

Affliction and Rejoicing: The Emotional Rituals of the *Haggim*

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On Yom Kippur, we are commanded to afflict ourselves, and on Sukkot we are commanded to rejoice. What is our tradition really asking of us on these days and why?

The Torah's description of Yom Kippur doesn't include most of the practices we associate with the holiday. It certainly doesn't require sitting in shul all day, it doesn't tell us to wear white, and in fact, it doesn't even explicitly mention fasting. Rather, in Leviticus 16:29–31, God states:

And this shall be to you a law for all time: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict yourselves; and you shall do no manner of work, neither the citizen nor the alien who resides among you. For on this day atonement shall be made for you to purify you of all your sins; you shall be pure before GOD. It shall be a sabbath of complete rest for you, and you shall afflict yourselves; it is a law for all time.

The Rabbis help us to understand that what is required on this holiday is not just a set of specific practices, but the pursuit of a particular kind of communally experienced sensation.

Yoma 74b asks whether this list is comprehensive or if “afflicting oneself” might also include practices such as sitting in the sun until one gets too hot or in the shade until one gets too cold. The conclusion is that it doesn't, because just as the verses in Leviticus command us not to work, so too *inui nefesh* must also consist of things that we *don't* do. Yet the assumption behind the question seems to be that the goal of *inui nefesh* isn't the performance of practices like fasting in order to transcend one's body for the day, but rather that the goal is actually to achieve a state of physical discomfort. It's just that we are only permitted to achieve this state via certain mechanisms (denial of normal physical comforts) and not by means of others (actively seeking out uncomfortable situations). The Torah, then, is asking us to spend a day together in the experience of particularly unpleasant sensations, which the Rabbis of the Mishnah help us understand in more detail: rumbling stomachs, parched mouths, feet exposed to the dirt and the wind, unwashed faces, and lonely bodies.



Leviticus promises atonement and purification from God on Yom Kippur and makes two requirements: first, refraining from work, and second, a practice known as *inui nefesh*, or “afflicting one's soul,” which is not described in further detail. What exactly does the Torah mean by this?

In the Mishnah, the Rabbis break *inui nefesh* down into several parts: refraining from eating, drinking, bathing, anointing with oil, wearing leather shoes, and sexual intimacy. A midrash quoted in Babylonian Talmud

On Sukkot, however, we are required to spend the holiday seeking out the opposite experience: joy and nothing but joy. “You shall rejoice in your festival, with your son and daughter, your male and female slave, the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your communities. You shall hold a festival for the Lord your God seven days, in the place that the Lord will choose; for the Lord your God will bless all your crops and all your undertakings, and you shall have nothing but joy.” (Deut. 16:14–15).

Again, the Rabbis help us to understand that what is required on this holiday is not just a set of specific practices, but the pursuit of a particular kind of communally experienced sensation:

Rabbi Yehuda says: “One should enable each member of his household to rejoice with an item that pleases them, men with what is fit for them and women with what is fit for them.” Rabbi Yehuda elaborates: “Men with what is fit for them, i.e., with wine. And as for the women, with what should one cause them to rejoice?” Rav Yosef teaches: “One should delight them with new clothes, in Babylonia with colored clothes and in Eretz Yisrael with the pressed linen clothes that are manufactured there. (BT Pesachim 109a)

Leaving aside the gender essentialism of this passage for a moment (in my experience, many women also enjoy wine), the Rabbis are trying to make a larger point here: when the Torah tells us to rejoice on Sukkot, it is not just telling us to perform certain practices, such as making the holiday a festive occasion by preparing nice food and drink. Rather, what is being commanded of us is the achievement of a communal experience of joy and pleasure.

Whatever our different individual experiences of loss, frustration, success, and response to global events—for these days, we will be joined together as an emotional collective, operating on rabbinic emotional time.

The idea that we might be commanded to feel certain ways can be challenging, especially when events in our personal lives or in the world don’t seem to align with the emotional mandate for the holiday. Why, then, does our tradition ask us to collectively experience discomfort on Yom Kippur and pleasure and happiness on Sukkot?

I want to suggest that the Rabbis are asking us to locate ourselves in a particular kind of Jewish experiential calendar. For Jews in the early rabbinic period, the calendar was an important locus of group identity, helping to distinguish Jews from other groups like Romans or Samaritans. And I believe that for the Rabbis, the calendar didn’t just regulate the date of Shabbat and holidays—it was supposed to govern a person’s emotional experience of the whole year. This is also why the Rabbis forbade both mourning and marriage on the three pilgrimage festivals: the Jewish emotional calendar was supposed to take precedence not only over competing calendars of other groups, but even over the joys and sorrows of our family’s life-cycle events.

I would like to challenge us all this year to find ourselves in this distinctive experience of collective Jewish identity, to look with empathy at those next to us and let our experiences reverberate. This will mean spending the High Holidays not only davening in shul and sitting at meals in community but also squirming together with the physical discomforts of Yom Kippur, and then, just days later, soaring together into the joy of Sukkot. Whatever our different individual experiences of loss, frustration, success, and response to global events—for these days, we will be joined together as an emotional collective, operating on rabbinic emotional time.