



High Holy Day Paradoxes Torah Reflections for the Days of Awe

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. I have sometimes looked toward the door at this point in the synagogue service, wondering whether there would be an exodus of community members suddenly stirred to action!

Of course the rabbis and sages who arranged our High Holy Day liturgy did not plan for our hasty departure from our places of worship. Rather, we remain standing or sitting, perhaps uncomfortably, as 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 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.

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