



Fasting on Yom Kippur for Social Justice and Peace

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Fasting on Yom Kippur is widespread for Jews in Israel and around the world, even for those who are not necessarily generally observant. Yet, it is often done out of habit or from a sense of Jewish solidarity, since millions of Jews gather in synagogues around the world on this day to express their identification with the Jewish people, in ways that are often inexplicable and even somewhat irrational.

Unfortunately, many people, if not most, who fast due to habit and routine, miss the central religious message of the fast. In fact, the essential meaning and purpose of fasting is almost completely forgotten.

However, if one were to pay careful attention to the Yom Kippur prophetic biblical reading, from the prophet Isaiah (chapter 58:1-12) which we read this Saturday, one would have a clear understanding of the purpose of the fast.

First of all, Isaiah identifies the problem of insincere fasting when he says: “On your fast day you see to your business and oppress all your laborers.... You fast in strife and contention, and you strike with a wicked fist.” (58:3). There is no point in fasting, says the prophet, if you don’t treat your workers fairly and you continue oppressing other people! If one does this, one misses the point of the fast!

Instead, why should one fast?

This is the fast that I desire: to unlock the fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke. 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 them, and do not ignore your own flesh. (58:6-7)

When one engages in this kind of sincere religious fasting, one develops a definite social consciousness for the poor and the oppressed people in one’s society. This is a response that comes out of a genuine understanding of the moral power of fasting.

According to Isaiah, this kind of sincere fasting elicits a positive response from God in the form of the Hebrew word “Hineini—Here I am.” What can this mean? One beautiful interpretation is offered in the relatively new special prayer book for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur of the Conservative movement, called Mahzor Lev Shalem (the prayer book of the whole heart):

‘Then when you call, Adonai will answer: when you cry, God will say Hineini, here I am (Isaiah 58:9)’. On Rosh Hashanah, in the story of the binding of Isaac, we read of God’s call to Abraham and Abraham’s response, ‘Hineini, here I am.’on Yom Kippur, it is we who call and God who responds ‘Hineini, here I am.’ Through our acts of righteousness, compassion, and repair of the world, we have the potential to bring the Divine Presence into the world. (Mahzor Lev Shalem, p. 286)

I like this interpretation because it stresses the partnership between us and God.

It is a mistake to think that simply by fasting and praying all day on Yom Kippur (or any other time) that we will be somehow magically forgiven by God for our sins, mistakes and evil deeds of the past year, as individuals, as a community, and as a people. Rather, it is only through our acting for social justice and peace in the year ahead, by our own saying of Hineini—and meaning it—that we will have participated in true repentance on this very special and serious day in the Jewish calendar.

This year, when I fast on Yom Kippur, I will be reminded and catalyzed to act for justice and peace in this world, not only for my own people, but for all human beings, since all are created in the divine image. As I do this, I will be mindful of growing racism, xenophobia and horrific threats of war in America, Iran, North Korea, Israel and other parts of the world, and I will re-dedicate myself to action, to do what I can, with other colleagues and organizations, to heal the world, before it is too late.

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