Fasting and Feasting in Contemporary Judaism and Christianity

31.03.2013 | Debbie Young-Somers; Patrick Morrow

Rabbi Young-Somers and Rev'd P Morrow are reflecting in a short and informative way about the use and meaning of feasting and fasting in Judaism and Christianity.

Debbie Young-Somers

Feasting and Fasting in Judaism

"They tried to kill us, we survived, let's eat!" is how Jewish festivals are often described…. And it works for a good number of them. And if it doesn't work for every festival – Rosh Hashanah for example, there is still plenty of food related celebration and symbolism. And when it comes to making up for all that feasting with fasting, we have plenty of that too! There are several fast days (sunset to sunset + an hour) and half days (sunrise to sunset + an hour) which other than Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, generally mark when 'They tried to kill us and didn't do too badly', particularly around the destruction of the Temple.

Judaism for me is often about keeping things in balance. Too much of anything can't be good for you, and the perfect example of this is Yom Kippur. This annual day of atonement is a 25 hour fast, before which we are encouraged to eat as well as possible and as much as possible – specifically because it will make the fast more of a challenge. We spend the day in spiritual contemplation and personal reflection, hoping to atone before God, and to work on doing better in the coming year. The day is of course book ended by meals, however by the end of the fast on the whole all one can manage is something simple and fairly small. What I find most interesting though, is the fact that the first *mitzvah* one is supposed to perform after leaving services on Yom Kippur, is to begin constructing your *Sukkah* – the temporary dwelling or Tabernacle that we will try to eat in (and sleep in if we live somewhere warm enough) for the duration of the festival of *Sukkot* which begins a few days after Yom Kippur. It is a very physical festival, one that from the first insists we involve ourselves in building and creating. After the introspection of Yom Kippur, this is just what we need. We move swiftly from the internal, spiritual world, and immediately are reminded to continue to engage in the physical world. In this way, Fasting and Feasting hold and support each other in Jewish space and time, and help to create balance and wholeness.

Of course food as a whole has always been important in Judaism, whether one believes the laws around food were handed down at Mount Sinai or that they were powerful social tools; what we eat and how we eat (or don't eat) is very important, and has been since Biblical times. Of course our

food has changed and adapted depending on where Jews have lived. I was very upset aged 14 when staying with my Catholic German exchanges family to discover they eat ‘kneidlach’ too (matza ball dumplings) – turns out we didn’t invent them, we just adapted them!

Every festival has its celebratory meal, from Shabbat to Purim, and these meals aren’t just encouraged, they are commanded! Wine, a symbol of joy, is usually blessed at the beginning of such a meal, alongside a blessing for the day and bread is also blessed to kick off any celebratory proceedings. Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year) and Tu Bishvat (New Year for the Trees) have *sedarim* (symbolic foods and accompanying ceremony) as well as the more famous Pesach, and in these we see foods being used to encourage reflection, questions, prayers and hopes.

Fasting has also held an important role in Jewish life since Biblical times, and has been used to express regret, to make a request (often for rain) or to remember. Fasting is seen as a way of spiritually transforming both an individual and their community, and is claimed to encourage God to act graciously towards us. Fasts are not always large communal events, and personal fasts can be undertaken. There is also the tradition of a bride and groom fasting on their wedding day in order to begin their marriage in a state of purity and atonement. But of course such fasting is always followed by feasting – with a wedding being one such occasion when a celebratory meal (or *seudat mitzvah*) is commanded.

Fasting for its own sake is not encouraged, however it is seen as a tool; a way to help make our prayers mean more and say more. We are reminded of our own frailty, and left with a deeper appreciation of God’s gifts to us. We are made vulnerable by fasting, focusing inwards, and yet reminding ourselves of our bodies and our dependence on them. We must be careful on Yom Kippur in particular not to make the mistake of thinking the fast alone is enough – it is there to help us transform, but if our behaviour to others and our inner life is unchanged, it has not served its purpose. It is also important to note that those for whom fasting would be a danger are commanded not to fast, and there is a special blessing for them to recite should they need to eat, which reminds us that we are required to save human life.

For some Jews today, the rhythm of feasting and fasting might be almost all that remains of their Judaism, with Passover Seder and Yom Kippur services being their main religious engagement. For others Jewish time is constructed through feasts and fasts and their lives revolve through them gaining meaning and personal growth as well as communal sharing and improvement.

Patrick Morrow

Fasting and Feasting in Contemporary Christianity

The obvious place to begin is by saying that neither fasting nor feasting is particularly important in modern Christianity. It’s true that British Christians may feel they ‘must’ have turkey at Christmas; in much of continental Europe, it’s fish on Christmas Eve; in Scandinavia, it may be ham. But these are folk customs that do not provoke religious reflection. Again, while those who are most *au fait* with the Church’s life and its calendar will speak often of the ‘Feast’ of a saint or event in the life of Christ, here ‘Feast’ is a technical term for the nature of the church service. There may be ‘a bun fight’ - or elaborate meal – afterwards. Or there may not.

As obvious statements, these do capture some truths. However, they also mislead. We must remember that there are many different Christianities. In some, fasting and feasting are still close to the centre of things.

This is most evident in the case of Eastern Orthodoxy. If you experience an Orthodox Easter in Greece, say, you will go to church for midnight, hear that 'Christ is risen!' and be given an Easter flame to take home. You'll go on to have *magiritsa*, a special soup of lamb, egg-lemon source and rice, a sweetbread called *tsoureki*, and hard-boiled eggs dyed a rich red. The main meal will be whole roast lamb or goat. The 'religious' and the 'domestic' practices blend into one, in ways that will be immediately recognisable to many Jews and Muslims.

These delicacies are of the essence of Easter, because they come after Great Lent and Holy Week, where 'fasting' is required of the faithful. The rules for fasting in Orthodoxy can be so complicated they might remind one of *kashrut* (the *kosher* pattern of eating). Keeping it simple, though, 'fasting' tends to mean *not* going without *all* food, but abstaining from all animal products, wine and oil. A diet of boiled or uncooked vegetables is the 'ideal', though sometimes the fare can be rich indeed, with hummus and other lovely dips. There is something of a reminder of this 'fasting' in the West: pancakes on Shrove Tuesday (the day before the Western Lent begins) are designed to use up eggs and other 'luxuries'. As well as for Lent, the Orthodox fast before Christmas, the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul (29 June), and the Feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God (15 August). What is more, most Wednesdays and Fridays are fast days, as commemorations of the betrayal of Judas and the crucifixion of Jesus respectively.

Orthodox living away from cultures where such rules are second nature may make their own accommodations. Certainly, you are not supposed to put your health in danger by fasting, or be rude to your hosts. In the West, things tend not to be so regulated. Not a few Christians will still fast – in the sense of go without food and maybe drink as well – on Good Friday, until 3 pm, the hour of Christ's death. Pope Benedict XVI is reported as encouraging an older practice for Catholics, that of eating fish on Fridays. Of course, it isn't so much a positive command to eat fish, as the negative one to avoid meat. Historically, meat has been a luxury. This notion has of course become newly apposite, given the evidence that a vegetarian diet makes much more efficient use of precious resources. (Catholic vegetarians are encouraged to go without some other food on Fridays, as a mark of their own penitence.)

Giving up some little 'luxury' for Lent is still popular, even for some who are not observant or believers. Lent doubtless gives some people a second chance at their New Year's resolutions. However, according to the religious logic, it is not about giving up something that is intrinsically bad for you, like cigarettes. Rather, it is giving up something which is good, but/and also something you may have come to take for granted, or rely upon for comfort and consolation ('I can't do anything before my cappuccino!'). By giving this thing up, for a time and a season, you realise your identity as, at heart, a vulnerable and needy creature. So it is easier – or more pressing – to turn to God, and be in solidarity with those who have no choice but to go without.

You are actively encouraged to return to the good and pleasant thing on Easter Day. Fasting (however understood) is traditionally forbidden throughout the fifty days of Eastertide. Some will emphasise that, in the West, Sundays and major Feast days (like St Patrick's Day in Ireland) are outside of Lent; every Sunday is a Feast of the Resurrection. For the last few years, the 'Real Easter Egg' company has produced chocolate eggs. Some add that they symbolise the stone that was rolled away from the tomb. While this is not impossible, it is more likely that chocolate is simply one of the aforementioned luxuries, to be given up before Easter and then enjoyed heartily. Evidence and intuition both suggest that the egg as a symbol of fertility and new life predates Christianity.

Monks and nuns may fast regularly and more strictly than other Christians. This may make Jews,

Muslims and others ask if there isn't something 'life denying' about Christianity. Not just fasting but monasticism itself can seem to be about denying the body. St Paul does write: 'I punish my body and enslave it' (1 Corinthians 9.27, NRSV). You will find references to the mortification of the flesh and the passions in Christian writings. But, at its best and most authentic, as with St Paul himself, the idea is really a physical and spiritual training, like that of an Olympian (see 1 Cor 9.25: 'athletes exercise self-control in all things'). This is the root meaning of *askesis* and asceticism - training. We are creatures before we are consumers. Yet everything in our comfortable lives can seem to hide this fact from us. We can need the sharp shock of the discipline of 'going without', to help us orient ourselves - the better to return to the soup, the roast, the chocolate, the sherry, or whatsoever, with fuller thanksgiving to God!

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