

Yom Kippur 5783

KLS

One evening in France, I was teaching a class on Yom Kippur in my previous community. I was explaining the five prohibitions of the day, eating or drinking, bathing, anointing the body with oil, wearing leather shoes, and sexual relations. As I mentioned the fifth one, a young man cried out: “What? No sex on Yom Kippur?”. I replied, “darling, Yom Kippur presents us with all sorts of challenges”.

It is indeed a day ripe with challenges: long services, the prohibition of eating and drinking, a day that is entirely different from all the others. Throughout the day, we read prayers that tell us how flawed we are, how often we miss the mark and make mistakes, but they also tell us about the possibility of Teshuvah, of return, the possibility to mend our ways and to try to do better next year.

Obviously, this young man had his own challenges. Some of us may struggle with the lack of water, or the lack of food. Others may find very difficult not to be able to shower, or to put on some day cream. And what about finding non leather shoes to wear?

This prohibition is probably the most puzzling of all. Why don't we wear leather shoes on Yom Kippur? Some say it is because in the old days only the well-off could afford leather shoes and wearing them was a sign of showing off. Others link this proscription to the prohibition of wearing leather shoes in the Temple of Jerusalem, and Yom Kippur reminds us of the sanctity of the synagogue on this day. Whatever reason you may relate to, my point is, Jewish practice is complex, not always self-explanatory, and there is a risk of losing oneself in the minutiae of the law at the expense of the larger picture.

In his masterpiece, the Mishneh Torah (laws of repentance 2: 9), Maimonides explains,

“Teshuvah and Yom Kippur atone for transgressions between human beings and God, such as one who eats a forbidden food... But transgressions between a person and their fellow, such as physical harm, or verbal harm, or stealing, those are never forgiven until they give their fellow what they owe him, and he is appeased... until he forgives them”.

In other words, Yom Kippur is mainly concerned with our relationship with God. Have we left enough space to God in our lives? Are we listening to this small, still voice in our noisy world? And if one does not believe in a God that is not a fictional character found in the Bible, how does one conduct one's life in accordance with the values that Judaism promotes?

The question of religious observance is a divisive issue within the Jewish community. We know that the emphasis on observance varies depending on the movement you belong to.

In order to understand how Progressive Judaism has dealt with this question, I would like to examine with you the Torah readings of the Yom Kippur morning service.

The more traditional Jewish movements kept the conventional readings of the Yom Kippur Temple sacrifice in Leviticus 16 in the morning, and in the afternoon, the list of the forbidden relationships known as “abominations”, *arayot* in Hebrew, among them, the prohibition to sleep with family members, or with animals, or sexual intercourse between men. In our liberal tradition, we read Parasha Nitzavim in the morning, that talks about being present in the here and now and being ready to heed God's words; in the afternoon, we read passages from the holiness code in Leviticus 19, that focus on ways to achieve personal holiness, “you shall be holy, because the Eternal your God is holy”, by adopting an ethical conduct.

In other words, we have moved from a halakhic point of view, explaining **how** things must be done, to a more ethical angle, explaining **why** things should be done. Already in the 17th century, Baruch Spinoza made a distinction between sacramental laws, such as lighting the Shabbat candles, and ethical laws, such as, you shall not murder. We believe that not all laws are of equal value, and ethical mitzvot are far superior to practical ones. It is more important to respect the stranger than to light the eight Chanukah candles in the right order. It is more important to pay your worker on time than to separate meat from milk. Even more so, about a third of the 613 commandments do not apply today anymore, as they pertain to the Temple of Jerusalem that was destroyed 1,952 years ago. Others clash with modern ethics, such as the prohibition of homosexuality, or the treatment of women as second-class Jews.

That gives us a pretty confusing picture of Jewish law: some parts are obsolete, some parts are meaningless, some are in contradiction with the law of the land, some may prevent us from mixing with the larger population.

Almost naturally, Jewish community have made choices in the past and are still making them today about what is relevant and what is part of the historical deposit of our tradition. Progressive Judaism puts the emphasis on ethical laws and leaves the ritual ones to the discretion of each individual, free to observe them or not after careful consideration.

This question is at the heart of the observance of Yom Kippur, one of the most restrictive of all our festivals, and is also central to appreciate the role that Judaism plays in our daily lives. Some of you will fast the 25 hours of the festival. Others will have their normal food and water consumption during the day. Whatever you decide to do, however you choose to observe the day, or to include Judaism in your personal lives, I suppose the most important question is, why are we doing what we are doing?

I would like to call again Maimonides into the conversation. He was a sage, a Rabbi, doctor, philosopher, who died in 1204 in Egypt. He wrestled with Halachah his entire life and composed a compendium of Jewish law to be used by people so that they could observe the mitzvot. He wrote in another of his major works, the Guide of the Perplexed (III, 27) the following that retains its relevance still today.

“The Law, as a whole, aims at two things: the welfare of the soul, and the welfare of the body. As for the welfare of the soul, it consists in the multitude’s acquiring correct opinions... As for the welfare of the body, it comes about by the improvement of their ways of living one with another. This is achieved through two things. One of them is the abolition of their wronging each other... The second consists in the acquisition by every human being of moral qualities. Know that between these two aims, one – namely the welfare of the soul – is greater than the other – the welfare of the body -... But both are equally necessary for the perfection of the human being”.

That is the ultimate goal of religious observance. Not to obey God by fear of divine punishment, but because, ultimately, the observance of the mitzvot contributes to human flourishing.

What is inside must correspond to what is outside. Your practice must be the result of your choices, or what we call in our movement, informed choices. Through study and reflection, a Liberal Jew formulates his or her own practice, a practice that gives meaning and solace, a practice that defines each individual.

If a mitzva does not make sense to you, don't observe it. If a mitzva is not ethical, abandon it. But you cannot be indifferent or sweep aside the width and depth of our tradition.

I cannot say how little is too little, or how much is too much. I can only encourage you to bring Yiddishkeit into your lives. I am passionate about Judaism. I love our tradition of endless discussions, of respectful disagreements. I love the dynamic between the particular and the universal, between the Jewish and the British – or French, or German -. Judaism questions us, constantly pushing us to reflect on how we conduct our lives and how we can make better them. And I see it as my duty to share this love and this passion with you.

Hashivenu Adonai eleykha v'nashuva. Chadesh yameynu ke-kedem

Help us to return to you, O God, then we shall return. Renew our days as in the past.

Ken Yehi Ratzon

May it be God's Will.

Rabbi Rene Pfertzel

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