



Torah Reflections on Yom Kippur

Each year, Jewish tradition calls us to celebrate the turning of the calendar with both joy and solemnity. We bring in the New Year with apples and honey, followed by “Ten Days of Repentance” and solemn introspection, concluding with Yom Kippur, our Day of Atonement.

On Yom Kippur itself, Jewish adults who are physically able refrain from food and drink for a full night and day. It might seem strange that, in the midst of this fast, we read a passage from the prophet Isaiah (chapter 58) questioning the practice of fasting unless it actually changes our behavior the rest of the year: “Is this the fast I look for? A day of self-affliction? Bowing your head like a reed...?” After this provocative challenge, Isaiah exhorts us to feed the hungry; to support the afflicted in our midst; to undo injustice; and not to hide ourselves from our kin who are in need. The prophet wanted to stir his contemporaries into caring action.

Isaiah’s words may be particularly resonant for people who cannot fast in the normal way this season. Especially for those of us whose physical or medical conditions require some intake of food or liquid during Yom Kippur, we might ask: what kind of fast would be meaningful? What would the prophet—or God—want of us? Even as we eat or drink to sustain our health, if medically appropriate we may still deny ourselves the pleasures of a spicy or flavorful meal, of dessert, of a large or second serving, of juice or soda where water may suffice. More importantly in Isaiah’s view, we may refrain from actions which may cause hurt, which may add to injustice or misunderstanding, or which distract from the spiritual purposes of the holiday. We can dedicate ourselves to contemplation of the themes and values of Yom Kippur; to an honest accounting of our own regretful actions and missed opportunities; to the sacredness of the day and of life; to the work of positive change in our deeds and relationships.

It is possible that the rabbis and sages who arranged our High Holy Day liturgy meant for us to feel uncomfortable as some of these words sink in. Paradoxically, we purposely trouble ourselves and revisit our misdeeds of the previous year, only to emerge with a sense of renewed purity and peace. Ideally, we turn inward and scrutinize our own hearts, and end up with a greater sense of active commitment and connection with those around us.

The work of spiritual renewal, of re-balancing our lives and relationships, can be both painful and joyful. This work makes demands on us. There are often internal and external obstacles, hurts, breaches of faith or trust, fears and self-doubt, resentments and anger to overcome. We must acknowledge shortcomings, adjust or let go of certain habits, routines, expectations, even dreams. We must also put our feelings and commitments into action.

Healing is often about reconnecting with the ones we love, with our community and the larger movements of which we are a part, with God, with life and positive life energy, with the wholeness and sacredness of our own selves. That healing sometimes

(over)

requires *teshuvah*—returning, going back in order to repair, restore, and move forward. As we focus our attention on the collective endeavor of prayer, repentance, and right action, we re-discover and remember buried and forgotten mistakes and grievances and hurts, as well as forgotten kindnesses, strengths, inspirations, and sacred yearnings. We seek ways to heal the festering wounds—and to revive hopes and lines of communication and channels of loving.

The High Holy Days remind us that we have work to do, “inside and out”—and that we all have something to offer in the world. Our concrete actions and our involvement in one another’s lives may convey care and support and connection on many levels. When we follow through and “walk through the valley of the shadow” together, we often end up affirming some precious part of life that connects us and is within us all.

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts throughout this High Holy Day season bring greater peace and healing, joy, and sweetness to us all.

© Bay Area Jewish Healing Center, Rabbi Natan Fenner



This Torah Reflection was written by Rabbi Natan Fenner, BCC of the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center in San Francisco. The Torah Reflections series is published by the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center, a beneficiary of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties. More information and healing-oriented resources can be found at www.JewishHealingCenter.org.



The Bay Area Jewish Healing Center provides Jewish spiritual care for people coping with illness, loss and dying, regardless of affiliation or ability to pay.

Our services include:

- Rabbinic care, chaplaincy, counseling and spiritual direction—at home or in hospitals, hospices, nursing homes or other care facilities
- Spiritual support groups for patients, caregivers, and the bereaved
- Healing and memorial services, and specialized rituals

Whether through prayer, study materials, or simply a listening presence, the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center is here to support you during difficult time.