

About Fasting: Food for Thought

July 16, 2022 – 17 Tammuz, 5782 – Parshat Balak

I have selected this topic today because it is 17 Tammuz, a fast day if it were not Shabbat. Since it is Shabbat, the fast is postponed until tomorrow.

Only if Yom Kippur falls on Shabbat is fasting permitted on Shabbat – except for during a short period of time many centuries ago when some rabbis permitted a Shabbat fast to a person who woke up on Shabbat morning after having three recurrent dreams on any one of three topics: Burning of Torah Scrolls, Beams of a house caving in, or Teeth falling out! Of course, this dispensation is no longer on our agenda, and one wonders if it had ever taken place.

This was just one of the curious pieces of information I came across while investigating fasting, so that this short presentation can be only an Introduction. (I encourage you to continue the exploration!)

To begin, I will say that fasts in the Jewish tradition crop up frequently, and sometimes at inopportune times. For example: I have two grandsons who are brothers. A *brit mila* must take place eight days after birth (except for medical reasons). The older grandson's brit came on Purim day. The younger one's took place on a fast day, Tzom Gedalia!

Such fasts punctuate the Jewish calendar 4-6 times a year, in general. (There can be more). This fasting seems unique in comparison to other religions. Muslims observe Ramadan, fasting for a month once a year. Catholics abstain from some foods, not actually fasting, on Ash Wednesday through Lent, and on Good Friday.

Why do Jews have so many fast days? (I will ask this question, again!) And how did the custom of fasting begin?

The word, "fast" is not mentioned in the Torah. We are commanded on Yom Kippur to "afflict our souls," and this is interpreted to include fasting. Exodus 34:28 does tell us that for forty days "Moses ate no bread and drank no water" while on Mt. Sinai, prior to receiving the Ten Commandments.

At present, according to one's level of observance, we have two major fasts – sundown to sundown – on Yom Kippur and Tisha B'Av (three weeks from now, heralded by the fast of 17 Tammuz). On Tisha B'Av we mourn the destruction of the Temple. There are three minor fasts – sunrise to sunset: Tzom Gedalia (already mentioned) coming on Tishri 3, marking the assassination of the last Governor of Judea, after which the Jews were dispersed; 10 Tevet, for us to remember the siege of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar; and today (tomorrow), 17 Tammuz, recalling the breach of the first wall of the Temple.

In addition, there is the Fast of Esther on the day before Purim, the Fast of the Firstborn on the day before Pesach, and the fast observed by a bride and groom until the wedding meal. Also, I have been reminded of fasting prior to going to war, as well as the Monday and Thursday fasts that my Grandma told me were observed when she grew up in Poland. And there may be more!

Additionally, the Shulchan Aruch tells us there may have been fasts in Biblical times to mark the deaths of Aaron's sons, of Aaron, Miriam, Moses, Joshua and Samuel. Fasts to avoid danger were noted in the books of Samuel, Esther and Jonah.

To summarize, we fast: To remember and show solidarity with TRAGEDIES; To mark DEATHS; To stave off DANGER; To ANTICIPATE events; To ANTICIPATE Revelation; And to AFFLICT our souls.

So I ask again: WHY has Judaism appointed fasting to express the above feelings and WHY do we have so many fasts?

Isaiah, in the Haftorah reading for Yom Kippur morning, gives his opinion (to summarize from Ch. 58:4-8): This is the fast that G-D has chosen, to loose the fetters of wickedness, undo the bands of the yoke, let the oppressed go free, give bread to the hungry, bring the poor into your house, clothe the naked . . .

And yet we continue to fast!

Rabbi Bodner of Congregation Ramath Orah, says we fast because it is easier than doing true repentance (teshuah) or performing good deeds (mitzvot). There are already some substitutes for fasting: a Study Session the day before Pesach excused the first born from fasting; a Fast of Silence has been suggested on Yom Ha Shoah. Should we try to add some activity to fast days and/or substitute activity? Should we eliminate some fast days, or continue as we are?

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To conclude, edited excerpts from a song by Ed Lipton, in consonance with the words of Isaiah:

“One thing that I know for sure, in this world this year right now,
There’s too many hungry and too many poor,
There’s too many people still being deprived,
Too many strugglin’ just to stay alive . . .
There’s lots of things that we can do,
In this world this year right now,
But it’s up to me and it’s up to you . . .
Yes, it’s time for us to take a stand,
Everybody, reach for a stranger’s hand,
In this world, this year, right now . . .”

(c. 1969)

Before I say Shabbat Shalom, let me end with a summary of thoughts from Rabbi Menachem Shneerson, told to me by my niece, Elana, for when a fast day occurs on Shabbat, as it does today. He writes, *For Redemption to come, we first need the dark days, the fast days. When Redemption comes, these days will turn into days of joy! Therefore, when such a fast occurs on Shabbat we should celebrate Shabbat with extra joy as the Herald of the coming of Moshiach!*

Shabbat Shalom!!