

D'var Haftarah for Yom Kippur Morning 5774
September 14, 2013
Cantor Wally Schachet-Briskin

Why do Jews fast on *Yom Kippur*? Growing up, I thought it was for self-punishment so that we can feel pain and then truly atone. I also thought this is why we pile the horseradish onto the gefilte fish. Discipline 101 would have us believe that we need to take a rolled-up newspaper and hit ourselves in the nose – Bad Cantor! You've been sinful! Now behave! We shed a tear, we express our "*Oy Gevalt!*", and God knows we've suffered enough to be forgiven.

Many of us probably think that's the proper way to be ready for atonement. Surprise! Fasting is not for self-torture. Just like the other behaviors we are supposed to engage in on Yom Kippur – no bubble baths, no excessive make-up, no luxurious leather shoes – denial of food should allow us to concentrate on higher values than self-indulgence.

Now, don't get the idea that Judaism values asceticism – we're not supposed to think that pleasurable behaviors and items have no place in life – rather, we're supposed to hear the call to put those needs and desires in their place.

But what if you're not fasting? If you're in one of several categories of being, you're PROHIBITED from fasting for 24 hours – the very young, the dangerously ill, and those who by doctor's advice or self-diagnosis should not fast. And you're not allowed to feel guilty about it, either.

Yet like we said before, fasting is ONE means to an end, not the end in itself. Judaism says those who are allowed and able to fast, to only wash when necessary, to avoid "anointing", and to put aside the comfy leather footwear, and derive meaning from these acts, by all means should. The denial of luxuries is a chance to not distract ourselves from our purpose in being here.

The prophet Isaiah says, in the *Haftarah* we're about to hear, if you ONLY refrain from eating but don't go to the next step of making this world a better place, you may as well have had a hearty breakfast this morning. Isaiah reminds us that if God had to choose between us fasting just because God said so, and bringing freedom to the captive, bread to the hungry, housing to the poor, clothing to the needy, and being present for our family, God would always say, "Enough with the fasting! You missed the point. It's not accomplishing its goal! MOVE ON."

Better we should simply work to repair this world. At my Hillel in college, we were encouraged to take the canned food equivalent of the meals we would have eaten on *Yom Kippur* and contribute that to the food drive. That's a start. Another place gave us the option to stop going through the motions – put down the prayer book for a while and really think to yourself about who you are and how you can help.

Repairing the world through acts of loving kindness is your big rock for the day. All the rest is gravel, sand, and water. *Tzom Kal*, may you have an easy fast, because we need our strength for the work we have left to do.