

Welcoming Your Brokenness

What is the character of Yom Kippur? Last night at *Kol Nidrei* I shared a midrash that says that Yom Kippur and the 15th day of the Month of Av are the most joyous days of the year! I am assuming that “joyous” is not a word most of us associate with Yom Kippur so I wanted to trace that theme and look at how the tradition understands the character of this day and then offer a suggestion for how we might.

We just read in the Torah – that this was the day when atonement was made for the Israelites through the ritual of the scapegoat and the *Kohen Gadol*, the High Priest, entering the holy of holies. I spoke about that last year. This year, I want to focus on the proscriptions that lead to our Yom Kippur practice today from the *maftir* – the reading from the second Torah from the book of Numbers.

The opening line reads: “On the Tenth day of the seventh month, you shall have a sacred assembly. And you shall afflict yourself (*v’eenitem et nafshotaychem*). No tasks shall you do.” (Nu. 29:7)

How do we square the midrash’s description of Yom Kippur as “one of the two most joyous days of the year” with the Torah commandment – “And you shall afflict yourself?” Our fasting is fulfilling this mitzvah of “self-affliction.” So too are the restrictions on sexual relations, bathing and anointing with perfume and wearing leather shoes (a sign of status and privilege in the ancient world). These five restrictions are exactly the same as those of the 9th of Av, the great day of mourning in the Jewish calendar. How does this help us understand the character of Yom Kippur? Far from it being one of the two most joyous days of they year (as the midrash says), it seems like a day of mourning like Tisha b’Av. So maybe that midrash just got it wrong.

But here’s how Yom Kippur is *not* like Tisha b’Av. If the 9th of Av falls on Shabbat (which it did this year) then the fasting and observance of the day is pushed off to the 10th of Av because Shabbat cannot be a day of mourning. However, Yom Kippur, will all of the same 5 prohibitions, *can* fall on Shabbat. The relation of Yom Kippur and Shabbat is key. In the two other places in the Torah where Yom Kippur is described it is called *Shabbat Shabbaton* “a Sabbath of Sabbaths” or “a Sabbath of Solemn Rest” and then again, in both places it reminds us - “and you shall afflict yourself.”

That is the paradox at the heart of Yom Kippur: “self-affliction” which is central to our Yom Kippur practice is associated with mourning, yet Yom Kippur is *Shabbat Shabbaton*, and Shabbat is a day of peace and refreshment when mourning is not appropriate.

Maimonides, the great medieval philosopher of Jewish Law, offers an elegant resolution of this tension. He understands these restrictions of Yom Kippur as themselves a form of Shabbat rest – we are *relaxing* from our mundane patterns and so reawakening our ability to understand who we are without all the noise of worrying about how we look, or our immediate mammalian desires. It is the wonderful opportunity to set all that aside, and focus on our lives and relationships without being so distracted. So relax! Not in the

accustomed way but deeply relax from all the layers of ephemeral desire and distraction we label as “need” during the rest of the year. Relax from all the wasted energy of fulfilling those needs. It’s hard to do in one day. I prepare for weeks just to release from the caffeine. Do we need that cup of coffee? We *don’t* need that cup of coffee! We’ve added it as a layer of needless need. Yom Kippur is a chance to get back to essentials; to reconnect with ourselves beneath all these layers.

This is the kind of difficult relaxing you might be familiar with in the disciplines of Yoga or Tai Chi. This kind of relaxing is extremely difficult and feels unnatural because we’ve gotten so tight and are holding ourselves in such strange and often unhealthy positions. We are far from ourselves and return is difficult. I studied Tai Chi briefly in San Francisco and the instructor would come check as I was trying to hold a pose and my legs would be shaking and he would smile and say “Relax. why so tense? Relax.” and he would take my hand that I was holding, as instructed, with the tips of thumb and finger all touching and feel the muscle and say with a gentle smile “relax it’s too tense.” But I knew there’s no way to hold my hand in that position without using that muscle. It has to be tense! Except for the fact that when he did it, it was soft like a baby. Relaxing is not necessarily easy or comfortable, but this is the deep relaxing we most need. The fasting and restrictions allow us to take away some of the layers. To return us to our unadorned selves, to what is truly most important to us. We’re trying to help each other do this as a community, which is much better than waiting to have those layers stripped away in a crisis.

Here’s some random practical advice you’ve probably already heard. I kept thinking about this year as I prepared these sermons so I wanted to share it: Do not drive your car through water if you can’t tell how deep it is. That is a very dangerous thing to do and I can imagine myself ignoring that very sound advice. Why? Because sometimes there are places I just feel I need to go. There’s somewhere I’m going that is very important to me and I’m looking at that water flowing across the road and thinking, “I can make it!”

That’s the kind of situation where the layers come off quickly! When the car stalls in the water and won’t restart – the first layer comes off: MY PLANS! “I won’t make it to the airport on time!” Or: there goes the birthday party, or the meeting, or whatever it is. And now, I need a tow truck.

And the water is rising.

And it doesn’t take long to realize the engine is flooded and probably a lost cause. Next Layer: “MY CAR!!” My stuff!

And the water is rising

And it turns out it doesn’t take very deep water to start pushing around a car. And now the desperation rises as we wonder: how can I get out of this car safely?

Now the plans don’t matter and the car doesn’t matter – not at all. What matters is our unadorned lives. What matters are the last conversations I had with the people I love. What matters is being able to get back home.

Yom Kippur is trying to get us to that place without needing miss the plane or destroy the car. We need to peel off the layers, or to relax all our efforts to keep ourselves so well covered up. We need to do this in order to really take account of our lives and make repair. And hopefully we can discover the unique pleasure of not needing to cover up.

Those layers, of desires and tension often serve to cover up what we don't want to see – layers of protection on a wound, something we prefer not to look at or acknowledge. There is a midrash (Vayikra Rabba 7:2) on the sacrifices that expands on this point. I began with the opening line of the Torah reading in the *Maftir aliyah*. The rest of it is all about the sacrifices that were brought on this day. In the Torah, clear description is given about the high technical standards for a sacrifice and a list of all the things that make an animal unfit as an offering.

The midrash states:

Rabbi Aba bar Yudan taught: All that God prohibited in an animal sacrifice, God accepts in a human being. What is prohibited in an offering? When a person offers, from the herd or the flock, a sacrifice of well-being to the Lord. . . it must, be without blemish; there must be no defect in it. Anything blind, or broken, or maimed, or with a wart, such you shall not offer to the Lord.”

[But] All these things, which render a sacrifice unfit, God fully accepts in a human being. Which we learn from the verse: “A crushed and broken heart God will not despise.” (Psalms 51:19)

When a normal person has to use a utensil that is broken, they are embarrassed. But it is not so with God. All God's vessels are broken.

“All God's vessels,” that's all of us who have such potential to bring holiness into the world. None of us is without our failings and brokenness.

In the year we find ways to cover over our brokenness, to put on layers – and that can be a necessary and appropriate thing to do. We need protection; we need to make it through the day. On Yom Kippur we try to relax from that need and to make the passage into the new year with our integrity *and* our imperfections.

We started with the paradox of how to understand Yom Kippur, a *Shabbat Shabbaton*, a Sabbath of Sabbaths and yet a time when we “afflict ourselves.” I want to end with another paradox of the wholeness and self-fulfillment that comes with connecting to our brokenness: the insight of the Kotzker Rebbe who said “there is nothing so whole as a broken heart.”

May you have a day of challenging relaxation, and find wholeness in reconnecting with your unadorned selves.