

RAM – YK Fasting -2023-5784

In 1917 Edna Ferber's published her autobiographical novel *Fanny Herself*, where young Fanny Brandeis decides to fast for the first time on Yom Kippur, only to be faced with temptation in the house of her friend Bella. An array of fresh-baked pastries laid out for the break-fast, "fragrant as a garden with spices, and fruit scents, and the melting delectable perfume of brown, freshly baked dough, sugar-coated," causes Fanny to "shut her eyes as if in pain. She was fighting the greatest fight of her life. She was to meet other temptations, and perhaps more glittering ones, in her lifetime, but to her dying day she never forgot that first battle between the flesh and the spirit, there in the sugar-scented pantry—and the spirit won."

Do you find it amusing that though today is a fast day, you actually prepared two meals for this holiday? The dinner you ate yesterday before shul, rushed though it was, was actually a meal that we are commanded to make festive. Tonight, you will probably have a somewhat lavish, dairy dinner, and it is hard to not overeat at a festive Break Fast. Pace yourselves. By the way, the same is culturally true for our Muslim cousins, where the culmination of each day of their Ramadan fasts are festive family meals.

Food is of course an important part of our culture even when we are commanded to not eat. People joke about being a "gastronomic Jew," but I'm one. I could not wait to get Adina Sussman's new cookbook, called *Shabbat* – my sister knew exactly what to get me for my last birthday! Did Adina or Mindy know what I was speaking about last night? And I am thrilled that the Jewish world of cooking now means more than just bland Ashkenazi food.

The joke among my friends around Thanksgiving is that when all of our neighbors are stressing over making one big meal, Sabbath observant Jews make a lavish meal or two each week. But today, the food is not here. Many say this is so we can more fully concentrate on the work of teshuva, the internal work that our souls need to do with ourselves and with God.

Alternatively, maybe it does not matter why we fast, except that we know we are commanded to do so, and it is part of our spiritual practice.

Many cannot fast for medical reasons and may feel like they are missing something. I want to clarify an important piece of Jewish law. If you are medically not supposed to fast, then you not allowed to do so, and in fact you have mitzva to eat today. Anyone who finds the fast too difficult please know that we have some food in our dairy kitchen for those who need. Possibly, those who have health challenges already feel the sense of vulnerability and their mortality that the fast affords everyone else.

What is the fast really about? Why are you fasting? Let me offer your three options from the Torah:

V'initem et nafshotechem you should afflict yourself!

O'ni – we are oppressed or impoverished.

V'anita –and we call out in joy.

The commandment comes to us in the Book of Leviticus (16:29), and also in Numbers.

וְעִנִּיתֶם אֶת-נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם

¹On the tenth day of this seventh month is the day of atonement; there shall be a holy convocation unto you, and you shall afflict your souls.

What does, *initem et nafshotechem*, I want to suggest three possible even competing ideas for this phase.

V'initem et nafshotechem, afflicting our souls, or practicing self-denial was understood by the rabbis first as not eating or drinking. Then in the second century, the sages expanded the rules from no food or drink to also include abstaining from bathing, sexual intimacy, the wearing of leather and extravagant clothing.

Not having food, a shower, human touch, may allow us to feel our fragility, our vulnerability. In many ways Yom Kippur is a rehearsal for our own death. Being in a state of hunger makes us aware of our mortality. On Yom Kippur we recite vidui, confessions, over and over, we attest to our sins. Our presence helps others to do teshuva. We are taught to do this before we die as well, and right before one marries – Yom Kippur is about recognizing how precious life is and about starting a new life. The liturgy of the day over and over reminds us of how finite our time in this world is: we chant, Who Shall live, who shall die, knowing it will at one point be one of us. The wearing of white reminds us of the shrouds that will be the last clothing to adorn our bodies. Afflicting ourselves, denying ourselves, makes us feel how important it really is to live each day with meaning. To be at one-with all those around us.

I promised you two other ways of looking at the word *initem*, or *inui*. the three letter root is *anah* has several distinct meanings, virtually the opposite of each other.

V'initem et nafshotechem you should afflict yourself!

O'ni – we are oppressed or impoverished.

V'anita –and we call out in joy.

¹ Leviticus 23:27

Early in Exodus, we read how the Egyptian taskmasters **afflicted the Israelites**.

לְמַעַן עֲנִתּוּ בְּסִבְלֹתָם :

So they set taskmasters over them to oppress them –

וְכֹאשֶׁר יַעֲנֶוּ :

²and the Israelites are referred to as 'oni' , often read as oppressed but related to the Hebrew word for poverty. That term might be familiar to you from the Haggadah, where we say Matzah is lechem oni, the bread of affliction; others translate it as the bread of the poor person.

We can look at this in a few ways:

First, how are we impoverished. What do we lack? Do we lack understanding? More friends? More dignity More health? More time with loved ones? Time on our own? And maybe you are someone who struggles with actual poverty. We can look inward, and we can look outward. Yes, there are many in our country who struggle to make ends meet and put food on the table.

The food pantry that I was fortunate to work with has served around 300 families a week – many, though not all over the years are, Jewish, since the fall of 1997. It is shameful that people go hungry in our country.

In 1938 Gandhi wrote: “It is fine to talk theology over this lovely meal, but to the poor, God can only appear as bread and butter.”

Isaiah’s gorgeous haftara for today, which I spoke about last night says:

*“You see to your business.
And oppress all your laborers!
Because you fast in strife and contention,*

*No, this is the fast I desire:
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 not to ignore your own kin.
This is the message of Yom Kippur:*

This fast is to remind us to act ethically in business. This fast is to know that the way to Godliness is to take care of others. To share our bread, our homes, to see the situation of our people in need.

² [Ex. 1:11-12],

Rabbi Cheryl Peretz a Dean at Ziegler Rabbinical School writes, “Yom Kippur gives us the opportunity to see ourselves in an interconnected world; to recognize our complicity in the political and economic landscape that fuels poverty and hunger. With this recognition, the pangs of our metaphoric starvation can drive us to act on behalf of those who hunger today and every day against their will.”

Next week our social action chairs and I will meet with Mazon, the Jewish American response to Hunger in America to learn how we can become the shul that does advocacy for those who are food insecure. Let us know if you want in. Tomorrow we need your help sorting the food that you all lovingly brought in this past week.

The construction on the apt on our premises to house our kin, then others, continues this week. They are our kin, literally. This fall members of the shul will visit Uganda and learn a bit about what that Jewish community needs. They are our kin; they need us.

What is inspirational in Isaiah’s message is the idea that the reward for giving and taking responsibility for others is the capacity to give even more. Isaiah promises that if we direct our fast toward giving, our “light will shine in darkness” and we will become like “fully watered gardens, like a source of water that never fails.” If we take care of others, we will be rewarded by becoming a continuous source of blessing. Let our fast this year motivate us to impact the lives of others, a spiritual tool for true tikkun.

The fast is about appreciating the abundance we have – by setting it aside for one day, and then reminding ourselves to be so appreciate at all times of what we have. We call this in Judaism, making brachot, saying blessings. With this in mind, one of the greatest ways to honor today is to start your meal tonight, and at all times with HaMotzie, making a blessing over the food we have to remind us how fortunate we are to have, and to be able to share.

***V'initem et nafshotechem* you should afflict yourself!**

O'ni – we are oppressed or impoverished.

V'anita –and we call out in joy.

There is one more way we can see the fast that speaks most to me, and it is the exact opposite of seeing it as an affliction: This summer on Labor Day weekend Professor Raanan Boustoan and I both spoke about this verse
In the Torah when a new tree is planted, its fruits are not eaten until the 3rd year. At that point, we are instructed to give first fruits to the widow, the orphan, the Levite, and the stranger, then the Torah says: “[v'anitah] (similar root word) And you shall sing out and say before the Lord your God...” a phrase. [Deut. 26:5]

A few weeks back in the summer I was sitting outside with several members of the shul when a stranger came looking for me. She had an overflowing basket of new fruit from her garden and wanted to give it as an offering. Inspired by her church, she wanted to share First Fruits with people who would appreciate its significance. I cannot tell you the joy this brought all of us. In the Torah, the one donating would actually say the words, My father was a wandering Aramean, to remind us we came from poverty and now enjoy bounty. This phrase might be familiar to you because we say it for the same reason at our Passover Seder. We are joyous at the bounty we have. Rashi explains that we are so joyous at being able to share what we have that we say this intention Loudly. Our Sages interpret *v'anita* to mean to chant with a tune of cantillation as a song of celebration, a song of joy. Yes! Today is a holiday of joy!

One way to see this day is as one of celebration. Part of it is solemn, but part of Yom Kippur is about singing out in sheer joy. We are so lucky to get to begin again, to have more time, to be forgiven, to make things better than they were. We are so fortunate to have to have what to share, to be in this community of love and support, joy and song. This is a joyous day.

One of my dearest rabbi friends ends Yom Kippur with a community break-fast Dance Party at her shul. I would love that next year if someone wants to take this on. Yes, this is the day of renewing, this is the day where we celebrate what we have, what we have to give, how we can do tikkun, fixing ourselves and our world. And then we celebrate. How joyous it will be to be at Neilah and be all together to hear the shofar and chant Havdalah. To see little ones basking in the joy of the day.

How joyous it will be this Friday night, to bring in Shabbat and sit in our Sukkot, all together!

V'initem et nafshotechem you should afflict yourself!

We are at once- denying ourselves, in order to become better.

V'anitem – We can See ourselves to be improvised so we can appreciate what we have, so we can be agents of change.

V'anita – we can shout out with joy - and we are joyous at the opportunity to sing out in joy, to begin again anew, to do tikkun on ourselves and the world.

