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I would guess that if I asked any of you here today what is forbidden to us on Yom Kippur, you would overwhelmingly respond with one answer--eating and drinking. Fasting is the most well-known aspect of Yom Kippur observance. It is something even those Jews who are unaccustomed to attending synagogue are familiar with.

I recall upon moving to Israel, being jarred by observing the unlikely combination of adults fasting on Yom Kippur while simultaneously taking advantage of the traffic-free streets to go out bicycle riding or roller skating with their kids. To them this was perfectly logical: on Yom Kippur one fasts, and, since we are at home from work and school, why not take advantage of the unusually traffic-free (and unusually safe!) streets to spend some quality time with our kids? While this would not be my first choice for any of us as Yom Kippur observance, it does illustrate the point that even so-called “secular” Israelis choose to fast on that day.

Much less-known to most of us, is the fact that in the Mishnah the Rabbis enumerated five categories of things we should deny

ourselves on Yom Kippur (of which fasting is only one!). It says in Tractate Yoma 8:1, *“On Yom Kippur it is forbidden to eat and to drink, to wash oneself, to anoint oneself, to wear leather sandals or shoes and to engage in sexual intercourse”*. This verse from Mishnah comes to expound upon the Biblical exhortation in the book of Numbers 29:7, where it says, *“On the tenth day of the seventh month you shall observe a sacred occasion where you shall practice self-denial”* (literally, *“you shall afflict yourselves”*).

I have thought a great deal over the years about what it might mean for us to “afflict ourselves”. Just like you, I have been party to conversations about what eating and drinking customs to engage in prior to Yom Kippur, in order to make the fast “easier and more bearable”. We all speak of hydrating ourselves really well the day before the fast, about cutting down on caffeine consumption the week before in order to avoid the dreaded “caffeine withdrawal headache”. Indeed we wish one another *tzom kal*, or “an easy fast”. Is this the point? I have heard of people refer to the fast as a physical detox or a mental self-challenge. But are all these self-related things really what the day is all about? I am not so sure.

And what of the other four, much less-practiced categories?
Washing or bathing ourselves is something we pretty much take for granted. We have an abundance of hot water and soap, and we desire to feel clean on a daily basis. What might it be like for us to neither bathe, nor shower nor wash up during Yom Kippur?

Anointing refers to the practice of anointing royalty with fragrant oil. This practice was considered a luxury; one reserved for the more privileged. By extension it has come to mean wearing of deodorant, perfume, hair products and make-up. For how many of us would not doing these things put us out of our comfort zone? And, isn't that the point here?

As for the prohibition of wearing leather shoes, its source is in the fact that leather was considered a luxury. It has become our custom over the years to dress in a festive manner when we attend synagogue on the High Holydays. We are often anxious when we don't have a new dress or suit to wear to services. The traditional custom is to wear a *kittel*, or white garment, reminiscent of the white shroud a body is buried in. How might it enrich our experience of the day to dress in the simplest clothing and footwear?

As for not engaging in sexual intercourse, the prohibition is designed to help us focus our thoughts on the spiritual, not the corporal or instinctual.

What were the Rabbis trying to get at in prescribing these five categories of denial? Rabbi Irving Greenberg in his book, The Jewish Way, Living the Holidays, says in his chapter on the High Holydays, *“One notable exception to the arm’s-length treatment of death (within Judaism), is the period of the High Holy Days. During this cluster of days, the tradition deliberately concentrates the individual’s attention on death. Human beings cannot be mature until they encompass a sense of their own mortality. To recognize the brevity of human existence gives urgency and significance to the totality of life. To confront death without being overwhelmed, driven to evasions or dulling the senses, is to be given life again as a daily gift.”*

I find Rabbi Greenberg’s words to be extremely helpful in understanding the categories of prohibitions listed in the Mishnah. If we view them in their totality as a metaphor for death, the experience of them can indeed, impel us toward the recognition of the inherent value in the gift of life we have been given.

I encourage you to consider experimenting in your observance of the Mishnaic prohibitions on Yom Kippur. In the words of one advertising wizard, “try it, you’ll like it!”--or at least you will find it an interesting exercise!