

Haftarah of Yom Kippur

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Hashem asks a startling question in the haftarah of Yom Kippur (Yeshayahu 58:5):

Is this the fast that I desire? A day for men to starve their bodies? Is it bowing the head like a bulrush And lying in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call that a fast, A day when the Lord is favorable?

ה: הַכֵּה, יְהִי צוֹם
אֲבַחְרֶהוּ--יּוֹם
אָדָם, נִפְשׁוּ; הִלַּכְךָ
כְּאֶגְמוֹן רֹאשׁוֹ, וְשָׁק וְאָפָר
יַצִּיעַ--הִלְזָה תִקְרָא-צוֹם,
'יּוֹם רְצוֹן לַה'

The response to this question seems to be a resounding “yes!” This is exactly what the Torah commands for this day (Vayikra 23:32): *וְעִנִּיתֶם, אֶת נַפְשֵׁיכֶם, and you shall afflict yourselves.* Nevertheless, the haftarah rhetorically dismisses the sacrifice and dedication of the Jewish People on this day, dismissing our fasting, the lowering of our heads, the pounding of our chests during the confessions and even the uncomfortable canvas sneakers on our feet.

Our particular practices on Yom Kippur are also universally utilized by people seeking connection to God in overcoming crisis. During the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln called for a “National Day of Humiliation, Fasting and Prayer”, and proclaimed:

I do, by this my proclamation, designate and set apart Thursday, the 30TH DAY OF APRIL, 1863, as a Day of National Humiliation, Fasting and Prayer.

And I do hereby request all the people to abstain on that day from their ordinary secular pursuits, and to unite, at their several places of public worship and their respective homes, in keeping the day holy to the Lord and devoted to the humble discharge of the religious duties proper to that solemn occasion.

All this being done, in sincerity and truth, let us then rest humbly in the hope authorized by the Divine teachings, that the united cry of the nation will be heard on high and answered with blessing no less than the pardon of our national sins and the restoration of our now divided and suffering country to its former happy condition of unity and peace.

Yeshayahu challenges our practice of Yom Kippur as well as this universal method of spiritual connection. What is his opposition and what would he suggest instead? He continues to explain himself (58:6-7,9):

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.

ו הַלּוֹא זֶה, צוֹם
אֲבַחְרֶהוּ--פֶּתַח חֲרָצְבוֹת
רָשָׁע, הַתֵּר אֲגִדּוֹת
מוֹטָה; וְשַׁלַּח רְצוּצִים
הַפְּשִׁים, וְכַל-מוֹטָה
תִּנְתְּקוּ.

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.

ז הַלּוֹא פֶּרֶס לְרֹעֵב
לַחֲמֶה, וְעֵנִיִּים מְרוּדִים
תְּבִיא בֵּית: כִּי-תִרְאֶה
עָרֹם וְכִסִּיתוֹ, וּמִבְּשָׂרְךָ
לֹא תִתְעַלֵּם.

Then, when you call,
the Lord will answer;
When you cry, He will
say: Here I am. If you
banish the yoke from
your midst, The
menacing hand, and
evil speech.

ט אז תקרא ויהוה
יענה, תשובע ויאמר
הנני:

*fasted, did You not see? When we starved our
bodies, did You pay no heed?*

This outlook of Yeshayahu mirrors his message from Chapter 1 (the *haftarah* of Shabbat Chazon) where he questions the insincere sacrifices and *tefillot* that are offered in place of a society committed to the pillars of *tzedek u'mishpat*, justice and kindness. Nevertheless, it is difficult to conceive of his design for Yom Kippur, since his calls contradict the essential laws of Yom Kippur. Food is forbidden, how can we offer food to the hungry on this day? Our concern with clothing seems misplaced on a day that certain types of clothing are restricted. Lastly, the mandate to lift the burden off of others so that they can hold their heads up high seems strange on a day that we spend with our heads lowered in prayer and humility. **So, what in fact is Yeshayahu suggesting? Should we get rid of Yom Kippur and instead volunteer in a soup kitchen, organize a clothing drive or volunteer?**

Yeshayahu responds that it is indeed true that the people did the correct actions by depriving themselves of food and clothing in order to mirror the angels and to connect to Hashem. However, this self-deprivation was intended to develop empathy towards others. Fasting should sensitize the penitent to the pain of those who are hungry every day of their lives. Yom Kippur is an internal day that develops our personal religious connections to Hashem. At the same time, this internal growth is fundamentally designed to bring our attention to the external, focusing us on the needs of others. We need that day of self-limitation as a catalyst to turn outward and recognize the needs- both physically and emotionally- of all the people who surround us.

May we all experience an introspective and outwardly focused Yom Kippur. May our better understanding of our own neediness help us to relate with kindness and empathy to the needs of others.

Rav David Sabato suggests that Yeshayahu did not mean to abolish Yom Kippur, but to expand the impact of the rituals of Yom Kippur. Yeshayahu describes a community that is careful about observing Yom Kippur and thinks that their worship is sincere. It is for that reason that earlier in the prophecy, Hashem describes them as a people who are (58:2): *וְאֹתֵי, יוֹם יוֹם יִדְרְשׁוּן, to be sure, they seek Me daily, Eager to learn My ways.* For this reason, they turn to Hashem and sincerely ask (58:3): *לָמָּה לָמָּה צָמְנוּ וְלֹא רָאִיתָ, עֲבִינוּ וְנִפְשָׁנוּ וְלֹא תִדְעַ,*