

THE NESIYA INSTITUTE
High Holy Day Study Guide
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FASTING & FIXING:
SELF-DENIAL AND THE JOY OF REPAIRING THE WORLD



הַכֶּזֶה יִהְיֶה צוֹם אֲבַחְרֶהוּ יוֹם עֲנוּת אָדָם נִפְשׁוֹ?...
הֲלוֹא זֶה צוֹם אֲבַחְרֶהוּ...
פָּרֶס לְרַעֲב לַחֲמֹד וְעֲנִיִּים מְרוּדִים תְּבִיא בַּיִת
כִּי תִרְאֶה עָרֶם וְכִסְיֹתוֹ וּמִבְּשָׂרָךְ לֹא תִתְעַלֵּם...
וְהֵייתָ כְּגֹן רְוָה, וּכְמוֹצָא מִיָּם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִכָּזְבוּ מִיָּמָיו.
וּבְנוּ מִמֶּנּוּ חֲרֻבוֹת עוֹלָם, מוֹסְדֵי דוֹר וְדוֹר תִּקְוָמָם.

Is this the fast I desire, a day for people to afflict themselves?...

No, this is the fast I desire...

To share your bread with the hungry, and to take the wretched poor into your home;

When you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to ignore your own flesh and blood...

You shall be like a fully watered garden

And like a source of water whose waters never fail.

People from among you shall rebuild ancient ruins,

You shall restore foundations laid long ago.

– *Isaiah 58:5-12*



Sources for Reflection

YOU SHALL AFFLICT YOURSELVES

²⁹ And this shall be to you a law for all time: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict yourselves; and you shall do no manner of work, neither the citizen nor the alien who resides among you. ³⁰ For on this day atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you of all your sins; you shall be clean before the Lord. ³¹ It shall be a sabbath of complete rest for you, and you shall afflict yourselves; it is a law for all time.

– *Leviticus 16:29-31*

LIMITING AFFLICTION

On the Day of Atonement it is forbidden to eat and drink, to wash, to anoint, to lace on shoes, and to engage in sexual intercourse.

A sick person – they feed him according to the instruction of experts. If there are no experts available, they feed him according to his own instructions, until he says "Enough."

– *Mishnah Yoma 8:1, 5*

A MEANS TO PAUSE

Rabba and R. Joseph taught from a group of midrashim known as "Sifre Debai Rav": From where do we learn that it is forbidden on Yom Kippur: bathing, anointing, wearing shoes, and having sexual intercourse? From what is written [Leviticus 16:31]: "A Sabbatical (*shabbaton*) – a cessation (*shvut*).

– *Talmud Yoma 74a*

LIKE A SOURCE WHOSE WATERS NEVER FAIL

Is this the fast I desire, a day for people to afflict themselves? Is it bowing the head like a bulrush and lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is this what you call a fast, a day pleasing to the Lord? No, this is the fast I desire: to unlock the chains of wickedness, and untie the cords of the yoke. To let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke. To share your bread with the hungry, and to take the wretched poor into your home; when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to ignore your own flesh and blood.

Then your light will burst through like the dawn and your healing spring up quickly... If you banish the yoke from among you, the threatening hand and evil speech, and you offer yourself to the hungry and satisfy the afflicted soul – then your light will shine in darkness, and your gloom will be like the noon.

The Lord will guide you always; he will quench your thirst in parched places and give strength to your bones. You shall be like a fully watered garden, like a source of water whose waters never fail. People from your midst shall rebuild ancient ruins, you shall restore foundations laid long ago. And you shall be called "Repairer of fallen walls, restorer of lanes for habitation."

– *From the Haftarah of Yom Kippur, Isaiah 58:5-12*

THE JOY OF YOM KIPPUR

Rabbi Akiva said: Happy are you Israel. Before whom do you purify yourselves? Who purifies you? Your Father in Heaven, as it is written: "I will sprinkle pure water upon you, and you shall be purified" (Ezek. 36:25), and it is also written, The Lord is the "*mikveh* (hope) of Israel" (Jer. 14:8) Just as a *mikveh* (ritual bath) purifies the impure, so does the Holy Blessed One purify Israel.

– *Mishnah Yoma 8:9*

THE FAST I WANT

On your fast day you wear clothes that were made by Chinese prisoners, and shoes that were cried over by terrified children in loathsome sweatshops, and the books you hold in your hands are filthy with the tears of dying forests... The fast I want is one that will inspire you to share your food with the hungry, to redistribute the wealth of this land fairly, to build affordable housing for the homeless.

– *Rabbi Shefa Gold, Interpretation of Isaiah 58*

TRUE CONTRITION AND THE SUFFERING OF OTHERS

[The people of Israel] are eager to learn God's ways, eager for the "nearness of God." They starve their bodies on fast days, bow their heads in penitence like bulrushes before the wind, even lie in sackcloth and ashes...

Yet Isaiah indicates that such outward show, such purely physical scourging of the body, is not the penitence God requires. *True contrition expresses itself in action designed to relieve the suffering of others...* God is more concerned with our behavior to other human beings, particularly those less fortunate than ourselves, than with acts of self-abasement designed to impress the deity.

The structure and syntax of the text foreground the cause and effect of redemption: *when* we fulfill our duties to our fellow beings, perform the *mitzvot bein adam lechavero* (injunctions governing our behavior to others), *then* shall we achieve personal and national redemption.

An image of dawning light penetrating nighttime gloom and midday sunshine replacing the dark, joy replacing sorrow (58:10), ushers in a further series of similes and metaphors that rise to a superb crescendo. The object of redemption becomes, in turn, a redeeming force. From at first being succored, with thirst slaked, like a watered garden whose withered blooms are restored to freshness, the people of Israel will themselves become an eternal source of life-giving water.

In its stress on correct interpersonal relations as a vital and essential accompaniment to ritual worship, the Yom Kippur Haftarah enlarges upon one of the central messages of Rosh Hashanah prayer, in the course of which we are assured that severe judgment and retribution for our sins can be averted by penitence (*teshuvah*), prayer (*tefila*), and charity (*tzedaka*)... None of these prescribed activities can alone bring redemption and renewal. It is precisely the combination of all of them and, most particularly, the practice of *tzedaka*, that the Yom Kippur Haftarah presents as a model of human behavior... [T]he uniqueness of Yom Kippur is to be found in the way in which it provides an annual opportunity for us to combine... a mortification of the flesh, which symbolizes penitence, and... prayer, which ideally combines confession of past sins with firm resolution to mend our behavior in everything relating to everyday human relations.

– *Alice Shalvi, "Repentance, Responsibility, and Regeneration: Reflections on Isaiah," in Beginning Anew, ed. Gail Twersky Reimer and Judith A. Kates, pp. 270, 272 (1997)*

The Nesiya Commentary

What is the relationship between fasting on Yom Kippur, self-improvement, and finding joy in repairing the world?

The most ancient biblical sources for Yom Kippur don't even specify a relationship between Yom Kippur and fasting. Leviticus speaks about a "day of atonement" in which we are commanded to "afflict" ourselves (*inui* – עִינִי) and "not do any kind of work." On Yom Kippur, the Torah states, "affliction" leads to atonement, which purifies us from all of our sins so that we become pure before God. The text also describes the day as a unique Sabbath Sabbatical (*shabbat shabbaton* – שַׁבַּת שַׁבְּתוֹן), and then repeats the commandment to afflict ourselves.

This ancient text tells us the goals of Yom Kippur, but doesn't tell us how we are supposed to achieve them. On one hand, this description of Yom Kippur seems to offer a unique opportunity for spiritual growth and transformation. But how can "affliction," a concept that seems so negative and threatening, be a tool for healthy spiritual growth? Mishnah Yoma (8:9) speaks of the joy that purification on Yom Kippur brings to the people of Israel. But how do we get from affliction to joy?

Already in the time of the prophets, the word "affliction" (*inui* – עִינִי) was understood to refer to fasting. Fasting was evidently a widely accepted practice for self-purification. Yet in the Haftarah reading of Yom Kippur, fasting is challenged as a worthy ritual pursuit by the prophet Isaiah, who bemoans the hypocrisy of a people who claim to seek God yet treat others with indifference. The prophet states clearly that the kind of "fast" that God wants is *not* one that is solely focused on ritual expressions of contrition and affliction, such as bowing the head, starving oneself and lying in sackcloth and ashes. According to Isaiah, the "fast" that God wants has no meaning without the pursuit of the ethical; there can't be any transformation in one's relationship with God without a positive transformation in one's relationship with people.

We must ask, however, whether Isaiah views all fasting as an empty gesture or whether he is simply criticizing the people for making the fast an end rather than a means to spiritual growth. Is Isaiah claiming that ritual by its very nature distracts us from the goal of seeking God through just and ethical behavior? Or is the problem in *how* we fast?

It's unlikely that Isaiah is completely disregarding the value of fasting. He uses the term "fast" twice, and in the second instance he uses the term to positively describe how God wants us to treat each other. The fast that God desires, according to Isaiah, leads to acts for others – letting the oppressed go free, feeding the hungry, housing and clothing the poor. Isaiah challenges us to see the fast as a way to make our behavior more ethical.

At first glance, the Rabbis of the Mishnah and Talmud seem to ignore Isaiah's challenge. They define "affliction" on Yom Kippur as abstention from five behaviors: eating and drinking, washing, anointing, wearing shoes, and sex.

But their definitions of "affliction" on Yom Kippur focus on activities which limit physical pleasure; they do *not* focus on the active pursuit of suffering. Self-affliction on Yom Kippur, for the Rabbis, is restricted to specific forms of self-denial. This emphasis on self-denial is reflected in their understanding of Yom Kippur as a unique and positive opportunity to experience a deep rest from the constant need to please oneself. They see the five prohibitions as essential means for experiencing a pause, a cessation (*shvut* – שְׁבוּת), from activities that give us pleasure, which is only possible on the Sabbath Sabbatical (*Shabbat Shabbaton* – שַׁבַּת שַׁבְּתוֹן) (Talmud Yoma 74a).

But can we reconcile the Rabbis's vision of ritual abstention on Yom Kippur with Isaiah's demand for a fast that leads to ethical sensitivity and acts of caring? In fact, the Rabbis' approach strengthens and gives new insight into Isaiah's message.

The Rabbis help us recognize that Yom Kippur and Shabbat are informed by the same spiritual logic, with one critical difference. On both Shabbat and Yom Kippur, we withdraw from daily routines and work. But on Yom Kippur we take on additional restraints – we withdraw from seeking physical pleasure.

On Yom Kippur we practice on a personal level what Isaiah wants us to practice throughout the year on a communal and national level. The acts of self-denial prescribed by the Rabbis and the acts of social giving prescribed by Isaiah have a common psychological basis. Both require personal sacrifice of what is pleasing to oneself; all of these acts are forms of self-denial.

The very fact that the tradition includes the Isaiah text as the Haftarah for Yom Kippur morning makes clear Rabbinic Judaism's commitment to inextricably linking atonement and purification with social responsibility and charity. According to Alice Shalvi, the Israeli scholar, social activist, and educator, "True contrition expresses itself in action designed to relieve the suffering of others."

This understanding of *inui* (affliction – עינוי) as fasting and self-denial offers us a challenge on Yom Kippur. Fasting can be a tool for ethical and spiritual growth, for realizing ultimate responsibilities. We experience ourselves as empty, not to revel in our own piety, but in order to fill ourselves with nobler, less self-involved, more altruistic purposes. For one day, prohibited from pleasing ourselves, we focus clearly on who we are for others, and who we want to become.

What is especially paradoxical and inspirational in Isaiah's message is the idea that the reward for giving and taking responsibility for others is the boundless capacity to give even more. Isaiah promises that if we direct our fast toward giving, our "light will shine in darkness" and we will become like "fully watered gardens, like a source of water whose waters never fail." If we take care of others, we will be rewarded by becoming a continuous source of abundance and blessing.

In fasting, we experience the lack and distress that others experience daily. We recognize that we are limited and imperfect vessels. We depend on forces greater than ourselves to sustain our own lives, and yet we can also become sources of life and blessing for others. This acknowledgement of our limitations – and willingness to limit ourselves – can lead us to joyous and inspired giving.

Questions and Suggested Activities

What is a meaningful fast? What is fasting supposed to lead to? How can I make my fast more meaningful?

Think of three activities you often do for yourself that you would consider reducing in order to give more to others during the coming year.

Sit down and invite everyone in your family to tell every other member one thing that he or she would like to do for each person in the coming year.

Ask everyone in your family to share a personal experience which reflects Isaiah's apparent message: the reward for giving to others is the ability to give even more.

In her interpretation of Isaiah 58, Rabbi Shefa Gold points out specific ways in which people in the modern world oppress others, and calls for a contemporary reinterpretation of a fast that leads to social justice. What contemporary challenges would you like your fast to inspire you to address?