of us forgoes some of what we want for the benefit of our relationships and society. And we are all the better for it.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, forcing ourselves to suffer on this day is a means of awakening our compassion. It is sometimes easy for us to forget, living in relative affluence and comfort, what it means to be hungry and in need. Rabbi Louis Jacobs puts it this way:

“By knowing what it means to go hungry, albeit for a day, our hearts are moved for those who suffer. By fasting we are moved to think of the needs of others and to alleviate their suffering.”

Indeed, in the haftarah for today the prophet Isaiah castigates the people for thinking of business and oppressing their workers when they are fasting, rather than letting the fast make them humble and considerate of others. The prophet declares, “This is the fast I desire: To unlock fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords of the yoke; to let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke. It is to share your bread with the hungry and to take the wretched poor into your home; when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to ignore your own kin.”

In fasting we remind ourselves, however briefly, what it means to go hungry. It has been said that the purpose of religion is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. In this case we are the comfortable, and on Yom Kippur we are called to afflict ourselves. We do so not because there is any inherent value in suffering, but because we are all too capable of ignoring the pain of others when we ourselves do not experience it. It is easy to ignore the plight of others when we ourselves are not subject to the same problems. And it is sadly all too easy to convince ourselves that somehow those “others” deserve their affliction and that it could never happen to us. But, of course, it can. And our self-inflicted hunger on Yom Kippur reminds us that our own comfort is no excuse for ignoring the needs of others. It increases our empathy so that in the year ahead we remember our pain and discomfort on Yom Kippur before we inflict it on others and before we close our eyes to the suffering and pain in the world around us.

May our fasting on the Day of Atonement bring us closer to our spiritual and moral selves. May it remind of the need to give of ourselves for others. And may it open our hearts to the needs of others so that we leave the sanctuary today better, kinder, and more compassionate.