

Two passages, and one question: The first passage comes from the final verses of the Torah reading for Yom Kippur, which we will hear chanted tomorrow morning: “And it shall be for you an everlasting statute: in the seventh month, upon the tenth day of the month” – that’s today, by the way – “you shall afflict your souls. No work shall you perform, both homeborn and the stranger in your midst, for on this day atonement shall be made for you, to make you clear from all your wrongdoing. Before the Fount of Life, you shall be clean.” And the second, from Rabbi Marc Gellman’s wonderful children’s book *God’s Mailbox*: “ In the Garden [of Eden], Adam would sometimes sit all day, talking to God. Adam would talk to God about the sky and the water, about the mountains and the valleys... And Adam would try to explain to God just how he felt seeing such beautiful things all around him. Sometimes Adam could not find the right words to explain how he felt and he would just throw up his hands and ask, “God, do you know how I feel?” Then God would answer in a still, small voice, “I know how you feel.” Then God would kiss Adam with a breath of wind and the two of them would go their separate ways until the next day. Now that Adam was outside the Garden, he remembered those talks with God. He was afraid that they would never happen again, and he was very sad.”

Two passages – and the question: What is the connection between these two passages?

We sit here on Kol Nidrei – we’re still comfortable and well-fed. But we’re well aware that by tomorrow mid-morning it will be a very different story. Our stomachs will start to growl unpleasantly, especially when we look up and notice the baskets filled with food, which we will be donating to Mitzvah Food Pantry after the Holidays (if seeing the food adds to our discomfort, I would only say that that is part of the point). If we observe the traditional prohibitions and don’t shower in the morning we may be feeling a bit grimy. We may not smell so good. These are all expressions of the Torah’s command to afflict our souls on the tenth day of the seventh month: We afflict ourselves on Yom Kippur so we can achieve atonement for our sins from the past year.

But what does it mean to afflict ourselves and why should this lead to atonement? In some religious traditions, there is a clear belief that suffering is redemptive and there is a positive value placed on suffering itself. While Judaism does express similar sentiments in some places, Jewish thinkers have generally been reluctant to make a connection between suffering and redemption: suffering is not ennobling, nor is it to be sought out. Rather suffering is something that keeps us from living with full human dignity, and which we must all take personal responsibility to alleviate in the world to the greatest extent possible. As the Talmud puts it, “The torments of poverty deprive a person of his good sense and of the capacity to acknowledge his Creator.” [Eruvin 41b] While many religions prescribe asceticism – abstaining from earthly pleasures to draw closer to God through our deprivation – there is no similar strand in Judaism. We do not seek out suffering; we try to purge it from the world. But if we are not to seek out suffering and do not believe it elevates us when it comes, why are we told to afflict ourselves on Yom Kippur and what is the connection between our affliction and the atonement we desire?

It might help to start by figuring out what we mean by affliction. If you ever read or saw Dan Brown’s *The DaVinci Code*, you’ll remember that one of the most startling and disturbing scenes involves the zealot monk Silas who has just committed a murder and now seeks atonement by praying as he repeatedly lashes himself across the back with a metal-studded whip until he bleeds. The concept of self mortification, of punishing our bodies, is entirely alien to Judaism. The Talmud asks [Yoma 74b]: If we are seeking to afflict ourselves on Yom Kippur, shouldn’t we actively inflict pain or discomfort on

ourselves – and roundly rejects the proposition. Affliction, the rabbis tell us, is *not* about causing suffering or discomfort, but instead about refraining from basic human pleasures such as eating, drinking, bathing, and sexual relations. One of my teachers from Israel, Judy Klitsner, draws the comparison with Shabbat. Shabbat is a day to focus on the transcendent, to exalt *being*, not *doing*; and the traditional Shabbos regulations and restrictions liberate us from the hustle-bustle of our daily lives, the daily activities and distractions that keep us from focusing on what really matters. So too on Yom Kippur, which the Torah calls *Shabbat Shabbaton* – the Sabbath of Sabbaths – various prohibitions have been set in place whose purpose is to remove the normal pleasures and distractions of everyday life, the better to allow us to focus on the work of Yom Kippur.

What is the work of Yom Kippur? It is the difficult and painful task of standing naked before God, keenly aware of all our many shortcomings and trying to find a way to heal our connections with the Divine and with ourselves. As we will say in a few minutes and throughout the day tomorrow in the *vidui* confessional prayer: “Our God, our ancients’ God, may our prayer come before you. Hide not from our supplication, for we are not so insolent and stubborn as to say, here in your presence... we are righteous and have not sinned, for we indeed have sinned.” Our task is to acknowledge and admit the many ways we have come up short, deliberating on all the words and actions from the past year for which we need forgiveness. Our job is to confront the gulf that lies between the way we *are* and the way we *wish* we were – the way we are *called* to become. We have to face all our iniquities and truly see the ways in which we have let a year’s callousness, indifference, and sheer habit accumulate unchecked and harden into routine. In classic Jewish theology, this hardening, this blockage, is *sin* creating a gulf between ourselves and our Creator. And our souls feel that gulf as a kind of pain, as we recognize that we are alienated from our divine Source, so distant that we cannot even feel God’s presence. As Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the great mystical teacher and chief rabbi of pre-state Israel wrote in his classic work *Lights of Repentance*: “When one forgets the essence of one’s soul; when one distracts his mind from seeing the true nature of his inner life, everything becomes doubtful and confused. The principal of *teshuvah*, which immediately lights up the darkness, is for a person to return to himself, to the root of his soul. Then he will immediately return to God, to the Soul of all souls.” [Orot ha-Teshuvah, ch. 16] This is the doubt and confusion Adam feels in our story, as he realizes that the immediacy of his connection with God has been severed by his act of disobedience at the tree – that God is no longer as immediately present to him because, in truth, Adam is no longer as immediately present to God.

We may or may not envision a God who is disappointed in our actions, from whom we feel at times closer or more distant. But we all appreciate that there is some best vision of ourselves to which we are called to aspire and more often than not – *much* more often than not – we fail. Each failure takes us further from that ideal vision until it can be hard even to remember what it once was. The distance between what we wish to be and what we are is too great, and so we turn away from that gulf, pretend it is not there. And so we go about our lives, alienated from our highest selves, willfully losing ourselves in the business of everyday life, because the task of acknowledging that distance – to say nothing of dealing with it – is simply too great.

But not today. Today is the day we try to strip away our defenses, painful though it is – almost like scraping off a scab that protects the raw, living skin underneath. Tonight we come to synagogue, we

pray, we abstain from the routines and pleasures that normally distract us from the distance we feel between what we are and what we should be.

And yet our abstinence is not only freedom from distraction. Because as we sit here, anticipating a sticky and hungry day in synagogue tomorrow, we might consider that our abstaining from the normal comforts of everyday life serves an additional purpose as well. Yes, our affliction may be challenging and may make our bodies uncomfortable but that is hardly the main point for, as the Torah states, the actual purpose is not to afflict our bodies, but our souls. By abstaining from basic material pleasures we forego the emotional as well as physical comfort they provide, the sense of wellbeing which normally cushions us from the awareness of our failures and limitations. As another of my teachers, Rabbi Zvi Hirschfeld, puts it: "Without the anesthetic of food and sex, we are left open to genuinely feel the loss, frustration, and pain our failures, shortcomings, and missed opportunities leave on our psyche. The [cessation] from our bodily routine, our rest from our physical selves, makes space for a pained spiritual self to burst to the forefront of our consciousness." Stripped of our defenses, we stand unprotected, unshielded before God and ourselves, reciting the litany of our sins – the *ashamnu's* and *al chet's* that are at the center of our liturgy for Yom Kippur, wrestling with all the words and actions for which we need forgiveness.

In other words, the true affliction of Yom Kippur isn't the relatively small physical discomfort we endure by foregoing food and water. It's the spiritual discomfort we endure on this holiest of days – a discomfort made possible by ignoring our bodily needs to focus instead on our spiritual state. "In the seventh month, upon the tenth day of the month you shall afflict your souls... for on this day atonement shall be made for you, to make you clear from all your wrongdoing." We don't afflict our bodies to cause expiation; we merely use hunger and thirst as a tool to strip away our physical and emotional defenses, and when we do we can hear our souls cry out with the same loss and sadness of Adam after he is exiled from the Garden. Our fast enables us to realize we too are in exile, to apprehend how far we have strayed from our divinely-centered selves. And this realization is the *true* affliction of the day, the one that spurs us to draw closer to God and seek atonement for our actions. Only when we can honestly acknowledge the rift that exists between us and our truest selves, only when we allow ourselves to fully experience the pain and alienation that comes from that distance, only then will we be motivated to seek forgiveness, to heal that wound and bridge that gulf.

In Marc Gellman's story, Adam becomes increasingly upset because God no longer answers him now that he lives outside of the Garden. Adam's despair grows until he finally bursts into tears because he feels so sad and lonely. "Just then," Gellman writes, "the sun came out from behind a cloud, warming his face. A breath of wind blew against his cheeks and dried his tears, and all of a sudden a still, small voice said, 'I know how you feel.'" Adam asks why God has not answered him any of the previous times he has called out since being expelled from the Garden, and God says, "I was always answering you. It's just that outside the garden you have to listen a little harder to hear me. Things are not as quiet out here."

Yom Kippur is a day for quiet, for reflection, for silent introspection. It is a day for ignoring our bodies in order to focus on our souls, for letting the pain and fear of our loneliness wash over us in a wave of affliction, and for listening to the still, small voice coming from without and within, to that voice that has the power to erase the distance and make us whole.

*Tzom Kal* – may our fasts be easy on our bodies, and hard on our souls.