

“Is This The Fast I Desire?”

“*Tzom kal*,” which is Hebrew for “easy fast,” is a Yom Kippur greeting with which I have long had a complicated relationship. First it was because, in the words of my friend Sarah when we were sixteen and thinking deeply and earnestly about religion, “the most important part of a fast isn’t how easy it is - it’s how meaningful it is.” But then in my mid-twenties, I wasn’t able to fast any more, for health reasons, and the greeting “*tzom kal*” became complicated for me in a totally different way.

(As an aside, if you were not aware, one of the oldest Jewish teachings about fasting is that if it would put your health at risk in any way, you should not fast on Yom Kippur, or at any other time, either.)

When I stopped fasting, the greeting “*tzom kal*,” meant to be a quick hello or goodbye, suddenly added an extra layer of complexity to my interactions. Did I let the person who had greeted me know that oh sorry, I wasn’t fasting, but I hoped it went well for them? Say thank you? Smile and offer a different Yom Kippur greeting instead?

A few years later, my health shifted again, and I returned to something much closer to a full fast. (This is still where I am today.) And suddenly my experience of Yom Kippur changed again ... and not in a way I loved. I was distracted, and hungry! When I started fasting as a post-Bat Mitzvah teenager, it was an exciting transition, and felt like a spiritual challenge. When I started fasting again as an adult who remembered other adult, non-hungry Yom Kippurs, Yom Kippurs where I could focus on the meaning of the prayers after 2 p.m. as well as before, it was decidedly less thrilling. My current feelings about fasting on Yom Kippur are probably best summed up as “eh, I guess it’s worth a shot.”

One of the blessings of being in community together is that we all experience the world in such different and complementary ways, and we can learn from each other. And in this room today, we are (likely) a community with a wide variety of relationships to fasting:

- We are people who fast and people who don't fast, and people who do things in between.
- And we are also people who feel fulfilled by fasting and people who feel kind of unenthusiastic about it – each for our own reasons,
- We are people who love the greeting “*tzom kal*” and people who just learned it five minutes ago,
- People who find fasting distracting and people who find fasting easy and people who find fasting hard and people who find fasting transformative ... and more.

In recent years, the Jewish community has become much better about talking about the presence of people who don't fast in our communities – and also teaching about the many Jewish texts that forbid fasting for anyone for whom it would be a risk to their mental or physical health. Organizations like *A Mitzvah to Eat* and *Shleimut* offer great resources online,¹ our prayerbook includes meditations for those who eat on Yom Kippur, and there are even Yom Kippur lunches organized in many cities so that those who need to eat can eat together. The lunch in our area is hosted by Gather DC.

So, we have a lot of resources these days to acknowledge the diversity of experiences our community has on Yom Kippur. These are all great ways to destigmatize eating on Yom Kippur, which is really important if we want to be a community in which everyone feels empowered to take care of their health. However, there is a broader question these efforts still leave unanswered, which is something like: is there a deeper *meaning* behind fasting that all of us can connect to, whether or not we ourselves fast? And what is fasting – or the practice we substitute for fasting – supposed to do or change in our lives and in the world?

I think these questions are important both for those of us who do some sort of food-related fasting on Yom Kippur and those of us who do not. And so, I'd like to spend some time today exploring them with you. I should say at the outset that I don't think there is one right answer to these questions – and ultimately, each of us needs to figure out what *all* Jewish practices, including fasting, mean to us personally. But there are a lot of possible answers in our tradition

¹ See for example: <https://www.amitzvahtoeat.org/yom-kippur>.

about what fasting *could* mean, and what fasting *could* do, and these possible answers can help us explore what fasting means to us.

First, let's start with an explanation for fasting that many of us may have heard before: we fast on Yom Kippur because fasting reduces our distraction. Have you heard this one?

This explanation comes from the medieval philosopher Maimonides.² He argued that if we fast on Yom Kippur, we don't need to spend time thinking about *preparing* food, and the time we save by skipping food prep – and importantly, don't forget, pre-food-prep *planning* – can instead be spent on reflection and atonement! His reasoning is still frequently repeated today (including in our prayer book, in a footnote on p. 137), and if it works for you, that's great! But many of us might find ourselves thinking something like, “I hear you, Maimonides, but it's actually pretty distracting *not* to eat too ... and food acquisition and meal prep might have been intense processes in your time period, but I have a refrigerator and a *microwave*. If you had had a microwave, Maimonides, I'm not sure you would have made this argument.”

Luckily, Maimonides' argument is far from the only perspective in Jewish tradition about why we fast on Yom Kippur. In fact, it was fairly innovative for his era, which is a polite way of saying he made it up.

So, where *does* the tradition of fasting on Yom Kippur come from, and why might the people who originated the custom have started doing it?

The first interesting thing to note here is where the tradition of fasting on Yom Kippur *doesn't* come from – it *doesn't* (seem to) come from the Torah, or from any other part of the Tanakh, the Jewish bible. The Bible does tell a number of really interesting stories about times when communities decided to fast together – and we'll get back to those stories in a moment, because they are important to our question – but none of these stories take place on Yom Kippur.

² In his *Guide for the Perplexed*.

The earliest clear instructions to fast on Yom Kippur are in the Mishnah,³ which was compiled about 1800 years ago, as Jewish communities reorganized their lives and their traditions following the destruction of the Second Temple. The ancient rabbis⁴ connected the custom of fasting to a verse in Leviticus that says that on Yom Kippur, we should “afflict ourselves.”⁵ They said that the verb for “afflict,” “ועניתם,” meant fasting, and consequently, in many Bibles, this verse is translated as “you shall practice self-denial.” But it’s not at all clear that the authors of Leviticus themselves were talking about fasting. For one thing, they *had* a word for “fast,” *tzom*, and they did not use it!

So we’re not quite sure when and why the custom of fasting on Yom Kippur emerged – but we know that the ancient rabbis worked hard to connect it to the Torah, a sure sign that it mattered to them.

But why did it matter to them? What did they think collective fasting *did* or *changed* in the world? To answer these questions, we need to turn back to some of the Tanakh’s fasting stories. Almost every story of collective fasting in the Tanakh could be the climax of an action movie, and that’s because in the Tanakh, fasting is usually a last-ditch response to existential crisis. Think about in Jonah, which we’ll read later this afternoon, when the people of Nineveh hear that they and their city are doomed unless they repent. Jonah 3:5 tells us:

וַיֵּאֱמְנוּ אֲנָשֵׁי נִינְוֶה בְּאֱלֹהִים וַיִּקְרְאוּ צוֹם וַיִּלְבְּשׁוּ שָׂקִים מִגְדוֹלָם וְעַד־קְטָנָם

The people of Nineveh believed God and they *proclaimed a fast* and put on sackcloths – [everyone,] from the elderly to the young.

(Putting on sackcloths is also a common theme in the Tanakh’s fasting stories – a theme that sadly, did *not* make it into our modern Yom Kippur customs – but I digress.)

In Jonah, this sudden fast by the people of Nineveh – which is not what God asked them to do, God asked them to repent – can perhaps be understood as a way of showing God, who holds

³ Mishnah Yoma 8:1.

⁴ See for example Babylonian Talmud Yoma 76a.

⁵ Leviticus 23:27. This verb is also used (for the behavior we should undertake on Yom Kippur) in Numbers 29:7, Leviticus 23:32, Leviticus 16:29, and Leviticus 16:31.

their fates in the balance, how serious they are about making positive change.⁶ And the fast, along with their other actions, works! It saves their city from destruction.

In the Tanakh, collective fasts don't just save communities from overtly declared divine vengeance, they *also* save communities threatened by war (as in battle stories told in Samuel⁷ and Judges⁸), genocide (as in the Book of Esther,⁹ when the entire Jewish community of Shushan fasts in solidarity with Esther when she risks her life to approach the king), or natural disaster (as in the Book of Joel,¹⁰ when a fast saves a city from a plague of locusts). It would be like in *Star Wars Episode IV*, if instead of finding a way to blow up the Death Star using spaceships and torpedoes, Luke and the other Rebels had sat on the ground wearing sacks and not eating, and saved the rebel base that way.¹¹

If we were to condense all of these fasting scenes, not into an action movie montage but into a commercial about the benefits of fasting as our ancient ancestors saw it, the script of the commercial might go something like this:

“Worried about genocide, war, divine vengeance, or even locusts?? Run out of all of your other options? Try FASTING AS A COLLECTIVE, the new miracle cure for impending doom! “When you think all is lost, don’t fret! Just grab your nearest brown sack, and stop eating and drinking! You’ll see your impending doom clear up in no time!”

And then amidst a montage of the people of Nineveh and Shushan and all the other almost-destroyed biblical communities frolicking happily in the fields, maybe next to a randomly placed tire swing, another voice would quickly say:

⁶ This is the perspective that the king of Nineveh articulates in Jonah 3:7-9 – that physical actions like a fast, along with repentance, might help change God’s will. In Jonah 3:10, God sees that the people have turned from their harmful ways, and decides not to destroy the city.

⁷ See for example I Samuel 7:6. As in some of the other stories, the fast in this story is paired with other actions, including repentance, prayer, and offerings to God.

⁸ Judges 20:26.

⁹ There are actually two collective fasts in Esther. The first is a spontaneous fast when the news of the king’s decree (against the Jews) reaches Jewish communities throughout Shushan (Esther 4:3); the second is a fast Esther requests everyone undertake (Esther 4:16).

¹⁰ Joel 2. The instructions to fast (amongst other actions) come in verses 12 and 15.

¹¹ In a truly parallel story (particularly to the battle stories in the *Tanakh*), Luke still would have eventually blown up the Death Star using a (human) weapon, but the fast would have been one of the climactic moments – pre-battle – when everything changed.

“Fasting is not for everyone. Most pregnant people, children, and people for whom fasting is in any other way dangerous should not fast. Consult your doctor, the Mishnah, or your own sense of well-being for details. Side effects of fasting may include”

And then the commercial would end with a smiling Esther or King of Nineveh, who would say brightly,

“We thought we were doomed ... but then we fasted! Talk with your God today to see if fasting is right for you.”

The ancient rabbis seem to have found this biblical commercial compelling. They composed an entire tractate of the Mishnah and later the Talmud called *Ta’anit* – the rabbinic Hebrew word for a fast – and it’s not about a holiday, it’s about how if the whole community fast together, rain will fall in times of drought. (It’s also about a person who sleeps for seventy years and wakes up in the future, because the Talmud is a pretty digressive form of literature, but that’s a story for another day.)

The ancient rabbis thought that fasts could change the world by pressuring *God* to change the world. And maybe that’s what they thought collective fasting on Yom Kippur could do, too. After all, even when doom is not imminent – even when the plague of locusts or the invading army isn’t literally at our door – even then, it would still be great if we could get some help in making the world a better place.

Probably, most of us here do *not* think that if everyone in our community stopped eating for 25 hours, we would automatically solve big existential problems we face, like climate change, or growing anti-democratic sentiment around the world. (And probably, Maimonides didn’t either – and that might be part of why and how he ended up suggesting that fasting is meant to change the people who fast, rather than the world they live in.) We also probably don’t believe that God is in control of the outcome in these situations. But is there something else we *could* do together that might be transformative? And what might that be?

When we read texts in the Talmud – and also in some part of the Bible – where the rabbis allege that calamities the Ancient Israelites faced, like terrible droughts or the invasions of foreign

armies, were actually the result of the *Israelites*' sins, and required the *Israelites*' repentance, the *Israelites*' fasting, it can be a little heartbreaking. You want to travel back in time and shout: "you are not responsible for the actions of empires who saw your community's geographic center as a good stopping point in between Asia and Africa! And you are definitely not in charge of the rain! Stop blaming yourself for droughts and invasions and attempted genocides!"

But there is also something kind of wise about the rabbinic intuition that maybe, if we all come together, we can take on big problems that we could not address alone. And their belief, that collective action could help improve their climate, and that climate disasters were in part the result of human actions, might not have much scientific basis in their day – but it certainly does in ours. Likewise, we are still not responsible for the decisions other governments make to invade other countries, or to attempt genocide – but in an age of representative democracy, we have much more of an opportunity to be engaged in finding solutions than human beings at almost any other point in history. And there are many people, in our TRS community, in our country, and in our world, who have made it their life's work to find these solutions.

In the Tanakh, and in tractate *Ta'anit* of the Talmud, "*fasting*" means coming together as a community to try to change ourselves and the world, particularly in a time of great need. The genius of whoever imposed the custom of fasting on the annual holiday of Yom Kippur, is that they were also bringing a sense of urgency to Yom Kippur that had previously been reserved only for external catastrophes. By linking fasting to Yom Kippur, the rabbis taught us that we don't have to wait for a drought, or an earthquake, or a plague of locusts or attempted genocide, to come together as a people – we can do it once a year, for the simple but important reason that we know that life is short, and we need each other.

We can come together right here, and right now.

Perhaps you are thinking, "okay, this is all well and good, but all of those ancient stories are still about people who stopped eating for a day. Wouldn't it be pretty radical if we tried to separate their goal of changing their world from their method?"

Maybe! But we actually would not be the first people to do so – that designation belongs to the prophet Isaiah, whose words we read every Yom Kippur.

In Isaiah 58, our Yom Kippur Haftarah, Isaiah describes a situation in which the people fasted, but it *didn't* have its desired effect – it didn't change their world for the better. And now, the people want to know why. Specifically, they are asking, “Why did we fast, and you (God) didn't see it? We afflicted ourselves, and you didn't know?”¹² Isaiah imagines God answering, “Because on the day of your fast, you had a great time, and you oppressed your laborers! You kept fighting with each other while you fasted! Don't fast the way you did today if you want your voices to be heard in the heavens.”¹³

So far, Isaiah sounds like he's saying a fast won't be effective if people are treating each other poorly while it happens, that you can't *just* all stop eating if you want to get God's attention – you have to treat each other justly, too.

But then, it gets much more interesting. According to Isaiah, what God says next is: “Is *this* the fast I desire? A day in which people afflict themselves, bow their heads, and lie around in sacks and ashes? Do you call *that* a fast?”¹⁴

And to this question, any reader of Jonah or Esther or Joel or Judges ... or any viewer of our new Collective Fasting As Miracle Cure bible commercial ... might say: “Yes! We **do** call that a fast! We think, in fact, that that's probably **exactly** what a fast is, and it usually works!”

But in Isaiah, God says otherwise. God continues by defining a “fast day,” a “*tzom*,” as “a day of God's goodwill”¹⁵ – and then famously says: “no, look, this is the *tzom* – the fast - I want. Unlock chains, and let oppressed peoples go free. Share your bread with the hungry, bring refugees home, clothe the naked, and don't ignore your flesh and blood. *Then* your light will burst out like the dawn, and your healing will quickly spring up.”¹⁶

¹² Isaiah 58:3.

¹³ Isaiah 58:4.

¹⁴ Isaiah 58:5.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ Isaiah 58:6-8.

In these verses, contrary to what thousands of years of Jewish tradition have led us to expect, a “*tzom*” – a fast – doesn’t necessarily have anything to do with food, or for that matter abstention from basic needs, at all. Rather, a “*tzom*” is “a day of God’s goodwill,” a day when things go well in the world, and what brings on God’s goodwill is treating each other justly.

In Isaiah’s description of the *meaning* and *impact* of fasting, we see glimmers of a definition of a fast day that is broad enough to encompass people with a variety of approaches to food on Yom Kippur.

Isaiah taught: *when* we come together in an attempt to take on crises and try to change our world for the better – that’s a fast! That’s a *tzom*! Whether or not you are eating or wearing a sackcloth or anything else ... the coming together to work for change is the point. And Isaiah also taught: when we come together like this, we should do it with an eye especially towards the most vulnerable people in our communities – in his time, and in ours, this included people who were hungry, and who were enslaved or imprisoned, and who were refugees ... and more. Isaiah taught the people of his time, and it’s true for us too, that the freedom and well-being of the most marginalized people in our society is inextricable from our own.

I’m not sure that Isaiah would have been a big fan of the phrase *tzom kal*, “easy fast.” But he might have wished us all a “*tzom mashma’uti*,” a “meaningful fast,” or even a “*tzom ya’il*,” an effective fast. And he certainly would have stood for a *tzom kahal*¹⁷ – a fast in community.

So however we spend the rest of our day today – whether our fast today involves abstention from food or whether it takes some other form – may this be a day we turn towards each other. May this be a day on which we recognize that we need each other, we need the earth and the earth needs us, and when we come together with an eye towards justice and interdependency, we have the power to do incredible things. Fasting for 25 hours might be one of these things. What else are we capable of?

¹⁷ This really lovely phrase is Rabbi Jeff Saxe’s. In Hebrew letters: צום קהל, as opposed to “צום קל,” which would be “easy fast.”