

## Yom Kippur Kol Rina Drash. 10/24

By: Rich Cohen

Many of us fast on Yom Kippur. Even one of the greetings we give each other in anticipation of this day is “May you have an easy fast.” So what is fasting all about?

In our modern world, there are many reasons to fast, some religious, some linked to improved health, and some political. Devotees have practiced religious fasting for centuries. There is a strong and rigorous tradition of fasting among many Christian religious orders and a cursory internet survey reveals many instructive articles on fasting for contemporary lay Christians with such titles as, 40 reasons to fast (United Methodist Church) and “Why do we fast?” from the Church of the Latter Day Saints. Islam also embraces a strong tradition of fasting, especially during the month of Ramadan, with its dawn to dusk fast. We educators should even remind ourselves that during the month of Ramadan we need to lighten up on our demands for our observant Muslim students in our classes, for they may be unfocussed and fatigued during their long daylight hours without food or water.

Intermittent fasting for health reasons has been gaining in popularity in recent years. Possible health benefits may include weight loss, blood sugar control, and protection against such medical conditions as cancer and neurogenerative disorders.

There is also a long tradition in many countries of political or protest fasting: Mahatma Gandhi in India and his many fasts protesting caste separation and other issues, Alice Paul and other suffragists protesting for the right to vote, the Irish republican hunger strike of 1980 against the harsh imprisonment of the British government, just to name a few.

My personal fast: I always approach the Yom Kippur fast with some planning and serious anticipation. First I stop drinking coffee a couple of days before Yom Kippur. Fasting can give me a headache, so why add a caffeine withdrawal headache to a fasting headache? Then I bulk up on bland carbs and liquids right before Kol Nidre. The morning of Yom Kippur my stomach growls for a while—hopefully it has stopped by now! Then I spend the day in prayer and try to minimize my physical cravings and concentrate on the spiritual. I always marvel at that certain point in the day when my bodily sensations quiet down there is at least a chance for the spiritual to take hold over the physical. The mind and spirit should take precedence over the incessant demands and sensations of the body.

So now what? What wisdom can we glean from our tradition on how to approach **this** fast? What is the meaning and significance of this fast that we take on?

It is uniquely different from any of the types of fasts we previously described. It is not a religious discipline, nor an attempt to promote better health, nor a political protest.

Bring on today's haftorah, selections from the teachings of the prophet Isaiah and a veritable instruction manual on the significance and meaning of our Yom Kippur fast. Isaiah teaches us both how to spiritually enter our fasting space and the attitudes and practices we need during our fast in order to effectively beseech Gd and evoke Gd to respond to our prayers and entreaties.

Through the mouth of the prophet Isaiah, Gd reminds us that Gd is exalted and Holy and powerful AND wrathful to those who have sinned against his ways. BUT what if we turn to Gd in penitence and fasting on this holy day? Should not Gd delight in and accept the prayers of those who are fasting? Should not Gd delight further in those who act even more contrite, who "droop their head like a bullrush, who grovel in sackcloth and ashes?" No, no! says Gd through the mouth of Isaiah. It is not enough. You can fast all you want, cry all you want, and grovel all you want, but if you oppress your workers, quarrel and fight, and deal wicked blows, Gd will NOT accept your petitions. It takes more than penitence and prayer to get Gd to listen. It takes compassionate action. So what are these actions? "Let the oppressed go free, share your bread with the hungry, take the homeless into your home, clothe the naked, do not turn away from people in need." And while you are at it, also celebrate Shabbat as a day of delight.

If you do all these things, then when you call out to Gd, the Lord will answer you and sustain you. When you cry out, Gd will accept your prayers and say "Here I am." "Then cleansing light shall break forth like the dawn, and the Lord's glory will be your rearguard."

What an important message! Today is the day when we fast and pray, pray and fast, in the formality of this day of intense prayer and hope that our prayers are reaching to Gd. but we must never lose sight of what Gd really values, the actions of love and kindness and support that we can extend to our communities and our fellow human beings. Isaiah teaches that only then will Gd accept the intense prayers and fasting of this day. To all of you: Gamar chatimah tova and oh yes, have an easy fast.

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