

**Yom Kippur 5775 - Afflict, Respond, Sing: What is אָת-נִפְשֵׁיכֶם?**

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What is the nature of Yom Kippur? What is most immediate to us probably is the restrictions on eating, drinking, sexual relations, leather shoes and perfume/anointing. These are the same as the other full fast day of the year, *Tisha B'av*, the ninth day of the month of Av - the great day of suffering. So you might think that the fasting is to increase our suffering to make us more contrite and humble that thus more forgivable from God's point of view. But here we are on Shabbat, and Shabbat is supposed to be a day of rest and enjoyment.

In fact, Shabbat can not be host to a day of mourning. For example, personal mourning rituals of shiva are not observed on Shabbat. Someone in mourning removes the ribbon or ripped garment that is the sign of mourning and does not "sit" on Shabbat. If the ninth of Av falls on Shabbat, the the fasting and mourning rituals are postponed until the tenth. So on Shabbat Yom Kippur we are between these extremes of rest and joy on the one hand and anxiety and suffering on the other. So, what is the nature of Yom Kippur? What is the nature of the fast? What are we doing here?

First I'm going to tell two stories, one from the midrash and one from the hassidic tradition. Then we'll look at the specific biblical instruction behind the prohibitions on Yom Kippur and see some different possibilities.

This story is a from a midrash I have shared before in different settings so I hope it is familiar to some of you. I mentioned the ninth of Av, the great day of mourning in the Jewish calendar. Six days later is the fifteenth of Av which is a day of celebration when the young single women dressed in white and went out into the fields and found their husbands. Now it's called Jewish Valentines Day. What's the connection between this intense day of mourning and then six days later a day of celebration? The explanation arises out of the original horrible event on the ninth of Av. This was the day, according to the ancient Rabbis, when the spies returned from scouting the land, discouraged the people

about their capacity to enter it. It was then that God decreed that the generation who knew slavery would not enter the land but instead, would all die in the wilderness. The midrash tells it this way:[Sefer Aggadah p. 99 from Eicha Rabba 33, Midrash Shmuel 32:5]

During all the years that Israel was in the wilderness, on the eve of every ninth of Av, Moses sent a herald throughout the camp to proclaim, "Go out and dig graves, go out and dig graves!" and the people went out and dug graves, in which they spent the night. In the morning, the herald went out and announced, "Let those who are alive separate from the dead!" The living then stood up and found themselves some fifteen thousand short. [And so it continued year after year in this way] until Israel was sixty myriads short.

In the last of the forty years, they did the same thing and, upon finding that they were all still alive, said: "Perhaps we have erred in calculating the new moon." So, to make sure [they had the correct date], they did the same thing the night of the tenth, each one spending it in the grave he had dug. In the morning, all of them again stood up alive. Then, to make quite sure, they did the same thing the night of the eleventh, twelfth, thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth of the month. Finally, when they saw that not one of them had died, they said: "It appears that the Holy One has cancelled the decree from over us." [בטלה] They declared that day a festival. Accordingly, the sages taught: Israel had no days more festive than the fifteenth of Av and the Day of Atonement.

וכך שנו חכמים: לא היו ימים טובים לישראל כחמשה עשר (ט"ו) באב וכיום הכיפורים

Story number two is from the Hassidic Tradition about the Baal Shem Tov, Master of the Good Name, the catalytic figure who created the movement.

Once, in Elul the Baal Shem came to a certain town and asked the people who leads the prayers there on the Days of Awe. They replied "by the Rav of the town." The Baal Shem asked: "What is his manner of praying?"

They said: "On Yom Kippur he recites all the confessions of sin in the **most cheerful tones**." The Baal Shem sent for the Rav and asked him the cause of this strange approach. The Rav answered: "The least among the servants of the king, he, whose task it is to sweep the outer courtyard free of dirt, sings a merry song as he works for he does what he is doing to gladden the king." Said the Baal Shem : "May my lot be with yours."

With those stories in mind, let's look at what the Torah says about the nature of Yom Kippur. Three times in Torah reading we hear some variation of the instruction for the people  $\text{וְעָנִיתֶם אֶת-נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם}$  which Lev Shalem translates "practice self denial."  $\text{וְעָנִיתֶם אֶת-נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם}$  - Both of the key words here, like many in Hebrew have a wide range of meanings. *Nefesh*,  $\text{נֶפֶשׁ}$  It is the essential living part of us so generally it means a person, a living being, and also breath or soul. *Eenitem*,  $\text{עָנִיתֶם}$  from the root Ayin-Nun-Hey means in this case, to oppress or afflict.  $\text{וְעָנִיתֶם אֶת-נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם}$  is the biblical instruction of what the people are supposed to do

on Yom Kippur. If you were reading along with the Torah chanting, you know that this is the *only* thing we're supposed to do.

Biblically this is a day of ritual sacrifice performed by the High Priest and his assistants on behalf of the people. The High Priest is doing the perilous work of entering the Holy-of-Holies. The Torah is very clear about the danger of this task and that the High Priest's life hangs in the balance. The people are on the periphery fasting - like the Jews of Shushan in solidarity with Queen Esther before she risked her life to enter king Achashvero's inner chamber. The fasting is a way to be in solidarity with the one who is most vulnerable. We unsettle our routines, deprive ourselves and connect with our own vulnerability as the High Priest or Queen Esther, risk their lives on our behalf.

A clear example of this usage is from the first part of the story of Sarah and Hagar that occurs before the reading for the first day of Rosh Hashanah. The two women are in conflict. Avram says to Sarai "she's your servant, do what you think is right." and then:

וְתַעֲנֶהָ שָׂרַי וְתִבְרַח מִפָּנֶיהָ:

"And Sarai *afflicted* her and she fled from her."

There are also couple of examples of the word used this way in the Haftarah reading. When describing the people's sinfulness Isaiah says:

לָמָּה צָמְנוּ וְלֹא רָאִיתָ? עֵינֵינוּ נִפְשָׁנוּ וְלֹא תִרְעֶה?

Why have we fasted, and yet you have not seen?

We have afflicted our souls and you have not understood. (58:3)

and then later in the reading...

If... you offer your compassion to the hungry,

וּתְפַק לְרַעֲב וּנְפֹשׁךְ

and satisfy the afflicted soul;

וּנְפֹשׁ גַּעְוָה תִשְׂבֵּיעַ

וְזָרַח בַּחֹשֶׁךְ אֹרֶךְ, וְאַפְלַתְךָ כַּצָּהָרִים

then shall your light rise in darkness, and your gloom be as the noon-day; (58:10)

אֶת-נַפְשֵׁיכֶם - afflict yourselves, practice self denial. So that accounts for the anxiety and deprivation, but why do we do it on Shabbat? Where's the joy?

## Respond

ענה has another and more common meaning than "afflict," it also means to answer or respond. We find this usage at one of the most dramatic moments in our Torah, the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai (Ex 19:19)

וַיְהִי קוֹל הַשּׁוֹפָר, הוֹלֵךְ וְחֹזֵק מְאֹד; מֹשֶׁה יְדַבֵּר, וַהֲאֱלֹהִים יַעֲנֵנוּ בְּקוֹל.

And when the voice of the shofar waxed louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God *answered* him by a voice.

Another example: one of the piyyutim, liturgical poems for this time of year is Aneynu! Answer us! (not "afflict us!")

This range of meaning in the word ענה that includes "respond" and "afflict" shows up in our Passover Hagadah because Matzah is called "Lechem Oni" The bread of affliction or, in a traditional hagadah in Aramaic - Ha Lachmah Anya [dee achalu avatana b'ar'ah d'Meetzrayim]. Along comes the sage Samuel who reads it as related to *oneh*, answer "the bread over which many answers are given" [Pes 115b-116a]

From this meaning of "answer" and "respond," my teacher Art Green reads עניתם את-נפשתיכם not as "afflict your selves," but "make yourselves more able to respond." Become more sensitive and attentive, able to get out of bed when the beloved is knocking, *Response-able*. That is what we are supposed to be doing on Yom Kippur. Become more Responsible. What does that mean?

In the psalm for Yom Kippur, Psalm 51, which is reflection on Teshuva, it says: (51:15).

אֲלֶמְדָּה פִּשְׁעִים דָּרַכִּי וְחַטָּאִים אֵלַי יָשׁוּבוּ:

Then I will teach transgressors Your ways; and sinners shall return to You.

This means King David, the author of the psalm, has seen his own failings and responds by helping others avoid his mistakes. One challenge if course is to avoid sinning in the first place, the next is the way we respond to our own experience and shortcomings in order to bring righteousness into the world.

This is how Isaiah is asking us to respond to Yom Kippur and the fast. Not as individuals

who narrowly follow the rules and say "I'm so Holy!" or "I'm so hungry!" But as part of a community. The fast can sensitize us to the real experience of people in need, people who are hungry and vulnerable.

Let's take a closer look at those verses from Isaiah to see how this works.

וּתְפַק לְרַעֲב נַפְשָׁךְ. Our book translates נַפְשָׁךְ as compassion, but it is again the word for person or soul. And the word is used again in the second half of the verse.

and satisfy the afflicted soul; וְנַפְשׁ נַעֲנָה תִשְׂבִּיעַ

What Isaiah, and Rabbi Green, are saying is that וְנַפְשֵׁיכֶם אֶת-נַפְשֵׁיכֶם the fasting and affliction of your self on Yom Kippur is supposed to allow you to connect to the afflictions and vulnerabilities of others. "Share your soul with the hungry!" In other words: You are hungry in order to be able to expand your *nefesh* and have compassion with those who are hungry . And then:

וְזָרַח בְּחֹשֶׁךְ אֹרֶךְ / וְאַפְלַתְךָ כְּצַהָרִים

*Your light will shine fourth to illuminate your darkness.*

It is not God's light that Isaiah promises, but the release of *our own capacity* for illumination as we participate in Holy work (and what *nachas* God gets from that!). That's why that joyous Rav in the Hassidic story, who feels like the lowest most insignificant servant of the king, is singing: because he knows that he is doing the King's work, in partnership with the King.

## SONG

That release of light and sense of joy leads right to the third meaning of ענה I want to share with you. This next reading from R. Shlomo Riskin. Here's an example from one of the other most dramatic Torah moments - Redemption, The Song of the Sea. [Ex 15:20-21]

וַתִּקַּח מִרְיָם הַגְּבִיּוֹתָהּ אֶחָדָה אֶחָדָה אֶחָדָה, אֶת-הַתֵּף--בְּיָדָהּ; וַתִּצְאֵן כָּל-הַנְּשִׁים אַחֲרֶיהָ, בְּתַפִּים וּבְמַחֲלֹת.

And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances.

כֹּה וַתַּעַן לָהֶם, מִרְיָם: שִׁירוּ לַיהוָה כִּי-גָאֹה גָאֹה, שׁוּס וְרָכְבוּ רָמָה בָּיָם. {ס}

There's our word again... Miriam afflicted them?! No She answered them? No, there's no question. Miriam sang to them! עָנָה can also mean to sing or chant. And so, in this reading we translate , -- as Enable your souls to sing!

Affliction, Responsiveness and Song - that's quite a range. How does song fit into our

experience of Yom Kippur? Central to the experience of these holidays and all Jewish sacred service is prayer. (Of course this is a major challenge and perhaps one of the reasons that some still pray for a return to animal sacrifice.) And for many of us, an essential part of our prayer is singing *together* in prayer. This is not an extra embellishment, but central to the prayer experience. As my teacher R. Nechemia Polan says: “melody is not an unessential extra, melody is like the yoga mat that allows you to stretch out more fully.”

In singing, there is a physical representation of the spiritual task. Singing together can be a deeply embodied teaching about the task that I described a moment ago, of expanding our souls, expanding our life force, in order to take in and accommodate others. We are combining our voice, our song, our vibrations with those around us. (Now I know some do not enjoy singing and find song as, or even more challenging as Hebrew prayer. Yet you still can drum or hum and tap and share your vibration and prayer in all sorts of ways - short answer: no excuses.) In your prayer and song, I encourage you to try to hear the sounds and feel the vibration of your own voice, and hear and feel the sound and vibrations of the voices around you. You are whole unto yourself, and you are also a part of something larger. Feeling that connection releases energy and feels right. Again this is not the spiritual task, but hopefully can help open us to the task. As Joey Wiesenberg taught us when he was here, the point of singing together is to open our hearts.

Judaism is very good at multiple interpretations and holding multiple meanings. All three meanings, Afflict, Respond and Sing are a part of what we are doing today. They are interdependent: Our deprivation and vulnerability, our greater responsiveness and our shared song.

On Yom Kippur we often wish one another a *Tzom Kal*, an easy fast. I am certainly not going to wish you an easy fast - I have much higher hopes than that. I wish you a fast that reminds you of your vulnerability. And that this vulnerability allows you to connect more deeply with family, community and the world. May your *nefesh* be opened in compassion, and may your mouth be opened in songs of celebration.

וְזָרַח בְּחֹשֶׁךְ אֹרֶךְ

May your darkness vanish as your dazzling light shines forth.