

After Musaf Drasha

Recently, I was speaking with someone who has been studying to become Jewish and is fasting for her first Yom Kippur this year.

She asked me a question which seems simple, but in reality, proves perplexing.

“Is Yom Kippur a sad day, like Tisha B’Av and the other fast days? Or, is it more like a celebration?”

What is the mood of this day of Yom Kippur?

I imagine many of you may agree with me, that this day is a blend of sadness and gladness, as well into a more subtle cocktail of sentiment.

Now, unlike most of us, this woman has fasted for each of the “minor fasts” of the Jewish calendar that occurred this past year. Through doing so, she observed that most of our fast days commemorate particular tragic events in our people’s past.

Ta’anit Esther, the fast of Esther is observed on the day before Purim in commemoration of the fasts that Esther and Mordechai called for in Shushan before Haman’s decree was diverted.

Shiva Asar b’Tammuz, the 17th day of the month of Tammuz commemorates 5 tragedies which occurred on that day: Moses broke the first two tablets, the daily offering in the Temple was stopped during the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem, the walls of Jerusalem were breached during the Roman siege of Jerusalem, a Roman military leader burned a Torah scroll, and an idol was erected in the Temple.

3 Weeks later, we there is the fast of Tisha B’Av, the 9th day of the month of Av, which also commemorates 5 tragedies: 10 of the 12 spies sent to scout out the land of Israel returned with a bad report; the first temple was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, the second temple was destroyed by the Romans, the revolt of Bar Kochva was defeated by the Romans, and the

Romans subsequently plowed over the site of the Temple in the following year.

Even last week, on the day after Rosh HaShanah, there is a fast observed known as Tzom Gedaliah, the fast of Gedaliah - a Judean leader who was propped up as a governor by the Babylonian empire, until he was murdered by other Jews who opposed him.

Clearly, each of these days of fasting are dedicated to recalling a tragic story, a devastating chapter in our people's history. In contrast, Yom Kippur is on the day that commemorates an amazing day in our people's history that has had a positively transformative impact on the Jewish people and the world: Moses descended Mt. Sinai with a second set of tablets, carved like the first one with the help of G-d.

Even though we do remember previous generations of Jewish martyr's on Yom Kippur through the martyrology service and we remember our loved one's through Yizkor, this day is at its core a commemoration and reenactment of an event worthy of celebration: G-d and Moses forgiving the people of Israel and forging a new chapter of our covenantal relationship.

At the same time, the way in which we observe this day does seem to signal that there is an element of sorrow and suffering to Yom Kippur.

This day which is referred to by the Mishnah simply as Yoma - the Day - has been observed annually by Jewish communities for as long as we can remember. Though our ritualized ceremonies have evolved from the *avodah* of the Mishkan to the prayers we sing, whisper, and chant together, there is one common core to the way we observe this day.

We fast. Or, to use the rabbinic term for our restrictions that reflects the language and the Torah's mitzvah, we perform *Inui Nefesh* - affliction of the body.

It says in the passage we read earlier as Maftir from parshat Pinchas describing our holiday calendar

וּבַעֲשׂוֹר לַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי הַזֶּה מִקְרָא-קֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם

On the 10th day of this 7th month, there will be a holy-occurrence for you

וְעִנִּיתֶם אֶת-נַפְשֵׁיכֶם

You should afflict yourselves -

כָּל-מְלָאכָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ:

All labor you should not do.

Here, it seems very clear from the language of “you will afflict yourselves”, that today is a day that involves some suffering and pain.

In other contexts in the Torah, Inui is language that describes one person using violent force over another. In the context of Yom Kippur, it has almost always been understood to mean to cause some kind of pain to yourself through temporary restrictions on behavior.

The Sages of the Talmud, counted 5 phrases in the Torah which describe Yom Kippur and identified these as parallel to the 5 kinds of behaviors that we fast from on Yom Kippur.

- יוֹם הַכַּפּוּרִים אָסוּר:

- בְּאֵכִילָה וּבִשְׁתֵּיה - counted as one

- וּבְרַחֲצָה

- וּבְסִיכָה

- וּבְנַעֲלַת הַסַּנְדָּל,

- וּבְתַשְׁמִישׁ הַמָּטָה.

We all have some familiarity with this fast, since we are here together. Even if we need to eat, drink, or wash ourselves for our health and well-being, we are all here participating in this day of Inui Nefesh. But would we really call this day self-affliction?

I am sure that many of us feel hungry right about now. This might be lunch time on another day. But, today, we will exert our will-power, denying ourselves food for another few hours, and our body will begin to kick into a new gear, powering us through the rest of the fast. There is a shade of pain

and suffering in this experience, but we can be encouraged in the perseverance of our mind and body by our participation in this fast.

Even still, we do call this self-affliction, we say that we are practicing the *mitzvah of inui nefesh*. We understand this significant, challenging, yet certainly do-able day of fasting to be a kind of instructive and spiritually-beneficial self-affliction - inui nefesh.

Yet, at the same time, we read in the final Mishnah of Masechet Ta'anit - the Talmudic volume on public fasting, that Yom Kippur was one of two most joyful holidays in ancient Israel!

On Yom Kippur, like on Tu B'Av, all the daughters of Israel would go out in borrowed white garments, so as not to embarrass the ones who did not have. On Yom Kippur, Jewish communities would come together in solidarity and support for each other, working to create a day when we can all participate as equals in our holiday ceremonies. A shade of this equality is present in our current day ways of observing Yom Kippur. As Jews come together in numbers greater than any other day of the year, we demonstrate our sense of shared identity, our commonality and our solidarity with each other, despite our differences. This, surely, is a reason to be glad and joyful!

So, we are left with a sense that Yom Kippur is both a day of great joy and a day of self-affliction, and therefore, suffering.

How should we understand this apparent paradox?

Here, contemporary neuroscience provides us with some enlightening knowledge.

Now, I am not a neuroscientist. I am a rabbi, so you should understand that my knowledge of this subject is mostly derived from listening to a podcast called Hidden Brain, which publishes interviews with leading researchers in neuroscience and psychology.

In an episode from July, the host Shankar Vedantam interviewed Dr. Anne Lembke, a Psychiatrist and Professor of Medicine at Stanford University, who shared the relatively recent finding that the human experiences of pleasure and pain are both rooted in the same region of the brain. In Dr. Lembke's language from her book, *Dopamine Nation*, she says:

“Pleasure and pain are co-located. In addition to the discovery of dopamine, neuro-scientists have determined that pleasure and pain are processed in overlapping brain regions, and work via an opponent processing mechanism. Another way to say this is pleasure and pain work like a balance.

In other words, from a biological perspective, our experiences of pleasure and pain are tied to each other – they are constantly held in a complex tension. But, essentially, when we experience pain, our brain will react to return itself to homeostasis by stimulating pleasure. Similarly, when we experience pleasure, our brain will attempt to restabilize by effectual painful experiences.

Perhaps, this can help us to begin to understand *Inui Nefesh* differently. The pain that we experience through our self-affliction is closely related to the pleasure that we can feel as we persevere through the fasting Yom Kippur.

However, Dr. Lembke's main claim is that we are in a precarious situation in the world, in our contemporary society, especially in the world's wealthiest countries like the United States. As we have gained access to all kinds of material and digital sources of pleasure, this has had a widespread effect on our brains. She hypothesizes that we might be able to attribute a large portion of our current mental health crisis, especially among young people, to the ways that contemporary consumerism and social media profit from our constant pursuit of pleasure.

Much has been made recently about the advancements of artificial intelligence. One element of AI which has already had a widespread effect on our world is the algorithms of social media platforms that calculate what to show to a user in order to maximize how long they will spend scrolling through their app. In a way, these algorithms work to cultivate a dependency on their product.

As Dr. Lemke says in the interview: “The way that our society has druggified things that used to be normal and healthy like having sex or eating food or playing games is essentially by increasing four factors: quantity, access, potency, and novelty.”

When we have constant access to goods and technology that can activate dopamine in our brains, we can lose sight of our priorities and end up making bad decisions. From spending too much time scrolling through facebook, to spending too much money online shopping or on sports betting, our contemporary digital and globalized world offers us a lot of opportunities to make mistakes.

While it is disturbing to think that a significant part of our society’s struggles with symptoms of depression and anxiety might be related to the interaction of our brain chemistry with the digital consumer economy, I find this framework to be enlightening, and, potentially, to even shine some light on our ancient spiritual technology of *Inui Nefesh* on Yom Kippur.

I do not have the answer to these huge challenges of our time, but I do believe that our fasting on Yom Kippur can be a tool to help us meet these challenges with resilience.

Could it be that we cause ourselves minor pain on Yom Kippur, denying ourselves what was known to be reliable sources of pleasure, as a way of resetting our brain chemistry so that we can regain clear vision of our priorities in this life?

I do believe that we can accurately understand our Inui Nefesh on Yom Kippur as an ancient strategy for resetting or rebalancing our brains and bodies - or, if you prefer, our nefesh and neshama. By refraining from the kinds of physical comforts which bring pleasure, and instead dedicating ourselves to prayers that call upon ourselves to be honest about our shortcomings while praising G-d's compassionate nature, we displace our constant craving for creature comforts. Even though we stay away from reliable sources of pleasure like food and drink, bathing and wearing comfortable shoes, and sexual intimacy, we are invited to a joyous, full-hearted celebration of life and our people's embracing eternal relationship with the Holy Blessed One, who Created and Sustains All Life.

This is one way of understanding why we call Yom Kippur Shabbat Shabbaton - a Sabbath of Sabbath. On Shabbat we do not fast. On the contrary, rabbinic tradition understands it to be imperative on Shabbat for everyone to eat plenty and to eat something nicer than normal. Yet, like on Yom Kippur, on Shabbat there are many restrictions on the kinds of behaviors that we believe are appropriate. On Yom Kippur and Shabbat alike, we fast from work. We refrain from the constant drive to accomplish more, to earn more, to create more. For one day each week, we are called to reset our systems by refraining from work, eating plenty, and allowing ourselves to rest.

Throughout our people's history, as we have weathered terrible storms of antisemitic persecution, pandemics, and other disasters, we have returned to shabbat as a way of stepping out of our normal experience of the world - a mechanism for resetting our brains from the drive to survive and instead inhabit temporarily a mindset of plenty.

In a song often sung around the Shabbat dinner table we describe shabbat as:

חֲמֵדַת הַלְבָבוֹת, לְאֵמָה שְׂבוּרָה, לְנַפְשׁוֹת נִכְאָבוֹת, נִשְׁמָה יְתֵרָה,

Precious to the hearts of a broken nation, for pained bodies, an extra soul.

In this way, perhaps shabbat is the inverse of Yom Kippur. To counterbalance our experience of pain and suffering in the week, Shabbat offers us a taste of pleasure.

Yet, both holy days make demands of us that we restrict our behavior in ways that are meant to be experienced as a sacrifice. They require commitment, and giving up something. Food and a days' labor respectively.

Yet, in exchange these holy days, these sacred observances offer us an invitation to make use of an ancient technology for finding balance and respite amidst the demands of the world. Shabbat, like Yom Kippur, leaves us ready for the long stretch of time until we return to its observance.

So, have we answered our question? Is Yom Kippur a day of suffering or a day of celebration?

Of course, this is a day of both. It is a day of perseverance, of recalibrating our brain, body, and soul for the year ahead. This is a day in which our self-affliction is accompanied by songs, which move us both to tears of sorrow and to tears of joy.

Yes, we are unquestionably grateful to be here, alive in this new year. And even though our bellies rumble, we carry on.