

*Yom Kippur Morning 5774  
Temple B'nai Israel, Amarillo, TX*

This is a warning to all of you. Some time this afternoon you may get a little cranky. Your head may be aching because you couldn't have any precious caffeine today, or your body may start to ache and feel tired, even though all you did was sit in services. When this moment occurs, when fasting has pushed you to feel your absolute worst, please do not open your siddur to look at the Haftarah we just read. If you are looking for a familiar story with a fish and a happy ending, hold out for the book of Jonah later. The text we read from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah will probably just make that weak, irritable feeling worse. In the verses traditionally read on Yom Kippur morning, Isaiah really adds insult to injury. Surrounded by the Israelites who have gone astray, and a society where the rich are powerful and the poor are getting poorer every day, he scolds the people as they are fasting.

58:5.           Is such the fast I desire,  
                  A day for men to starve their bodies?  
                  Is it bowing the head like a bulrush  
                  And lying in sackcloth and ashes?  
                  Do you call that a fast,  
                  A day when the LORD is favorable?

58:6.           No, this is the fast I desire:  
                  To unlock the fetters of wickedness,  
                  And untie the cords of the yoke  
                  To let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke.

Isaiah shouts aloud his own warning—that if the fasts and rituals are not sincere, God will not accept them. We need to get at the deeper meaning of the days of awe, a message that rings true for us today, even if it is hard to swallow.

Why did the ancient rabbis choose for this to be the prophetic commentary on the Torah portion for Yom Kippur? The Mishnah and other texts clearly outline all the rituals and prohibitions for the twenty-five hour period of confession and repentance that makes up Yom Kippur. We cannot eat or drink, and we cannot apply lotions or scents, and leather shoes that comfort our feet are forbidden. Fasting is equated with afflicting the body and the soul. When we are not being nourished, we feel the weaknesses and pains of our bodies more acutely. We are deprived, and it can clear our minds to notice our own fleeting mortality. This is the most ideal way of looking at the practice of fasting. We go beyond the physical to focus on the spiritual, to look more seriously at how we can change our behavior and improve our lives. In the moment, this can often seem like a lofty goal. Fasting is difficult, inconvenient, and can seem devoid of meaning. Or, on the other hand, we can be like the people Isaiah confronts, using fasting as an empty gesture, a way to distract ourselves from making serious commitments to change or to thinking about our sorrows and regrets.

Drawing the connection between a fast and the will to create a just society can be a little difficult to buy into, especially when you are in that tricky moment of mid-fast misery. I think it might even be more difficult to connect with when we are not even participating in the fasting on Yom Kippur. When you don't even have the opportunity to connect the feelings of suffering in a fast and the pain of others, how can we then push ourselves to think in that direction within Jewish ritual? This is a question I have asked myself personally over the past few years on Yom Kippur. When I was in high school I ended up passing out on Yom Kippur and found it difficult to recover. Since I am not inclined to do that again, I am not actually able to engage in a full fast, as much as I would like to and feel that it can be a meaningful spiritual practice. Last year, when on top of all of it I was very, very sick on Yom Kippur, I managed to find an answer and a new intention for the 25-hour period of Yom Kippur. In the various Jewish emails I receive, I stumbled across an email that shared a prayer for not fasting on Yom Kippur, for those hospitalized with everything from chronic illnesses to eating disorders. A hospital chaplain had written it and shared with his patients to encourage them to find meaning in not fasting on Yom Kippur.

**(READ TEXT)**



## Meditation before Yom Kippur for One who Cannot Fast

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*Ribbano shel Olam*/Master of the Universe;  
Creator of All, Source of All Life,  
Who Knows What is Deep in Human Hearts,  
Who Nurtures Every Living Being:

As You know, dear God,  
Yom Kippur is fast approaching, and because of my condition,  
I am not able to keep the traditional fast –  
I cannot abstain totally from eating.

On this Day of Atonement, this Sabbath of Sabbaths,  
this year and every year,  
it is so central to join the people of Israel  
in denying ourselves food and drink for one day  
so that we focus on correcting our misdeeds,  
on knowing our mortality;  
on reaching for a life of Torah, *mitzvot*, and lovingkindness;  
on You.

You know, dear God, that it is not my intent  
to be apart from our people and our tradition.  
My current state of health makes it unsuitable for me to fast

So, dear God, I turn to You now in sincerity and openness:  
Help me in the coming year to do my best in guarding my health.  
Help us, Your children, learn how to protect our bodies from harm.  
Help us support others in caring for their *tzelem Elokim*, their Image of God.  
Teach us to help one another grow and thrive in Body, Mind, and Spirit.

Guide caring family and health care professionals in their partnering with you  
to bring healing if not cure, support and strength if not an end to symptoms.  
And if there is an opportunity for me to help others who suffer  
by doing something they need or by being attentive company –  
Grant me the ability to do this *mitzvah* with love and devotion.

*Rofeh khol basar*/Healer of all living creatures:  
I thank You for the breath that is in me  
for the community of Israel that lives  
for the possibilities of today and tomorrow.

May my eating be as a fast;  
May it be dedicated to You, to *T'shuvah* –  
to the Renewal and Restoration of my Relationship  
to You, to Others, and to Myself.



Is this not what Isaiah was trying to say over two thousand years ago? That it is not the fast that makes this holiest of days special, but what we do afterwards? Most medical professionals and studies I have encountered over the years have shared a common message: that we need to be in tune with the signals we give ourselves and make a change. When our body is stressed or hurt, it finds a way to tell us and we are able to adjust our behavior or our position to return to comfort and health. With or without a ritual fast, we need to also be keenly in tune with the natural signals of our hearts and minds. When we have the opportunity, with or without a ritual to go along with it, we are obligated to engage in teshuvah, and to try and make our relationships to others better. This requires a genuine turning of the heart, parallel to our fasting. Then, as Isaiah also teaches, incredible things can happen. We can create our own light and love and feel a greater connection to the Divine all around us.

Isaiah also says in the Haftarah portion that only when we change our ways will God reply to our cries for help or our needs with the word HINEINI. Hineini seems just the right Hebrew word to use here in this context. In the stories of the Torah, Hineini, Here I am, is the reply of Abraham, of Jacob, and of Moses---an answer to God's call not just to mark being somewhere, but with a willingness of spirit and readiness to act. When called to show their faith like Abraham, or to a big change like Jacob, or to an unbelievably difficult task of leadership like Moses, they all responded with this single utterance: Hineini. From the teachings of Isaiah, we see a different use of Hineini. Just as our ancestors responded to God's call at pivotal moments in their lives, we need to respond to the needs of others as well. We need to see the reality in front of us and try to help. Only when we do this can we call upon our Creator for help and be answered with God's own willingness to act, to hear the ultimate Hineini as well.

But what does this Hineini mean when God says it? When we complain, or feel hurt, or try to ask for guidance, God says without hesitation that the Divine Presence is with us. We must remember that always and remember our covenant. In the world we see before us, it is easy to see how modern Jewish thinkers, especially those who survived the horrors of the Holocaust, have taught that we do not believe in a God that acts in the world to affect human affairs. It is we who have the power to act. In fact it is we who **MUST** act—to feed the hungry, to support the oppressed, and to make sure all have an equal chance at a good life. Only we can be the agents of change to enact the charges of our faith.

Often, the world is a less than ideal place. Even when we see the glimmers of human potential, creativity, and kindness, the darkness of all the bad things still exists. My question then is this: What makes us ready enough and present enough to open our eyes to see the world around us for what it is? The practice of fasting can indeed be a part of this effort. When we ourselves feel deprived, powerless, and weak, we can more deeply recognize and remedy it in others. When we use our Jewish practices as a means to identify the suffering and stop it, then we may truly fulfill our mission as a holy people. A people who is different, maybe even expected to be a little bit better than the rest in how we treat others and ourselves. The Jewish God does not require faith alone nor worship for its own sake. We are each expected to live out our values in addition to learning about and carrying out our Jewish faith and rituals.

The authentic message of Yom Kippur is that we see the heavenly gates open before us, ready to receive our prayers, but the keys are earthly—we find them by having integrity in life and showing responsibility for our actions, acting with kindness towards others. Isaiah preached to the people that they had lost sight of this crucial point. They had become too zealous about the details and structures of the ritual itself, not what fasting was meant to accomplish. Our ancestors needed to refocus their zeal. Zealousness does not always have to be a bad thing. Like our forbears, we need to direct that same fervor and passion to an extremely important cause—our own personal system of values being who we really are. Our right and wrong, our own good and bad. We need have the courage of our convictions and be our truest, most passionate selves, as Jews and as members of our society in the world. The modern Jewish philosopher Martin Buber tells of a Hasidic story in his writings that poses a similar question. When a rabbi named Zusya died, he went to stand before the judgment seat of God. As he waited for God to appear, he grew nervous thinking about his life and how little he had done. He began to imagine that God was going to ask him, "Why weren't you a wonderful teacher like Moses or why weren't you wise and kind like Solomon or why weren't you a warrior and a poet like King David?" But when God appeared, the rabbi was surprised. God simply asked, "Why weren't you Zusya?" As Isaiah implies with his call, it is important that as we live our lives, we do not just go through the motions. We have to remember to be our truest selves, and to live with the belief that we each have gifts given to us to make the world the place we know it can and should be. Only then can we truly stand before God on Yom Kippur and be counted in the book of life.