

Fasting as Part of Prayer

In this week's portion, *Bechukkotai*, the first thing God promises us if we follow the commandments is rain:

אִם-בְּחֻקֹּתַי תֵּלְכוּ וְאֶת-מִצְוֹתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ וְעָשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם:
וְנָתַתִּי גִשְׁמֵיכֶם בְּעֵתָם וְנָתַנָּה הָאָרֶץ יְבוּלָהּ וְעֵץ הַשָּׁדֶה יִתֵּן פְּרִיָּו:

If you follow My laws and faithfully observe My commandments,
I will grant your rains in their season, so that the earth shall yield its produce and
the trees of the field their fruit. [Lev. 26:3-4]

Later in Deuteronomy, the same promise is repeated:

If you shall follow diligently My commandments which I command you this day,
love the Lord your God, and serve him with all your heart and with all your soul,
then I will give you the rain of your land in its due season, the first rain and the
latter rain, that you may gather in your grain, and your wine, and your oil. [Deut.
11:13-14]

Rain meant the difference between food and famine. No rain, no water to drink, no crops. No crops, no food. If the rain was late in coming, the ancient rabbis would order the community to fast. The Mishna says:

If the 17th of Marcheshvan came and no rain fell, the distinguished individuals begin to fast three [dawn-to-dusk] fasts... If the new moon of Kislev came and [still] no rain fell, the Bet Din orders the [entire] community to fast three [dawn-to-dusk] fasts. [Ta'anit 10a]

The Gemara adds:

The Sages taught in a baraita: "A person must not say: 'I am only a student, and therefore I am not worthy to consider myself a distinguished individual [and therefore I should not fast].' Rather, all students of the Sages are considered distinguished." [Ta'anit 10b]

So, for purposes of fasting, even students must consider themselves "distinguished"! (Nice try!)

The only fasting the Torah mandates is Yom Kippur. It does not mandate or even mention fasting for rain. That practice was instituted by the rabbis. It is rarely done nowadays, but it is done. The Chief Rabbis of Israel sometimes call for it. In 2017, Chief Rabbi Goldstein of Cape Town, South Africa, called for all South African Jews to fast for a half-day for rain in their country.

This ritual makes people feel they are not helpless, that there is something they can do to control the events around them. Because they feel deeply that they will not get something for nothing, they are convinced they have to give God something in exchange for God granting their petition. Fortunately, they don't sacrifice their children anymore, animal sacrifices are on hold, and material donations are out of fashion. This leaves prayer. But prayer is just words, and they feel that God wants something more than words, something more personal in exchange. So they offer their hunger, their pain.

Fasting to get something from God is a very old idea. Consider the example of King David, who fasted so his sick son would live:

The Lord afflicted the child that Uriah's wife had borne to David, and it became critically ill. David entreated God for the boy. David fasted, and he went in and spent the night lying on the ground...

On the seventh day the child died... David asked his servants, "Is the child dead?" "Yes," they replied. Thereupon David rose from the ground; he bathed and anointed himself, and he changed his clothes. He went into the House of the Lord and prostrated himself. Then he went home and asked for food, which they set before him, and he ate. His courtiers asked him, "Why have you acted in this manner? While the child was alive, you fasted and wept; but now that the child is dead, you rise and take food!"

He replied, "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept because I thought: 'Who knows? The Lord may have pity on me, and the child may live.' But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will never come back to me."

David consoled his wife Bathsheba; he went to her and lay with her. She bore a son and she named him Solomon. [2Sam. 12:16-24]

The fasting didn't work, so David quickly moved on. But he got another son, destined to succeed him. Perhaps God wanted Solomon the Wise, and not the older son, to succeed David.

Or the example of King Ahab:

When Ahab heard these words, he rent his clothes and put sackcloth on his body. He fasted and lay in sackcloth and walked about subdued.

Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite: "Have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? Because he has humbled himself before Me, I will not bring the disaster in his lifetime. I will bring the disaster upon his house in his son's time." [1Kings 21:27–29]

So his fasting brought him a small but appreciable reprieve.

Israel fasted to ask God for victory in war, and got it:

Then all the Israelites, all the army, went up and came to Bethel and they sat there, weeping before the Lord. They fasted that day until evening... The Lord [then said], "...tomorrow I will deliver [your enemies] into your hands." [Judg. 20:26–28; also 1Sam. 7:6, 14:24]

The psalmist says:

Yet, when they were ill, my dress was sackcloth.
I kept a fast— may the thing for which I prayed happen to me! [Ps.35:13]

Evidently, then, fasting sometimes works, sometimes, doesn't, and sometimes works part way.

Is fasting to get something from God a good idea? Not all rabbis thought so. The Talmud says:

- Shmuel said: He who fasts is called a sinner...
- Rabbi Eleazar said: He is called holy [if he can fast with no harm to his body, because everyone has a duty not to damage his body]...
- Resh Lakish said: He is called pious...
- Rabbi Shesheth said: The young yeshiva student who fasts [is not meritorious]...
- There is no public fast [among the Jews of] Babylonia except for Tish'a b'Av.
- Rav Yirmeyah bar Abba said that Resh Lakish said: A Torah scholar is not permitted to ... fast, because [his fasting] reduces [his strength for the] heavenly service [of Torah study and mitzvot.] [Ta'anit 11a-b]

In Tosefta, we read:

Rabbi Yosei said: One has no right to afflict himself by fasting, lest he become a burden on the community, which will then have to provide for him. [Tosefta Ta'anit 2:12]

Another story looks down on even praying for mercy:

In the years of Rav Yosef there was a divine anger, manifested by world hunger. The Sages said to Rav Yosef: Let the Master pray for mercy concerning this decree. He said to them: Now, if in the case of the prophet Elisha ... he would not pray for mercy at a time of divine anger and famine, [so] should I pray for mercy? [Ketubot 106a]

Fasting was practiced by mystics and kabbalists. Hassidic Jews were opposed to it.

The rabbis of the Talmud had a rule: Don't overdo prayer, don't ask God too much, don't pray for more than one thing at a time:

In the days of Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahmani there was a famine and a deadly plague.

People asked: "What shall we do? Shall we pray for [the removal of] both? That is not possible. [We do not pray for two things at a time.] Let us then pray for [the removal of] the plague and we will endure the famine."

Thereupon Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahmani said to them: "Let us rather pray [for the removal of] the famine, because when the All-Merciful gives plenty, He gives it for the living, [not for the dead,] as it is said [in the Book of Psalms]: "You open Your hand and give to each *living* thing according to his need". [Ps. 145:16]

How do we know that we do not pray for two things [at the same time]?

-Because it is written [in Ezra]:

So we fasted and petitioned our God concerning "this" [in the singular].

[Ezra 8:23]

This indicates that there were other things for which they could have prayed [but didn't].

-In the Land of Israel, it was reported in the name of Rabbi Haggai that it could [also] be deduced from this verse [in Daniel]:

... Implore the God of Heaven for help concerning "this" mystery [in the singular]. [Dan. 2:18]

This implies that there were other things for which they could have prayed [but didn't].

[Taanit 8b]

Nevertheless, people do pray for more than one thing at a time.

Petitioning the divine comes naturally to most people, with or without the "enhancement" of fasting:

-Some people don't pray, believing it's like talking to a wall. The old joke about people praying at the Western Wall comes to mind. ("It's like talking to a wall!")

-Others believe prayer focuses mental energy, and accomplishes its goal in mind-over-matter fashion. In that case, prayer is more likely to come to fruition when a lot of people are praying for the same thing at the same time, which the rabbis always encourage.

-Some believe the value of fasting is to focus the mind on the prayer. Others object, "But does it, if you are hungry?"

-Most people believe prayer, to be effective, must be accompanied by giving something in return: a person, an animal, food, ornate objects, improved behavior, or some degree of comfort.

Our tradition includes fixed prayers at fixed times, with the option to add others of your own. The rest is up to us.

Shabbat shalom.