

When I was asked to give the Dvar Torah today, on Yom Kippur, I have to admit I was a little intimidated. But I remembered what a valued and important part of Darchei Noam is our practice of congregants giving divrei torah, even though we now have a full-time Rabbi to grace our bema. Ten years ago I was honored with this same task: we were newly installed in our rented basement space on Salem Avenue at the time, and we all felt pretty good about being in an actual sanctuary instead of someone's house (although it was still a basement either way!). 10 years ago I spoke about the concept of "afflicting ourselves" on Yom Kippur, and I'm going to take another look at that idea today.

But first I want to mention a little story that many of you will recognize, about Rabbi Simcha Bunem of Pershyscha, who used to carry two pieces of paper in his pockets. In one pocket was a paper that said "Afar vEfer Anochi": I am but dust and ashes, inconsequential and puny in the world. In the other pocket was a paper that said "Bishvili Nivra HaOlam". I am the very center of the world, it was created for me and for my benefit. Rabbi Simcha would take out each slip of paper as necessary, as a reminder to himself. Hold onto that little story; we'll come back to it later.

But now, Back to affliction:

There is a great deal of discussion in the Talmud over the question of whether we are supposed to afflict ourselves by fasting and praying all day, or whether Yom Kippur is actually a holiday, a Festival. The crux of the issue is, should the fasting be meant to cause ourselves pain and suffering, or is the material deprivation merely a technique to heighten our spiritual seeking, our concentration or Kavana, our focus on forgiveness? The Rabbis have argued about this going as far back as the Amoraim, 2,000 years ago. The Sifra calls Yom Kippur a festival like Rosh Hashana. In more modern times, the Vilna Gaon distinguishes between honoring the day of Yom Kippur, as opposed to experiencing pleasure as on a festival, primarily with a festive meal. He also notes that on erev Yom Kippur we light candles, just like on Shabbat, even though there is no explicit mitzvah to do so. It's the honoring of the day that makes it comparable to a festival, although the eating or lack thereof distinguishes it from a festival at the same time.

The Rambam calls Yom Kippur a day that is "not for excessive rejoicing", but rather is for solemn and modest rejoicing. Note, it IS, in the Rambam's view, for rejoicing; Just not the wild and crazy kind. Further evidence to support the view that Yom Kippur is closer to a chag than not, is that when a sick person who has to eat on Yom Kippur for his or her health, finishes the meal and proceeds to the bensching, he or she is instructed to add "Ya'aleh v'yavo", the paragraph normally reserved for a chag (show and read from benscher!).

So if Yom Kippur should be seen as being closer to a festival, why do we deprive ourselves of material pleasures on Yom Kippur? Why isn't it simply a day on which our tradition is to focus, to concentrate extra hard on teshuva? Why, for example, don't we have a tradition to stay up all night like we do on Shavuot, to show God we mean business? On Rosh Hashana, Rabbi Davis mentioned that some have the tradition of staying up all night on erev rosh Hashana, presumably for this exact reason: for such an important day as Yom HaZikaron, we should show God how seriously we take our impending judgment. So why not also on Yom Kippur, when our final judgment is even more imminent? Why, instead of learning Torah all night, or doing deeds of chesed all night, do we instead refrain from the trappings of our normal life, the food and drink, the leather shoes, the marital relations and use of make-up, perfumes and lotions?

Perhaps, the sages teach us, it's all about "rest". We need to rest from our material pursuits: not to deprive ourselves per se, but rather to abstain from them, the same way we abstain from the use of electricity and other melacha on Shabbat. The point of such rest is to enable us to focus, to allow us to rise above the material concerns that normally occupy us on this most holy of days.

Rambam also likes this idea. He refers to the Yom Kippur prohibitions as "sh'vita", or resting. He sees resting as resting from ALL human activity, obviously more so than on Shabbat, and calls Yom Kippur a day of "solemn rest". He sees two separate types of rest on this day: rest from labor, similar to Shabbat, and also rest from food and drink. Just as Shabbat rest shows that we are ready to waive our usual labors to be close to God, so the special extra resting of Yom Kippur shows that we seek intimacy with God, and forgiveness from God: we forego everything, even the very food and drink that normally fuel our worldly life and our physical selves. In fact, food and drink normally fuel our ability to be close to God! We normally can't and wouldn't have a festival without such fuel. But today, to stand before God requires our withdrawal from worldly things. The solemnity and gravity of the day of Yom Kippur require our total concentration: the distractions of food and drink are counterproductive to our goals on this day.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in his second book of Letters to the Next Generation, has a chapter called "Making a Blessing Over Life". In this chapter he explains that on Yom Kippur we think about death so that for the rest of the year, we will love life, and not take life for granted. He points out that many societies either demonize pleasure, becoming puritanical, or else idolize pleasure, becoming hedonistic. But we as Jews sanctify pleasure, even on Yom Kippur, when we prepare for the day with pleasure, having not just a filling meal but a festive meal preceding Kol Nidre, and many people have a festive meal as well after N'eila. In his class this past Shabbat, Rob Portnoe mentioned that the sages called erev Yom Kippur a festival, so important

was the seudat mafseket that we eat before the fast. So Yom Kippur itself is “sandwiched” (you should pardon the expression) between festive preparations, in order to enable and even magnify the day in between, which should be focused and solemn, but not perceived as suffering and affliction. I’ve always wondered why there isn’t a tradition, which would seem consistent with fasting, to wear old clothes, or only dull colors, or refrain from wearing jewelry on Yom Kippur. But the fact that we wear our nicest clothes, with the exception of leather shoes, and even new clothes and jewelry, perhaps is another indication that Yom Kippur is closer to a chag than, for example, a sad day like Tisha B’Av.

Rabbi Sacks also notes that we don’t pray on Yom Kippur to be spared any future trials and tribulations. Rather, we simply pray for LIFE, even as we know that life brings with it inevitable pain and suffering. We’re not praying for the unachievable, for perfection. We are praying as human beings, for a human life, which we know will also be imperfect. This is a reasonable and achievable request to make of God. We’re not asking to be made into angels; merely to have the chance at another human and imperfect year.

So I appreciate and agree with the Rabbis like the Rambam and the Vilna Gaon, who maintain that the purpose of refraining from the material comforts of food and drink today is a more neutral message, more of a technique meant to enhance our focus. I do not see it as primarily about affliction or causing ourselves pain and suffering to atone for our sins. Rather, Yom Kippur is a festive day, toned down but joyful all the same. A day that would require us to say Ya’aleh v’yavo, if we were benschng.

Which brings us back to the story of Rabbi Simcha Bunem of Pershyscha. He held the two pieces of paper in his two pockets because he understood the duality of life. Some moments can be distressing or depressing, can feel like an affliction. For those moments we have the piece of paper that says, “Bishvili Nivra HaOlam”: don’t be too hard on yourself, don’t think it’s the end of the world. Tomorrow is another day and the world was created for my benefit. It is in this mood that we pray for forgiveness, with the idea that we’re not SO bad that God can’t be implored to give us another chance, and another and another. After all, he DID create the world for us!

But lest we get too cocky, lest we feel like maybe we haven’t been so bad anyway, lest we feel that we don’t need to be forgiven, we pull out the piece of paper that reminds us, “Afar v’Efer anochi”: don’t be so proud, so confident, so self-sufficient. Don’t have the illusion that we got here all by ourselves. After all, we are but dust and ashes. On Yom kippur we remember repeatedly, that we began as dust and to dust we shall return.

Notice that the pieces of paper are meant to be an antidote to the feeling, to counter the over-emphasis on the feeling: when we're feeling like nothing, we do not read the paper that says, "yes, I am nothing"! Rather, we read the paper that says "no, I am a holy and worthwhile being"! And when we feel on top of the world, that is not the time to confirm it with arrogance, but rather, it's the time to tone it down with a dose of humility. Rabbi Simcha Bunem was a smart guy, a natural therapist.

As we say the prayers so familiar on Yom Kippur, the Ashamnu and the Vidui in which each line begins with "Al Chet sh'chatanu", for the sin which we have committed, we focus almost obsessively on our worthlessness before God. We remind God again and again that we are sinners, we are nothing, we are evil-doers. We are nothing but dust. But according to Rabbi Simcha Bunem, this also may be the time to pull out that piece of paper that reminds us that "Bishvilanu nivra HaOlam", for our sake, the world was created! Let's keep our lives in perspective, let's not become so overcome by our faults and imperfections that we fail to see the beauty not only in the world around us, but the beauty in ourselves as well. Let's remember that even though we are nothing but dust, and even though we miss many opportunities to be better, we are still the creatures for whom God created the world. It's a case of rising to the level of what is expected of us, of what we expect of ourselves. Surely a person for whom God created the entire world should treat him or herself as worthy of such trust, and should act accordingly. I think Rabbi Simcha Bunem's two pieces of paper serve as an important reminder not to get too carried away with self-deprecation, even on this day when we repeat the Al Chet and the Ashamnu prayers so often. His message is to keep a balance in our self-image, in our character, in our lives.

So in summary, Yom Kippur has two contradictory sides to it: the feeling of deprivation that we feel because we're human and we're used to our creature comforts, our cup of coffee in the morning, our nice Kiddush and lunch after shul. Today we feel the reality of being mortal, of being on our way back to dust. But also the joy that we should feel on this holiday, this day of super-rest, you could say, "uber-rest". We rest from all those creature comforts so that we can really feel that we are standing before God, we are worthy to be standing before God, not distracted, not depressed but also not arrogant, hopefully pure in our concentration on this day when we seek intimacy with God, who created the entire world for our sake.

I wish everyone a Gmar Chatima Tova and Shana Tova.

Yom Kippur 5777 (2016)

Judy Shapiro

