

The Yom Kippur Amidah (silent meditation) ends with a personal prayer that is, on the surface, self-deprecating. “My God, before I was created, I was unworthy; and now that I have been created, it is as if I had never been created.” In his commentary on the liturgy, *Olat Re’iyah*, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook transforms this seemingly downcast text into a redemptive and inspiring call, in keeping with the sentiments of the prophets urging us to act to improve the world. He interprets the line to mean that none of us was created until the exact moment when we had a specific role to play. Only when we direct our actions toward the higher purpose of our existence do we become worthy of having been created; if we fail to live up to our best potential, we remain unworthy.

Our task on Yom Kippur, then, is for each one of us to try to discern what the world needs us for, and to remind ourselves of the obligation to fulfill that task. From the local to the global, the world around us is full of causes crying out for our attention. Yom Kippur is the day to see the need that we can respond to, the problem that we can help alleviate, the suffering that we can lessen in some way. It is the day to commit—amidst all of our family and work and personal obligations—to do something to help. We must not allow ourselves to be satisfied with merely showing up to services, fasting, singing, beating our chests, sitting, standing, bowing, and passing the hours as we move through the pages of the *mahzor*.

The Mishnah famously states, *lo alekha hamlakhah ligmor, velo atah ben horin lehibat el mimenah*. None of us can solve the problems of the world on our own, but we can never stop doing our part to try (Avot 2:16). We invoke the image of God as judge so many times during the High Holidays; but rather than imagining God as one who sentences each of us to either life or death in the coming year, we should instead understand this to mean that God notices and evaluates our actions and holds us to the highest of standards.²

May we hear and heed Isaiah’s challenge never to let our religious lives and communities shield us from the complex responsibilities of repairing the brokenness around us, but rather to let our Judaism guide each of us, as it was designed to do, toward a path of building a better world—for the Jewish community and for all of God’s creatures.

¹ English translation adapted from *Kol Haneshamah: Prayerbook for the Days of Awe*.

² This sentence was adapted from a sermon by Rabbi Annie Tucker

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יום כיפור תשע”ז

Yom Kippur 5777



Is This the Fast I Desire?

Rabbi Julia Andelman, Director of Community Engagement, JTS

When I was a congregational rabbi, my practice was to offer a sermon on Yom Kippur morning relating to social justice. I would raise an issue of ethical concern in the world; share my reading of what Jewish texts and tradition had to say on the matter; and suggest actions for individuals and for the community.

While generally well received, these sermons did not sit well with a few members of my community. Issues tinged with political valences and moral controversies were not appropriate for Yom Kippur, these people argued. A Yom Kippur sermon should uplift and inspire, not raise charged sociopolitical topics about which congregants might disagree. That was simply not what they came to synagogue to hear.

So what led me to this practice, and why did I remain committed to it? Because I am convinced that this is what the liturgy and readings of Yom Kippur want of us.

Much of the haftarah (prophetic reading) for Yom Kippur morning, from the book of Isaiah, serves as an exhortation not to divorce ritual behavior from social and moral considerations. The haftarah stands in sharp contrast to the Torah reading, which is focused almost exclusively on ritual behavior—specifically, the cultic worship of Yom Kippur in Temple times. A significant portion of the Musaf service echoes this theme. In between the two is the haftarah. The rabbis generally chose haftarot that were thematically related to the Torah reading; but the Yom Kippur haftarah, surprisingly, seems to negate Torah reading almost entirely, along with a key part of the Musaf service—declaring ritual to be, more often than not, meaningless in the eyes of God.

Like a people righteous in their deeds,
who have not abandoned the laws of their God,
they ask of me the laws of righteousness,
they yearn for nearness to their God.
“Why, when we fasted, did you not see it?
When we starved our bodies, did you not know?”
Because on your fast day you engage in business
and oppress all your laborers!

Because you fast in strife and quarrelling,
and you strike with a wicked fist!
Today, you do not fast in such a way
as to make your voice heard on high.
Is this the kind of fast I desire?
A day of merely depriving one's body?
Is it bowing the head like a bulrush
and lying in sackcloth and ash?
Do you call that a fast,
a day in which the Lord delights?
Is not the fast that I desire
the unlocking of the chains of wickedness,
the loosening of exploitation,
the freeing of all those oppressed,
the breaking of the yoke of servitude?
Is it not the sharing of your bread with the hungry,
the bringing of the wretched poor into your home,
or clothing someone you see who is naked,
and not hiding from your kin in their need?
Then...the presence of the Lord will encompass you.
Then, when you call, the Lord will answer.
...If you banish oppression from your midst,
the menacing hand and tainted speech,
if you give of yourself to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the poor—
Then the Lord will guide you always...
And those among you will rebuild ancient ruins,
foundations long dormant you'll restore.
You shall be called the repairer of fallen walls,
the restorer of settlement roads.¹

The haftarah is a sharp indictment of the notion that ritual practice and moral behavior can exist in separate realms. We must not enter Yom Kippur under the assumption that fasting and prayer alone can bring about atonement for our sins, Isaiah contends. If we spend the day fervently engaged in ritual activities and then return to our lives as if nothing has changed—as if spiritual self-reflection has nothing to do with how we conduct ourselves in the world—then we have missed the point entirely. Going through the motions of Yom Kippur with a sense of complacency about the problems of the world around us is, according to Isaiah, a fundamentally un-Jewish way of relating to God.

Isaiah's thoughts build off of earlier prophetic books, such as Amos, who puts even stronger words in God's mouth:

"I loathe, I spurn your festivals, I am not appeased by your solemn assemblies. If you offer me burnt offerings, or your meal offerings, I will not accept; I will pay no heed to your gifts of fatlings. Spare me the sound of your hymns, and let me not hear the sound of your lutes. But let justice well up like water, righteousness like an unfailing stream" (5:21-24).

Reflecting on these prophetic teachings, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote:

[T]he worth of worship, far from being absolute, is contingent upon moral living, and that when immorality prevails, worship is detestable. Questioning man's right to worship through offerings and songs, they maintained that the primary way of serving God is through love, justice, and righteousness...Of course the prophets did not condemn the practice of sacrifice in itself...They did, however, claim that deeds of injustice vitiate both sacrifice and prayer. Men may not drown the cries of the oppressed with the noise of hymns, nor buy off the Lord with increased offerings. The prophets disparaged the cult when it became a substitute for righteousness. (*The Prophets*, p. 250)

In other words, we cannot honestly define Yom Kippur as relating purely to our personal spiritual development. God demands more of us. To avoid reflecting on our actions in the realms of social action and social justice on Yom Kippur would be to fly in the face of what our prophets, and the rabbis who highlighted their texts, are trying to teach us. While we may prefer to engage with liturgy, biblical readings, and sermons that speak only in terms of our own lives, it behooves us, on this most sacred day of the Jewish year, to resist that self-centered temptation and to be reminded of our broader obligations to others in need.

The Yom Kippur liturgy similarly calls us to task through the *al heit* confession, or *vidui*. It is so easy to mumble quickly through the long litany of abstract transgressions, recited repeatedly throughout the day. But if we listen to the charges of that confession, we will hear the text reminding us of our obligations beyond ourselves:

*For the sin that we have committed before you by hardening our hearts—
Ignoring poverty, homelessness, and despair.*

*For the sin that we have committed before you by exploitation—
Living well while those who serve us live in poverty.*

*For the sin that we have committed before you by silence—
Saying nothing when we knew that human beings were being mistreated.*

*For the sin that we have committed before you by narrow-mindedness—
Feeling only our own pain, closing our hearts to the agony of the bereaved and oppressed.*

(Adapted from the Rabbis for Human Rights [Yamim Noraim Rabbinic Resource Packet](#))