

Yom Kippur Morning 5783
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Is this the Fast I Ask For?

A few years ago, I offered a Rosh HaShana sermon discussing the “second day of the year.” I noted the phenomenon around the first day of school, where parents take pictures of their children, Facebook fills up with excited and nervous and happy images, and schools are buzzing with intensity.

It is, of course, similar with Rosh HaShana. There is a huge build up, a great sense of occasion, and a lot of excitement. It is the birthday of the world and the beginning of the year.

I asked then...what about the second day? What can we do to add meaning and inspiration and importance to our choices and activities all throughout the year?

And here we are today, on Yom Kippur, and I find myself reflecting on how this day fits into the fullness of our identities.

In the traditional view, there are seven weeks of preparation for the new year and an important set of spiritual pursuits during the 10 days leading into Yom Kippur. All of this centers on the idea that we should engage in *cheshbon hanefesh*, soul searching, so that we are ready for this Day of Atonement. There is a sacred anticipation of our arrival at this season and at this holy day.

All of this is important. Yom Kippur can be most impactful if we prepare ourselves for the prayer and study and reflection that defines this day. Or, stating the opposite, which might be obvious: if we don't do anything to get ready for the Days of Awe, they will not reach their full potential.

And, critically, there is more than just this day and this season. I ask myself...what comes after? What comes after these momentous occasions are done and the calendar rolls on?

In my research and preparation this year, I found a beautiful poem by an author named Sheri Lindner. She was inspired by the Haftarah reading we turn to each year on this morning, the reading from Isaiah that asks about the nature of the fast we undertake on Yom Kippur. That traditional reading, of course, raises all sorts of social justice possibilities...don't just fast and beat yourself up without thinking about and taking action to help those who are struggling and suffering.

Lindner writes¹, "If we fast today with no thought of how we will meet tomorrow, and every day that follows, then this ritual fast is as hollow as the dry shrunken gourd from last year's sukkah...barren, unmoored from the lifeblood of meaning. Or, worse, if our empty stomachs fill us with the righteous illusion that today's hunger alone makes us good Jews, good people..."

The challenge of Yom Kippur is, I think, that there is so much that is expected of us that it can be hard to determine how it connects to all the other days of the year. I believe that we need to approach Yom Kippur as part of a much broader context. We cannot see it as a stand alone activity, even if there are things we do on Yom Kippur that we never do during the rest of the year.

¹ <https://ritualwell.org/ritual/isaiah-an-interpretation/>

Let me offer a couple of examples.

On Yom Kippur, the tradition is to fast. Now let me be clear: I know there are many who are unable to fast or who choose not to fast. Regardless of your personal practice, let me offer this thought: one aspect of Yom Kippur that connects to the entirety of the year is that this is a day when we can consider how we think about food. Are our food choices healthy for our bodies? Are all the workers in the supply chain, whether they be farmers or factory workers, grocery store or restaurant staff, treated properly? Is the process of producing the food safe for the environment and the natural world?

There is a beautiful tradition of saying blessings both before and after we eat. I have found that there is power in these acts. Pause to show that we can control our appetites, that we recognize something more than the immediate moment...pause to elevate a mundane act that we perform several times a day into something sacred. Nourishing our bodies is, ultimately, a holy and beautiful thing to do.

Note that none of this, in my opinion, needs to adhere strictly to the most traditional practices. If the conventions of kashrut and the traditional blessings speak to you, wonderful! If not, consider this as an open ended question: what is fit and proper (which is, after all, the literal meaning of the word kosher) for us to be eating? What can you do at mealtime to elevate and consecrate the experience?

Another aspect of Yom Kippur beyond the fasting is that today is a time for serious consideration of what the prophets and other sacred voices have to say. What in the holy texts is relevant and enduring and important in this day and age?

In the morning, we read from Isaiah, as I mentioned. In the afternoon, we read the story of Jonah and the Whale. We also read from the Torah, the dramatic clarion call, “You are all gathered together today. I set before life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life!”

My hope is that it is not only today when we are asking the hard questions about the sacred texts and their passage through the generations. Does Torah speak to us? The prophets were offering a frank assessment of what they saw in the world and urging the people to change their ways. That is, uncomfortably, something that is timeless.

Who are the prophets in today's world? Who are the teachers, the authors, the public figures, the hosts of podcasts and websites and other resources, that allow us to be lifelong learners and to use each and every day of the year as a chance to ask the essential questions about how we live and how we reach our potential?

Each Saturday morning, we offer the opportunity to study the weekly Torah portion. This is a chance for spirited conversation, explicitly structured not only to learn what the ancient texts have to say in their original context, but to consider what they mean in today's world. On October 22, the beginning of the new cycle, we will bring back this Torah study as an in person opportunity, ending the long, covid-imposed switch to meeting only as an online group. All are welcome.

And, also in October, we will launch an Introduction to Judaism class. This is a special opportunity for anyone who wants to build a foundation of Jewish knowledge. Participants will be Jewish and non-Jewish, those who never had a formal education and those who may have forgotten their childhood learning. All are welcome.

The prophetic words we read on Yom Kippur urge us to do more than just learn throughout the year, however. They urge us to take responsibility for the world around us.

I spoke on Rosh HaShana about one aspect of the urgency of this moment: the bitter divides that keep us far apart. And, I offered a charge that we cultivate audacious curiosity and courageous openness to bring us closer together.

Today, I pray that another way we can bring the power of Yom Kippur into all the days of the year is to take pride in our Jewish identity and to recognize that that identity is action-oriented.

I want us to be proud of who we are, and that is not always easy.

I believe, however, it is essential. Jewish pride is an antidote to hate. Jewish pride can also counter the more innocuous ways that Judaism is threatened.

Over the summer, the prominent journalist Dana Bash published a piece and hosted an on air special about antisemitism. The personal elements of what she shared were moving to me.

Bash's great grandparents, Rudolph and Matilda Vidor, were killed in Auschwitz. As a young adult, Bash traveled through eastern Europe with her grandfather and saw many of the historic places and learned of the tragedies in a personal way.

Bash has a 10 year old son, and she wrote an essay about what she learned from his choice to wear a Jewish star necklace...as she puts it, his innate understanding that "normalizing the practice of and pride in Judaism is one of the antidotes to prejudice."

Bash interviewed a man named Jeff Cohen. He is one of the members of the temple in Colleyville, Texas, where an armed terrorist took Cohen, the rabbi, and other congregants hostage during a Shabbat service in January. In looking back and reflecting on this horrific experience, Cohen said, “I’m not going to hide. I’m not going to allow myself to disappear because I do want to challenge other good people to stand up and say no...”

On this Yom Kippur, let us consider what we can do—all throughout the year—to continue the intensity and the pride that many of us feel today. There is the potential for the beauty and wisdom and power of Judaism to infuse every aspect of our lives. What we do here on this day counts and what we do in this building all throughout the year has importance. I believe that is magnified when Jewish learning and living is part of every day...in our homes and in our workplaces, in our friendships and family relationships. Whether it focuses on ritual, on learning, on social justice or tzedakah or other pieces of what we have inherited, we can elevate our lives and fulfill our potential.

When Bash asked her son why he liked wearing his necklace, he replied, “It’s my identity, mom.”

If we fast today with no thought of how we will meet tomorrow and every day that follows, then what is the meaning of today? As we pray today, let us initiate an ongoing dialogue with the Divine that continues throughout the year. As we turn inward and reflect today, may it be the start of a year when we consider the fullness of who we are, every single day.

If today is the first day of a journey, may we be blessed as we go on our way.