

Having to or Wanting to Fast?

While much attention is given to the Haftorah recited at Mincha of Yom Kippur, that of the story of Yonah, the Haftorah of Shacharit carries with it its own set of critical themes to assist in understanding this unique day. When reviewing the various themes of the Haftorah, the focus on disingenuous fasting is quite prominent. The prophet explains how we cry out to God, wondering why, if we have fasted, we have not heard a reply from God.

The response is quite brutal (Yeshayahu 58:4):

“Behold, for quarrel and strife you fast, and to strike with a fist of wickedness. Do not fast like this day, to make your voice heard on high.”

This damning indictment seems to label the fasting taking place as being tied to a purpose of “quarrel and strife”, a strange consideration.

The prophet continues (ibid 7-10):

“Is this not the fast I will choose? To undo the fetters of wickedness, to untie the bands of perverseness, and to let out the oppressed free, and all perverseness you shall eliminate. Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and moaning poor you shall bring home; when you see a naked one, you shall clothe him, and from your flesh you shall not hide. Then your light shall break forth as the dawn, and your healing shall quickly sprout, and your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall gather you in. Then you shall call and the Lord shall answer, you shall cry and He shall say, “Here I am,” if you remove perverseness from your midst, putting forth the finger and speaking wickedness. And you draw out your soul to the hungry, and an afflicted soul you sate, then your light shall shine in the darkness, and your darkness shall be like noon.”

In these verses, we see God providing the solution to us of how to avoid the disingenuous fasting. One critical point is helping those who are misfortunate. However, the prophet returns to the idea of avoiding actions such as pointing one’s finger at someone else as a necessary part of ensuring the fasting is being accomplished correctly. How do we connect these seemingly two different considerations?

Malbim adds an interesting layer to the prophet’s message. In commenting on the fasting for strife, he explains that gathering to fast for the purpose of serving God is a burden. However, people will join together with a “full heart” if it is for the objective of fighting and conflict.

This seems to be an odd assumption. Yom Kippur services are somber affairs and breaking out into fights does not seem to be a common occurrence. It is hard to imagine such a phenomenon taking place, and yet Malbim treats this as almost a *fait accompli*.

The concept of people fasting for the sake of fighting indicates a complete dissolution of any sense of social cohesion, a violation of *achdut* (unity) to the nth degree. But a scene of Jews fighting during Yom Kippur is hard to fathom. What the prophet could be referring to is the way one relates to the obligation of fasting (and the other afflictions) on Yom Kippur.

One of the great challenges that face each and every one of us is the acknowledgment of the reality of being a flawed person. Sure, one can point to a “mistake” made, but to internalize a true sense of self, warts and all, is certainly a difficult path to take. If it was easy, the process of repentance would be a no brainer, and one might argue the very necessity of Yom Kippur would go by the wayside. Yom Kippur presents a unique opportunity. It is a day where one is defined as a sinner, and one faces this reality and engages in repentance and *viduy* (confession). The key here is **opportunity**. Of course, there is fasting and the other avenues of affliction. The deprivation experienced creates the necessary environment to engage in the proper degree of introspection and to work on repairing the relationship with God. Taking advantage of the day becomes the primary objective.

For others, though, the day is solely obligatory. When Yom Kippur is viewed as a series of commandments, the opportunity changes into an encumbrance. Fasting and the other requirements are heavy weights to carry, and the day becomes a countdown to when one can eat again.

The individual who views Yom Kippur as obligations and commandments is now faced with a difficult problem. It cannot be due to his or her own problems that this communal obligation exists, as introspection is not something being considered. Therefore, it must be due to that person, or that person, or that person, as they must be sinners; anyone but the individual. When Yom Kippur is viewed as a burden, it becomes simple to consider anyone but the self as the catalyst for this painful experience. This is the attitude of “strife” being referred to by the prophet. The unwillingness to view the self in an honest light defines the Yom Kippur experience as forced and unnatural. It is due to the sins of others that this individual must join along and fast.

While the message may seem harsh, the prophet is actually guiding us to the right path. Indeed, to take a mirror and see oneself in an honest way is very challenging. We should embrace what Yom Kippur offers to us, and reject the narrow view of restrictions and don'ts. When Yom Kippur functions as something we do not want, it becomes quite simple to blame others for the pain of the individual. The unity desired by God is fulfilled through the communal realization of the tremendous opportunity the day provides.

G'mar Chatima Tova

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