


Yom ha-Kippurim. And the Israelites celebrated when he returned. We reverse the process. We celebrate with delicacies before and refrain from eating (like Moses) afterward.

While these two full fast days share certain rituals, they are, in fact, opposites, yet opposites that imply and even require one another.

While mourning and *oneg* are ritualized in similar ways, they are opposite states of mind. Yet Jewish tradition seems to be alluding to the fact that these opposites require one another. Without Tisha b'Av, Yom ha-Kippurim is not necessary; without Yom ha-Kippurim, Tisha b'Av is all there is. 

Coming Closer

TOBA SPITZER

For most Jews, the central ritual practice of Yom Kippur is fasting. Whether or not we go to synagogue, whether or not we believe in God, many of us understand the fast as a key — perhaps the key — component of the experience of this day. Interestingly, the biblical commandment of *yom ha-kippurim* does not mention fasting directly, instead instructing the Israelites to “afflict” themselves on that day. By the early rabbinic period, that “affliction” came to include abstaining from food and drink, from bathing, from wearing shoes, and from sexual intercourse. Yet of all those restrictions, it is the fast that looms largest in our consciousness and our practice today.

Why fast? In his wonderful collection, *Days of Awe*, S.Y. Agnon brings this teaching from Rabbi Judah Loeb of Prague: “[These afflictions] are intended to lessen the corporeality of the soul, until the soul separates from the body and becomes completely holy, as is fitting. Thus the whole purpose of Yom Kippur is to withdraw from and lessen the importance of the body... [W]hen the body is weakened and its strength lessened, the spiritual grows stronger.” This notion that we fast in order to somehow lessen or ignore our physical being seems to fly in the face of actual experience. How much more aware of our bodies we are when we’re fasting! From rumbling stomachs to lightheadedness to the throb of caffeine withdrawal, fasting is probably one of the best ways to remind ourselves that we in fact have bodies and need to feed them.

And while the biblical roots of the Yom Kippur fast imply that it should be a punitive, negative experience, the opposite now holds true: Yom Kippur is supposed to be a day on which we turn to our divine Source wholeheartedly and in joy. Unlike Tisha b'Av or other days of mourning, it is a joyous fast. So, if the Yom Kippur fast functions neither as punishment nor as a way to divorce ourselves from

corporeal reality, what does it do?

Yom Kippur is usually translated as the “Day of Atonement.” This English phrase was coined by William Tyndale in his 1530 translation of the Hebrew Bible, and he used the word “atonement” according to its original, quite literal meaning: at-one-ment. By choosing this particular word, instead of the more common “expiation,” as a translation for the Hebrew word “*kippurim*,” Tyndale implied that sin is essentially a matter of estrangement, of disconnection. Yom Kippur, the “Day of At-one-ment,” is a means to respond to the defiling power of sin through the restorative power of connection.

Tyndale’s insight is echoed in Jewish sources. As Maimonides writes in his *Hilchot Teshuvah*, “*Teshuvah* is great because it draws a person close to the *Shechina*...as the prophet Jeremiah states, ‘If you will turn/return (*tashuv*), Israel’ declares Adonai, ‘to Me you will return.’” Maimonides concludes, “*Teshuvah* brings close those who are far off.” Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, in his commentary on Maimonides’ teaching, defines sin as that which creates distance between a person and God. The work of *teshuvah*, then, is the act of overcoming that distance, of once again “coming close” to the divine.

How does one do that, then? How to achieve this closeness? Much of the experience of Yom Kippur, and indeed of the 50 days leading up to it, beginning with the month of Elul, is dedicated to reconnecting to our Source, to realigning ourselves with the divine flow of the universe. Much of the High Holydays liturgy has the sense of a calling out to the One, of “returning” by means of acts of contrition and letting go of that which keeps us off of a Godly path. This process of *teshuvah* climaxes with the 25-hour fast of Yom Kippur.

To understand the role of fasting in this “coming close” process, it is helpful to remem-



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ber the most basic claim of Jewish theology. This is stated most starkly in the *yotzer* blessing of the morning liturgy, which describes God as “*yotzer or u’vorey choshech, oseh shalom u’vorey et ha-kol*, the One that creates light and dark, who makes peace and creates everything.”

Everything, *Ha-kol*, All of it.

This claim is that there is one ultimate Source of every facet of our reality. Whatever that Source is, however we understand it, it is to be found in all aspects of our existence — in the pleasant and the unpleasant, in the joyful and the painful. I can’t have the exquisite taste of dark chocolate without the ability to feel excruciating pain. I can’t experience the transformative power of love without also knowing the depths of loss.

Rav Soloveitchik speaks of *teshuvah* as re-establishing intimacy with God. If God, or Godliness, is, indeed, within everything — without exception — then the challenge of *teshuvah* is to become intimate with everything — with *all* of our experience, without exception.

Fasting becomes an important component of “coming close” when it heightens our awareness of ourselves and brings our attention into the present moment of experience. By fasting, we “come close” to the sensations that accompany our altered physical state. We disrupt our routine, on the most fundamental level, and so cause a shift in our awareness. We become better able to notice what is happening right here, right now. And if we can not only notice but embrace this experience, in all its challenge and difficulty, then we are one step closer to being truly intimate with the Godliness that is in everything. If we are unable to do this, we will never be able to come as close as the season of *teshuvah* demands, because we will always be running away from the reality of our own experience. We will fail to be fully present in our own lives, and thus miss the opportunity to embrace the Godliness that dwells right here.

If we can experience our hunger pangs and odd sensations not as distractions from the holiness of the moment but as a component of that holiness, then our fast will indeed be joyous. 🕊

To Fast or Not

PENINA V. ADELMAN

In my varied Jewish life, I have fasted and not fasted for different reasons on Yom Kippur. During my sparsely Jewish childhood, there were no fasting adults in view. I was not even aware that fasting was part of this solemn day. Some years we went to temple and prayed until lunchtime. Then we went home to eat. That was it.

**The senses are more vivid and vibrant.
I am inside the birdsong, the flower’s scent,
the fallen leaf’s changing colors.**

Living in Jerusalem at age 24 during the year of discovering the depth of my Jewish yearnings, I was too ashamed of my ignorance to attend the Orthodox synagogue next door. I spent the day in my room, praying by myself and fasting. It was meaningful because it was my first experience in Israel but I found that I was not meant for the ascetic life and was relieved to learn enough by the next year to spend Yom Kippur in a community. For many years I did just that and grew to appreciate the world

that fasted around me.

When I was diagnosed with Type-1 (insulin-dependent) diabetes at age 33, I was determined not to let this new fact of my life deter me from the keen sense of my soul’s existence that fasting on Yom Kippur lent me. On Yom Kippur, we experience what being an angel is like. We don’t eat, or drink, or bathe, or have sex, or wear makeup or shoes made from an animal. But, the fact was, not eating or drinking made me feel sick in two hours. What kind of angel was I? I stuck it out through *Ne’ilah*, but I did not fast again on Yom Kippur for many years.

What is it like not to fast when all the Jews around me who were obligated to do so were fasting? Yom Kippur seemed too easy. After all, fasting is the essence of this holy day just as lighting candles is the essence of Hanukkah. If I could not participate in this simple 25-hour trial, could I really be part of the community?

Because I was able to do the thing that everyone else was trying to forget about, by ignoring their growling stomachs, their dry mouths, and their fantasies of their favorite foods, I felt guilty and apart. I was “privileged”

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