

# On Fasting

## Yom Kippur 1993, UCSB Hillel

When Rabbi Israel Salanter's community of Vilna was in the grip of the cholera epidemic of 1848, on the morning of Yom Kippur of that year, seeking to convince the congregants not to endanger their health by fasting, Rabbi Salanter stood on the bimah and in front of the entire community, recited the appropriate blessing and ate a roll.

That story quickly spread throughout the Jewish world, and became a famous illustration of our people's flair for drama combined with a passion for common sense. In fact, even today, *every* Jew seems to be an expert regarding the fact that the fast of Yom Kippur is nullified to protect a person's health. Indeed, it is a wonderful point of Jewish law, that if on Yom Kippur, a sick person says he or she needs to eat, then even if one hundred expert doctors say that he or she doesn't need to, we feed them anyway. It's not that we don't trust the doctors, but just that we are extremely strict about protecting a person's health.

One of my own favorite memories of Yom Kippur as a child is of my mother's box of triscuits, those little crackers, that she tucked into her handbag, and which got her through the long day of Yom Kippur. There was *drama* in that little box of contraband, smuggled into the heart of the Temple... and there was also my mother's ferocious conviction that Judaism and God want common sense.

Tonight, however, I want to talk about the other side of the coin. I want to talk about fasting, because I am more and more convinced that the fast is at the heart of this day of Yom Kippur. Rabbi Israel Salanter's community knew that already, which is why his standing up in front of them and eating that roll had such tremendous shock value. I want to talk about the purposes of the fast, and to talk about the experience of fasting.

Many of us tend to approach the fast with what seems at first like a reasonable, "moderate" philosophy", which is:

"I won't eat...unless I start to get really hungry".

Isn't it clear though, that it is only *then* when the hunger starts it hurt, that the fast really begins? A 24 hour fast *hurts*. That's the idea. Obviously, it is not pain just for its own sake. I'm going to suggest tonight that the pain of our Yom Kippur fast is the intense *physical* foundation of the whole Yom Kippur experience.

First of all, Yom Kippur is about freedom. Freedom from habits. Freedom from peer pressure. Freedom from our past. This entire season of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is called the season of *T'shuvah*, or turning. And that name, the season of turning, expresses the essential Yom Kippur idea: Whatever path we are on we are completely *free*...to go forward or stop. To adjust our direction or to turn around completely and return to a turnoff we missed several miles back.

It is certainly true, however, that on many levels we don't *feel* free. Some of us feel trapped in a bad relationship with a boyfriend or girlfriend. Or a bad marriage. Some of us do not feel free to speak the truth to our parents, or to an estranged friend because of too many painful memories. Some of us feel trapped in unhealthy habits - regularly

getting drunk or smoking pot, or binging and purging,...or just watching lots of television. Some of us feel forced into having sex with someone we don't love. Some of us feel unable to hold our heads up proudly as Jews because of not knowing Hebrew, or because of worrying about the reaction of our non—Jewish friends.

In all these ways, and many, many more, we do often feel trapped in our lives. And the message of Yom Kippur is loud and clear: the choice is yours. Each of us is free to turn, to make a change...It may take courage...There may be some pain, but we human beings can *survive* pain.

So speak the truth. Turn off the television. Bring the bad relationship to a close. Refuse to make love if you do not love. Live as a Jew and be proud of it.

This is the message that we send to ourselves by fasting: We are hungry; it feels like we need to eat. It hurts...But look, we can choose, freely, not to eat. And we survive! After fasting for 24 hours, we feel a sense of our own strength. We know a little of our own courage. Our toughness. The fast is a pure act of free will, and it is a powerful acting out of Yom Kippur's essential teaching, which is: We are free to choose.

A second dimension of the Yom Kippur fast, which also requires that we continue to fast even after we begin to feel really hungry, is the fast as an act of empathy.

This is perhaps the most obvious purpose of today's fast, and yet it is worth spelling out explicitly. When else, at what other time of year do we even *begin* to know what it feels like to experience real hunger? All the newspaper articles and television pictures in the world cannot teach us the soul-destroying reality of true hunger...the single reality which every day dominates the lives of billions of human beings.

The hurt of our 24 hour fast is a joke compared to the pain of chronic, never-ending hunger. But even before these 24 hours are up, we begin to lose our composure. We get edgy. We feel weak. We can't concentrate. We think about food, about food, about food. About a cool drink of water. In less than 24 hours, we begin to come apart...and in that moment, we suddenly catch a glimpse of the inner world of the child in Sarajevo. The sad eyed barefoot mother on the street, the scruffy guy on the freeway exit with the cardboard sign: I need food. This is the second purpose of the Yom Kippur fast.

In tomorrow morning's haftorah, we hear Isaiah's scorching warning: *Just* fasting is not enough. It means *nothing* for us to glimpse the reality of hunger if it leads to no action. The purpose of the fast, says Isaiah, is to *move* us: to share our bread with the hungry...to cover the naked and to give them shelter.

The act of fasting is not *tsedakah* in itself, but it is one of our traditionally most powerful---perhaps the most powerful---motivator, inspiring us to acts of *tsedakah* of righteousness. Because at 10:00 tomorrow morning, and again at 2:00 in the afternoon and then at 5:00 in the late afternoon, we know in our own bodies a tiny bit of the debilitating effect of hunger. And we also discover, by the way, how quickly and completely the human soul is restored, simply by a small piece of bread and a few sips of water. We come away from this fast knowing the face of hunger and knowing better how *little* it takes to beat that enemy.

There are three things, according to the tradition, that can alter God's decree for us at this time of year. *T'shuvah*---an act of turning. *Tsedakah*---acts of righteousness.

And *T'fillah*---prayer. I said earlier that I see the fast as the foundation of the entire Yom Kippur experience, *because the fast opens for us all three of these doors.*

I've already suggested that our fast on Yom Kippur teaches us first about our own free will..., about our ability to survive some discomfort... to overcome our fears, in order to make *t'shuvah*, a turn, a change in our lives. I've also said that the fast is a powerful motivator for *tsedakah*---by giving us a first-hand experience of the reality of hunger. It is also my experience, finally, that the fast is one of the strongest preparations I know for the act of *t'fillah* of prayer.

Most of us know that when we pray, something is supposed to happen to us. We look for some sort of transformation. One of the reasons that most young Jews have stopped going to synagogue is that, on the few occasions when they do go --- at High Holy Days, or to a Bar or Bat Mitzvah -- it may be a nice social gathering, but nothing really happens. There is no experience of transformation. Certainly not to compare with a close basketball game, or an intense night out at the movies.

In an anthropology class, we might watch documentaries of Haitian voodoo, or of whirling Sufi dervishes, and realize that *those* religions *are* still providing an experience of profound transformation. And it just makes us that much more fed up with our own bone-dry American Jewish prayer services.

I know that Jewish worship offers the possibility of soul-shaking transformative experience. It drives me crazy to see our synagogues empty and especially to see young Jews looking everywhere for an authentic worship experience -- toward Eastern religions, towards Christianity, toward Native American religion...everywhere but Judaism...

Jewish worship does offer the possibility of reaching to heaven, but of course there are a lot of problems. One problem is Hebrew. Jews have always prayed in our ancient, awesome, mystical holy language. And now few American Jews can read Hebrew, and even fewer understand it. The Jewish prayers lose nearly all their power in translation. So how can Jewish prayer work for those of us who don't know Hebrew?

Another problem is that for the last 100 years, Jews have been moving frenetically around the globe. A very tiny fraction of us are still living in the same community in which we grew up. But it takes years and years of knowing someone before we really feel comfortable praying next to them. Prayer is an act of surrender,...in true prayer we strip off our own masks and stand revealed and vulnerable before God. We don't do it together with strangers, or even with friends whom we're just getting to know.

One of the few truly effective responses to the problems of modern Jewish prayer is the fast. Because fasting *shakes* us, *physically*...because fasting tears down our defenses..., because fasting together creates a profound bond even between strangers... and because *you don't need know one word of Hebrew* to fast for 24 hours --- for these reasons, the fast of Yom Kippur can help us to pray. *Really* pray. When we are seriously hungry, the walls of our ego begin to come down, and we may even find ourselves crying, or feeling like crying. That means it's working.

The traditional greeting on Yom Kippur, ironically, is "Have an easy fast." That is the voice of reasonable, common sense Judaism. Tonight I won't wish you that; I wish you a *heart-breaking* fast. A fast that will give you the courage and strength to alter the

course of your life...if necessary. A fast that will move you to take practical steps to relieve someone's chronic hunger. And, finally, a fast that will crack your heart open, and allow you...at some unexpected moment tomorrow afternoon, to really pray.