



The Ziegler School
of Rabbinic Studies

בית המדרש ע"ש זיגלר

Walking with the Jewish Calendar

Edited By
Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson
and Rachel Miriam Safman

דרכיה דרכי נעם

YOM KIPPUR

RABBI CHERYL PERETZ

INTRODUCTION

Of all the days on the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur is often considered the most important and holiest. With its themes of prayer, repentance, and atonement, Yom Kippur has always held a central position in Jewish thought and practice throughout the ages. Described by the Torah as *Shabbat Shabbaton* (the Sabbath of Sabbaths), Yom Kippur is anything but restful; rather, just as it is the holiness of Shabbat that sets it apart, it is the holiness of Yom Kippur that elevates it beyond other days.

Coming at the end of the Ten Days of Repentance, Yom Kippur is both a somber and a celebratory time. It marks the culmination of a period of *teshuvah*, a period of return and repentance that begins at the outset of the Hebrew month of Elul, and grows more intense during the *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah* (The Ten Days of Repentance) from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur.¹ According to Maimonides' Laws of Repentance, while *teshuvah* and crying out to God are always welcome, they are especially so during the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and are immediately accepted.² So, this period becomes one of prayer, *teshuvah*, and spiritual vigilance.

To emphasize the impact of even a single act of repentance, our sages teach that at any given moment in time, a person's scale of judgment is in balance. As such his or her next act of righteousness or goodness may be what tips the balance in favor of a positive outcome. Conversely, when a person acts with malice or evil, s/he moves the balance towards a negative fate. So, as our lives hang in the balance and we await the outcome of the sealing of the Book of Life, we are especially cognizant of our ambivalent position and strive to find ways to increase our righteousness in the world.

The period leading up to Yom Kippur is one of preparation and reparation, during which we do the "housekeeping" with one another that will ultimately allow us to engage in *teshuvah*, a return to or reconciliation with God. Judaism teaches, for example, that while the rituals of Yom Kippur day, including confession and seeking atonement, are sufficient to rectify the sins which we have committed against God directly, they do not atone for offenses against our fellow human beings. In fact, when we sin against another person, we actually commit two transgressions – one towards the other person and one against God. So, in order to achieve forgiveness, the reconciliation between people must be taken care of prior to Yom Kippur by the one who has offended asking forgiveness of the one offended. Whatever can be rectified must be rectified. Once this has happened and the two people are reconciled, the offender can approach God and ask God's forgiveness as well.

The ten day period, like the holiday itself, is also marked by changes in the liturgy. We call on God as King to hear the prayers of a humble and penitent people and to respond with Divine mercy and compassion.

In many early commentaries and certainly in the simple reading of much of the liturgy of the day, Yom Kippur was thought of as a day of reckoning and judgment during which final judgment is rendered and sealed.³ "On Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed," these are the famous words of the *Unetaneh Tokef*, a prayer recited during the Musaf service on both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. As we recite these words, we imagine God as arbiter and judge in the courtroom of our lives, observing every action, deciding who will live and who will die, handing out reward and punishment as fit. We wait, hoping that in the end the scale weighing our deeds will tip in our favor so that we will be found to merit life.

Yet even as we recite the *Unetaneh Tokef* and other prayers of the day with fervor and in communal unison, we recognize that we are not passive puppets in God's theater. We know that the ultimate truth and meaning of Yom Kippur lies in recognition of human imperfection and in our willingness to change. As such, the liturgy of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement (or have some have called the day of At-one-ment) invites us to scrutinize our actions and consider our behaviors in the hope that we can see those places where we have fallen short, and begin the process of

¹ The term *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah* finds its origins in Talmud Yerushalmi I:3 and Midrash of Pesikta d'rabati, 40.

² Maimonides, *Laws of Repentance*, 2:6.

³ See the Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 16b and 32b as examples.



YOM KIPPUR

turning back towards God, turning towards the good and the right in new ways.

Unique to the Yom Kippur liturgy is the *Vidui* (confessional) prayer, recited as part of every service. The confessions of the *Vidui* are couched in the plural (“we have sinned...”) and their number far exceeds the sins than any one individual could possibly have committed in the preceding year. This begs the question: Why do we confess to sins we didn’t commit? The answer often given is that the *Vidui* is a public confessional because we do not ask individuals to stand before the community and confess their sins publicly. Rather, we stand before God as a community and confess as a people, for we each bear some responsibility for the sins of others. Had we helped guide and support them to a greater degree, they may not have erred, and since we failed to do so, some portion of their guilt rests with us.

The words of our confession which are set to stirring melodies, tug at the heart and trouble the mind, and as we recite them the fear grows in us that our errors may be too great, that God may, in fact, decide not to forgive us. The authors of our liturgy understood this fear and the obstacle which it might present to undertaking *teshuvah*, and so included also in our prayers a reminder that God does forgive. As we intone repeatedly during the recitation of the 13 attributes of God, a central piece of the Yom Kippur liturgy, “Our God is a merciful and forgiving God,”⁴ and sincere repentance is always rewarded with forgiveness.

We want to be forgiven, so we remind ourselves of God’s willingness to forgive. We want to love and be loved, so we remind ourselves of God’s endless love. We seek compassion and want to be more compassionate, so we invoke God’s compassion. For all its solemnity, Yom Kippur is also a time of joy because it affords us an opportunity for spiritual cleansing for our tradition tells us that we will re-enter our relationship God on new terms, with a clean slate, unburdened of the mistakes which have cast a shadow on this relationship in days gone by.

The process of drawing close to God in this way demands of us a particular intensity, and to help us achieve this our tradition prescribes that additional measures be taken, beyond the accustomed act of prayer (or in ancient times, sacrifice) which characterizes our typical Shabbat or festival observance. Specifically, the Torah tells us: “...*te’anu et nafshoteichem... ki bayom ha-zeh yechaper aleichem letaher etchem mikol chatoteichem* - You shall afflict your soul... for on this day atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you of all your sins.”⁵

This obligation to “afflict ourselves” has been understood by our sages to include five prohibitions: eating or drinking, bathing or washing, wearing perfume or other body oils, wearing leather shoes, and sexual relations.⁶ Of these, the ritual most prominently associated with the holiday is an arduous fast, beginning just before sundown on the evening of Yom Kippur lasting until the conclusion of Yom Kippur at nightfall the following evening.

The very act of fasting is seen as equivalent to having asked for God’s forgiveness, as is reflected in a story from the Talmud in which Rav Sheshet, having concluded his prescribed prayer on fast days, added the following postscript: “Master of the Universe, You know full well that in the time when the Temple was standing, if a man sinned he used to bring a sacrifice, and though all that was offered of it was its fat and blood, atonement was made for him therewith. Now I have kept a fast and my fat and blood have diminished. May it be Thy will to account my fat and blood which have been diminished as if I had offered them before Thee on the altar, and do show me favor.”⁷

Why does Judaism hold the act of fasting or “afflicting one’s Soul” in such high regard? Are we really meant to be punishing ourselves for our sins? The 20th century rabbi, Mordechai Kaplan, offers an important perspective on these acts of self-denial:

⁴ Exodus 34:6-7.

⁵ Leviticus 16:29-30.

⁶ Mishnah, Yomah 8:1.

⁷ Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 17z.



YOM KIPPUR

We refrain from indulging our physical appetites for a limited period, in order to devote ourselves for a time more exclusively to demands that rank higher in our hierarchy of values... we are not denying the physical appetites their just place in life; we are simply recognizing the need of putting them in their place.⁸

Certainly, the pangs of hunger remind us of the fragility of the body, faced with the truth of our own humanity. By depriving ourselves of food, we attune ourselves to the most basic elements of life, our own physiological needs. The paradoxical danger, though, is that this awareness becomes an end in itself, that we spend the whole time when we are not eating thinking about food.

This is, of course, not what Kaplan was encouraging us to strive for. Rather, he, like the sages of old, was hopeful that through our weakened state, we would be able to see parts of ourselves we might not otherwise see, and so would we be inspired to address these weaknesses with prayer and supplication. Ideally in fasting, we combine discomfort with inspiration, focusing on the spirit, not the body, or, in the words of Rabbi Harold Kushner, the purpose of our fasting is to exercise our soul.

I would like to suggest that we exercise our soul in two ways through fasting – through becoming an angel and through being called to service God’s world and make it a better place. No food, no drink. No bathing. None of the luxuries to which we have become accustomed - for a moment, we live between life and death, transcending the physical world and entering an ephemeral state of angelic existence. In the words of Rav:

The World to Come has no eating nor drinking nor propagation nor jealousy nor hatred nor competition; rather the righteous sitting with their crowns upon their heads, and basking in the glow of the *Shechinah* (Divine Presence).⁹

In emulating the angels in heaven, we stop working, abstain from creating, don our pure white clothing to reside with God and have no need to eat, drink, or wash. We exist with and for God, spending the entire 25 hour period in reflection, prayer, and meditation.

It bears mention here that Yom Kippur is the only time during the year when there are five different services – Maariv (Evening), Shacharit (Morning), Musaf (Additional service), Mincha (Afternoon), and Neilah (Concluding). Moreover, to connect one service to the other and to reinforce the importance of spending the whole day in prayer and reflection, no one service is fully ended; rather, the conclusion is held off until the end of the entire Yom Kippur Day. When there are breaks, the time is often used for study, Torah discussion, or other forms of worship. In this way, like angels, we transcend the physical world and reside in a constant state of spiritual being for a single day.

The prophetic reading of Isaiah 58, the haftarah for Yom Kippur morning, expands the rationale of the fast even further:

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, shall restore foundations laid long ago.

The act of fasting, according to Isaiah, is not merely an act of self-denial meant to punish nor an emulation of angels, it is an act of solidarity with the suffering of the Jewish people. Through fasting we are drawn closer to all who live lives of deprivation, and we are called on to help turn that deprivation into sustenance. The way to get closer to God is to

⁸ *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*, p. 169.

⁹ *Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 17a. See also Maimonides Siraj and Mishnah Torah 8:2.*



YOM KIPPUR

get closer to other people, to all people. Unless we stand for justice and righteousness, unless we reveal the inherent holiness of caring for one another and renew ourselves as God's partner in creating a better world, our service to God is not complete. Fasting by itself is meaningless, the prophet tells us; for fasting to have meaning, it has to result in changes behavior. True fasting is an acknowledgement of the demand for social justice and a plea for compassion towards others.

The line between exultant joy and fearful anguish can be very fine. There are times when the cries of hysterical laughter and mournful weeping are virtually indistinguishable. So, it is possible that our Yom Kippur fast is not simply an affliction, but is meant to bring us to a place of celebration. Maimonides codifies the laws of Yom Kippur as enabling our bodies to rest from food, drink and sex - not in prohibition but rather in re-creation and repair.¹⁰ In the shelter of the loving embrace of God and community, the body becomes insignificant as we reach the deep recesses of our soul, seeking avenues towards *tikkun olam*, towards making the world a better place for ourselves and those around us. In so doing on Yom Kippur, the Shabbat of all Shabbats, we experience a taste of eternity and know a joy like no other.

¹⁰ *Laws of Shvitat HaAsor 1,12.*



YOM KIPPUR – TEXT 1

משנה תורה הלכות דעות ג,ב

צָרִיךְ לָהֶם מֵאֲכִילָה וּשְׁתֵּיהּ וַיִּשְׁיבַת בֵּית וּנְשִׂיאַת אִשָּׁה, וְכֵן כְּנִשְׂי אֲכֹל וַיִּשְׁתָּה וַיִּבְעוֹל ל' א יִשִּׁים בְּלִבּוֹ לַעֲשׂוֹת דְּבָרִים הָאֵלוֹ כְּדִי לִיהַנּוֹת בְּלֶבֶד עַד שְׁנַמְצָא שְׂאִינוֹ אוֹכֵל וְשׁוֹתָה אֶלָּא הַמְתוּק לַחֲיִךְ וַיִּבְעוֹל כְּדִי לַהַנּוֹת, אֶלָּא יִשִּׁים עַל-לִבּוֹ שְׂי אֲכֹל וַיִּשְׁתָּה כְּדִי לַהַבְרוֹת גּוּפוֹ וְאַיְבָרָיו בְּלֶבֶד, לְפִיכָךְ ל' א י אֲכֹל כָּל שֶׁחֲחִיךְ מִתְאַוָּה כְּכֹלֵב וְחַמּוֹר אֶלָּא י אֲכֹל דְּבָרִים הַמוֹעִילִים לַגּוּף אִם מְרִים אִם מְתוּקִים, וְל' א י אֲכֹל דְּבָרִים הַרְעִים לַגּוּף אֶף-עַל-פִּי שֶׁהֵם מְתוּקִים לַחֲיִךְ.

MAIMONIDES, MISHNEH TORAH HILCHOT DEOT 3:5-8

When one eats and drinks, one should not be doing so just for enjoyment, because then one will eventually be eating just to sweeten one's palate and for the joy of it; but one should eat and drink just for the sake of the health of one's body and limbs. Therefore, one should not eat whatever he desires like a dog or a donkey; one should eat only what the body will use, whether it is bitter or sweet, and one should not eat those things which are bad for the body, even if they are sweet.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- According to this text, what is the purpose of eating and drinking?
- How does this understanding inform our understanding of fasting?
- How does food impact our relationship with God? With ourselves? With each other?
- How does the fact that Yom Kippur is a fast day (rather than a feast, as is the case with so many other of our holy days) color our understanding and relationship to the holiday?



YOM KIPPUR – TEXT 2

ויקרא פרק טז

כט) וְהִיְתָה לָכֶם לְחֻקֹּת עוֹלָם בַּח' דָּשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי בְּעֶשְׂוֹר לַח' דָּשׁ תִּעַנּוּ אֶת נַפְשׁוֹתֵיכֶם וְכָל מְלֶאכֶה ל' א' תַּעֲשׂוּ הָאֲזָרָח וְהַגֵּר הַגֵּר בְּתוֹכְכֶם:

ל) כִּי בַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יִכַּפֵּר עֲלֵיכֶם לְטַהֵר אֶתְכֶם מִכָּל חַטֹּאתֵיכֶם לִפְנֵי ה' תִּטְהָרוּ:

LEVITICUS 16:29-30

And this shall be a statute forever to you; that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict your souls, and you shall do no work, whether it be one of your own country, or a stranger who sojourns among you; For on that day shall the priest make an atonement for you, to cleanse you, that you may be clean from all your sins before the Lord. It shall be a sabbath of rest to you, and you shall afflict your souls, by a statute forever.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- What is the purpose of afflicting one's soul?
- Why are fasting and self-denial associated with spiritual cleansing?
- In the Biblical text the burden for achieving atonement for all of Israel falls on the shoulders of the Cohein Gadol. Today it is understood to be the responsibility of each of us individually. How does this change our understanding of the holiday?



YOM KIPPUR – TEXT 3

תלמוד בבלי מסכת יומא דף עד עמוד ב

תלמוד לומר וְכָל מְלָאכָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ. מַה מְלָאכָה יָשֵׁב וְאֵל תַּעֲשֶׂה, אִךְ עֲנוּי נֶפֶשׁ - יָשֵׁב וְאֵל תַּעֲשֶׂה.
וְאִמָּא: הֵיכָא דִּיתִיב בְּשִׁמְשָׁא וְחַיִּים לִיה - לֹא נִימָא לִיה קוּם תּוּב בְּטוּלָא, יְתִיב בְּטוּלָא וְקָרִיר לִיה, לֹא
נִימָא לִיה קוּם תּוּב בְּשִׁמְשָׁא.

TALMUD YOMA 74B

Our Rabbis taught: You shall afflict your souls. One might assume that one must sit in heat or cold in order to afflict oneself, therefore the text reads: And ye shall do no manner of work; just as the prohibition of work involves only a passive attitude, so the affliction of soul intended by the law must be only a passive one.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- How is the text distinguishing between an active and passive attitude of affliction? What are the characteristics of each?
- How does fasting fit into this rubric? Does it strike you as more active or passive? How so?
- How would it affect our experience of Yom Kippur if we were enjoined to engage in a more active process of self-affliction? How would this change our attitude toward the process? Towards prayer?
- What does the fact that we are also prohibited from engaging in other worldly pursuits (“work”) add to or detract from our observance of the holiday? How does it differ from the fast of Tisha B’Av when we refrain from food, drink, etc. but still participate in normal “work”?



YOM KIPPUR – TEXT 4

ישעיהו פרק נח

(ג) לָמָּה צָמַנּוּ וְלֹא רָאִיתָ עֲנִינּוּ וּנְפִשָׁנוּ וְלֹא תִדְעֵהוּ בְיָוֶם צָמַמְתֶּם תִּמְצְאוּ חִפְזָן וְכָל עֲצָבֵיכֶם תִּגְגֹּשׁוּ: (ד) הֵן לְרִיב וּמִצָּה תִצְוּמוּ וּלְהִכּוֹת בְּאֲגָרֶיךָ רִשְׁעֵי לֹא תִצְוּמוּ כִּיּוֹם לְהִשְׁמִיעַ בְּמִרוֹם קוֹלְכֶם: (ה) הִכְזֶה יִהְיֶה צוֹם אֲבַחְרֶהוּ יוֹם עֲנוּת אָדָם נִפְשׁוֹ הִלְכֵךָ פֶּאֶגְמָן רִאשׁוֹ וְשִׁק וְאֶפֶר יִצְיַע הַלְזָה תִקְרָא צוֹם וְיוֹם רְצוֹן לֵה': (ו) הֲלוֹא זֶה צוֹם אֲבַחְרֶהוּ פִתַח חֲרָצְבוֹת רִשְׁעֵי הַתֵּר אֲגִדּוֹת מוֹטָה וְשִׁלַח רְצוּצִים חֲפִשִׁים וְכָל מוֹטָה תִנְתַּקּוּ: (ז) הֲלוֹא פָרִס לְרַעֲב לְחֻמְךָ וְעַנְיִים מְרוֹדִים תָּבִיא בַּיִת פִּי תִרְאֶה עָרִם וְכִסִּיתוּ וּמִבְשָׂרְךָ לֹא תִתְעַלֵּם: (ח) אִזּוּ יִבְקַע כְּשֹׁחַר אוֹרְךָ וְאֶרְכַּתְךָ מִהֲרָה תִצְמַח וְהִלַּךְ לְפָנֶיךָ צִדְקָתְךָ כְּבוֹד ה' יֵאֱסָפֶךָ:

ISAIAH 58:3-8

Why when we fasted did You not see? When we starved our bodies, did you pay no heed? Because on your fast day you see to your business and oppress all your laborers! Because you fast in strife and contention, and you strike with a wicked fist! Your fasting is not such as to make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast I desire, a day for men to starve their bodies? Is it bowing down the head like a bulrush and lying in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call that a fast, a day when the Lord is favorable? No this is the fast I desire: To unlock 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 him, and not to ignore your own kin. Then shall your light burst through like the dawn and your healing spring up quickly; your Vindicator shall march before you, the Presence of the Lord shall be your rear guard.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- What does the text say about the relationship between ritual (fasting) and social justice?
- Who are the speakers (the “we”) of these passages? What is the relationship between their ritual life and their secular pursuits? Why is this problematic?
- What does the text teach us about the role ritual is intended to play in our overall existence? How does (or should) ritual work? Do you see this happening in your own life? In the way ritual is performed in the Jewish community?



YOM KIPPUR - TEXT FOR GROUP STUDY

DAVID HARTMAN, "REFLECTIONS ON ROSH HASHANA AND YOM KIPPUR"
JPost, OCTOBER 7, 2008

The personal significance of Yom Kippur ultimately turns on the individual's ability to believe that his or her life can be different. The major obstacle to *teshuva* is not whether God will forgive us but whether we can forgive ourselves – whether we can believe in our own ability to change the direction of our lives, even minimally. *Teshuva* is grounded in the idea of an open future, in the belief that the possibilities for human change have not been exhausted, that the final chapters of our personal narratives have not yet been written. The sense of empowerment felt on Yom Kippur reflects an underlying faith in the power of the human will to break the fixed cycles of the past and to chart new possibilities for the future.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- How does Hartman understand the process of *teshuvah*? Where do human beings fit into the process? God?
- What are the major obstacles to successful *teshuvah* in Hartman's eyes?
How do the rites of Yom Kippur (fasting, prayer, etc.) address these potential roadblocks?
- What are the implications of his vision for the way in which we approach *teshuvah*?
What can we do personally and as a community to enhance our likelihood of success?





Published in partnership with the
United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism,
the Rabbinical Assembly,
the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs
and the Women's League for Conservative Judaism.



ZIEGLER SCHOOL OF
RABBINIC STUDIES
AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

15600 MULHOLLAND DRIVE • BEL AIR, CA 90077