

**Is THIS The Fast I Desire?!... Fasting Better
Yom Kippur 5783- Torah Derasha
10.5.22**

Part 1- Before the 1st Aliyah

Good Yuntif! If I was going to create a podcast, I think I would entitle it: “kids say the darndest things.” I’m convinced it would be a hit! Between things I hear our students in our Eric B. Jacobs Early Childhood Education Center say and things I hear my twins Meyer and Gavi say, I have A LOT of good material. This week’s podcast would feature a conversation I had with Meyer and Gavi just a few days ago. Meyer and Gavi are now six. How in the world did that happen?! n (that would be a topic for a whole other podcast). Well, here’s what took place. The last few weeks Meyer and Gavi and I have been talking a lot about the themes of the High Holidays. We have had conversations about the shofar, teshuvah, saying we are sorry, turning to a New Year and more. Then a few days ago, they overheard someone say to me: I hope you have an “easy fast, tzom kal.” This led to Gavi asking me a series of questions about fasting. And then, all of a sudden, Meyer’s eyes lit up. He looked at me and said: “I can fast better than you.” I responded: “Meyer you are not old enough to fast.” But again he insisted: “No, Daddy, I can fast better than you.” And then he proceeded to run as fast as he could in circles around our living room, using what he calls his super speed. I joined in for a while and let me tell you, Meyer was right. He definitely fasted better than me.

Fasting is our quintessential Yom Kippur observance. Mention Yom Kippur and I think the first association that most people make is with fasting. Fasting is an ancient practice, however the Torah itself does not explicitly instruct us to fast on Yom Kippur.

Rather, in several places in the Torah it says that on the seventh month on the tenth day of the month (ie Yom Kippur), “*ee-nee-tem et naf-sho-tei-chem*, we are to practice self-denial,” or more literally “you shall afflict your souls.” We will hear that phrase three times in our Torah reading this morning, in the 5th, 6th, and maftir aliyot.

Over time, the rabbis interpreted the phrase *eenetem et nafshoteichem* to mean fasting. On Yom Kippur we afflict our souls by removing worldly pleasure such as wearing leather, bathing, engaging in sexual relations, and most of all, by fasting. But why is fasting such an important element of Yom Kippur? Why has it become the central ritual practice of today, the holiest day of the year? Do we fast to torture ourselves? Who wouldn’t love a good old pastrami sandwich right now? Or some delicious kiddush from the Magical Sweet Shop? Maybe a slice of pizza or a big ol’ piece of cake?! Am I making you hungry? Am I afflicting your soul? You’re welcome!

But in all seriousness, the point of fasting is not to torture or punish ourselves at all. In his book, Seasons of the Mind, Rabbi Bernard Raskas (z”l) cites four primary reason why we fast on Yom Kippur.

1. As a sign of contrition for the sins we have committed.

As our stomachs grow ever more hungry over the course of today, it is a physical reminder of the ways we have fallen short. **It is not a means for self-punishment, but rather the pangs serve as a reminder. Through our misdeeds and shortcomings we have hurt others and ourselves.**

2. As an indication of self-discipline

Teshuvah requires discipline. Our fasting on Yom Kippur demonstrates our willingness to commit ourselves to to discipline. **How can we atone for our excesses toward others unless we can curb appetites which depend on no one but ourselves? To set boundaries for our own conduct in this very private matter is to begin the path toward controlling our public behavior.**

3. To enable us to focus on the spiritual

Yom Kippur is a day where we try to focus on what matters most in life. By removing physical amenities and pleasures from our lives, we are left with the spiritual. Food and material well-being can be a distraction to the physical, so for one day we remove all that may serve as material distractions.

4. To awaken in us compassion.

Fasting on Yom Kippur is an act of solidarity with the suffering of the Jewish people and all people everywhere. Through fasting we are drawn closer to all who live lives of deprivation. The Yom Kippur fast is intended to move us to turn back to the world prepared to act with love and compassion.

Four good explanations of why we fast on Yom Kippur. So as we begin our Torah

reading this morning, let me you: **why are you fasting today? What meaning does it add to your life?**

Part 2—After 4th Aliyah

So, I've given everyone some time to think about the question: why are you fasting today? Earlier I mentioned four possible reasons for fasting:

- As a sign of contrition for the sins we have committed.
- As an indication of self-discipline
- To enable us to focus on the spiritual
- To awaken in us compassion.

Allow me to add a fifth reason why we fast today, a reason that I find particularly meaningful. Fasting can bring about a strong sense of cleansing, or even catharsis. On a physical level, this may be a function of sweating out the garbage from industrialized food, but on an emotional level, maybe it's about cleansing the accumulated grime of ignored emotions and getting some insight into what lies beneath. Our fasting today can be healing. As I spoke about on Rosh Hashanah, our fasting today can help us become more open to the cracks that exist in our lives. It can help us wrestle with the notion that we are perfectly imperfect.

Even more, fasting helps to remind me of my humanity and it also helps to remind me about what I am truly hungry for. It's a long list. So long, that I could make a list using each letter of the alphabet. In fact, I did. Not just today but all year, we hunger for: Acceptance, Belonging, Certainty, Dignity, Emotional Stability, Friendship, God, Health, Happiness, Healing, and Hope, Integrity in Government, Justice, Kindness, Love, Meaning, New Beginnings, Openness and Opportunities, Peace, Quietude, Respect,

Safety and Security, Truth, Unconditional Love, Values, Wisdom, Xenial Relationships, and a Zest and a Zeal for Life. What do you hunger for?

Today is a day to think about hunger. Yes, our stomachs may grumble throughout the day, but with each grumble can we ask ourselves: what do I truly hunger for today and in the new year of 5783? In this way our fasts become a very personal experience, and an opportunity for soul searching. But what about communally? How can our fasts also be a communal experience. Yes, there is catharsis and solidarity in the knowledge that our stomachs are all panging together. But even more, our fasts move from the personal to the collective with the realization that there is a common hunger we are all fasting for: tikkun olam. Our fasting today is meaningless if it doesn't help lead us to change and growth in our own lives, in our community, and in our world. Fasting is not simply about leaving food behind for a day, it is about understanding that it is our responsibility to leave the world in a better place than we found it. Our Haftarah will pick up on this idea when we turn to it a bit later in our service, but as we continue now with our Torah reading, let's also take some more time to reflect on our fasting. And by the way, this goes for everyone; everyone who is fasting and everyone who is unable to fast for medical reasons or otherwise. **What do you hunger for today for yourself, for your family, for our community, and for our world? How will you use your hunger today to inspire you into action tomorrow? How will we hunger for tikkun olam together?**

Part 3- Before the Haftarah

We are talking this morning about the meaning behind fasting on Yom Kippur. the Torah reading and the maftir readings that we just read both command us that today is a day today to practice self-denial, or more literally, *ee-nee-tem nafshoteichem*. All agree that fasting is part of the self-denial that we practice today. But the meaning behind fasting is up for debate. Most commonly we think of fasting today as an attempt to exonerate ourselves from our wrongdoings, earning us a clean slate (and a hearty break fast). But that misses the point. The primary purpose of fasting is revealed in the stirring *haftarah* from the prophet Isaiah that we are about to hear.

Isaiah says, in the name of God: *“Is such the fast I desire, a day for people to starve their bodies? Is it bowing the head like a bulrush and lying in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call that a fast?...” “No, this is the fast I desire: to unlock the 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 them, and do not ignore your own flesh...”*

Isaiah’s words are haunting. They hit us right in our hungry kishkes. Isaiah teaches: we don’t fast for the sake of fasting, rather, we fast to awaken our empathy. We fast so that we can briefly experiencing the suffering, hunger, and nakedness that others experience year-round. In other words: We do not fast merely to awaken the hunger within ourselves to do teshuvah, we also fast to awaken the hunger within us to turn towards tikkun olam , the Jewish value of repairing the world.

Today we hunger so that tomorrow we will help feed the world. A few years ago, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks (z"l), the former chief rabbi of the UK, wrote an article entitled: "Why Fighting Poverty and Hunger is a Religious Duty." In the article he wrote: "One of my favourite Jewish sayings is, 'Many people worry about their own stomachs and the state of other people's souls.' The real task is to do the opposite: to worry about other people's stomachs and the state of your own soul." That's our task today.

Today we hunger so that tomorrow we will help feed the world. And it doesn't even have to wait until tomorrow. It shouldn't. Last night we collected hundreds of bags of donated canned goods that tomorrow will be delivered to the Besty and Peter Fischer JFCS Food pantry. Our teens helped to collect the bags and load them in the truck. They then studied this morning's haftarah together and proceeded to make about 75 sandwiches and brown bag lunches which tomorrow will be delivered by Deenie Ettenson and Bobbi Grossman to the Neighborhood Center in Camden. As their stomachs grumbled, our teens made sandwiches for those in need.

It's obviously not just about food, but I guess we have food on our minds today and that's the point. As we will hear the prophet Isaiah implore us in a few moments, today we should feel (unsatisfied and) insatiated. May we feel hungry to both look within ourselves and to look out into the world in order to change and improve. May our hunger lead to commitment; a commitment to work to create the world as we want it to be, attuned to the needs of the most vulnerable among us. Today, let us not wish one another an easy fast. **The fast is not supposed to be easy.** It is supposed to challenge

us. Yes physically, but even more emotionally and spiritually. Rather **let us wish one another a MEANINGFUL fast**. Today, like two wise little kids recently taught me, may we **fast better** by turning to compassion and seeking to make the world a better place.

Wishing everyone a meaningful fast.

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