

YOM KIPPUR

Eat and Drink! For Tomorrow we Fast!!

2010 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

Everyone knows about the Mitzvah to fast on Yom Kippur. The tenth day of the month of Tishrei is the holiest day of the year. Moses concluded his 40-day visit on Mount Sinai and brought down a second set of Tablets, demonstrating that G-d had accepted the Nation's repentance for worshipping the Golden Calf.

Every year, on the tenth of the month we commemorate that original Day of Atonement by spending the day in prayer, repentance, and fasting.

Less well-known is the requirement to fast the day before Yom Kippur, on the ninth day of Tishrei.

What's that? You can't fast the day before a fast day? Well, the Torah seems to say otherwise:

It is a day of complete rest for you and you shall afflict yourselves [i.e., fast]; on the ninth of the month ...* (*Exodus, 23:32)

The Talmud (Yoma, 81b) understands this verse as indicating that we fast starting *on the ninth of the month* ... The ninth is also a fast day!

Our Sages question this reading – we KNOW that there is only one day of fasting for Yom Kippur, and that is on the tenth. What's the deal with fasting on the ninth??

The answer that the Talmud gives is that in reality there is a Mitzvah to EAT on the ninth, and the Torah refers to this eating as *afflicting/fasting* in order to consider it as if we fasted both days.

Now what is that supposed to mean? Are we eating or are we fasting? If we're eating, call it eating, and if we're fasting, call it fasting!

The Chofetz Chaim (Brief biographies of the Chofetz Chaim can be found [here](#) and [here](#). Read his obituaries in the New York Times and Time magazine [here](#).) writes that G-d wants to give us some extra credit. The harder it is to do a Mitzvah the greater the reward. Fasting is difficult; eating is pleasant. As such, we would assume that the reward for fasting is greater than the reward for eating. (After all, what's harder, Tisha B'Av or Purim?!!) In these waning moments before the Day of Atonement, G-d CALLS the Mitzvah of eating on the ninth fasting, so He can reward our easy Mitzvah of eating as if we fulfilled the difficult Mitzvah of fasting.

This is difficult to comprehend.

Is this a game? Is G-d pretending, with a Divine wink and a nod, that we are more devoted than we really are?? “Here, just get to first base somehow, and we’ll score it as if it’s a home run!”

What is this, frequent flyer miles? Get credit for something you didn’t do by doing something else??

Are we getting something for next-to-nothing?

I don’t think so. Clearly, at this point of the year, G-d wants to see us making the effort to improve ourselves. And He’s willing to help us. He provides us with opportunities. But we have to do the work.

On the tenth of the month, we will fast. How do we get ready? Obviously, in order to fast on the tenth, we MUST eat on the ninth. If we don’t, we won’t have the strength to carry through. Therefore, eating on the ninth is part and parcel of the Mitzvah of fasting on the tenth. Since we put two days of work into this effort, one of eating, to prepare, and one of the actual fast, we are considered as having put two days of effort into this Mitzvah.

But still, is it fair? Why should we get credit for an easy Mitzvah by pretending we’re doing a hard one?

I think the point is, why are we eating? Are we eating because we enjoy good food? If that’s the case, I don’t know how much reward there could be to be earned. If, however, we are eating today so that we will have the strength to fast, and to pray, and to pour our hearts out to G-d tomorrow, then today’s eating is truly a preparation for tomorrow.

Let’s look again at what the Chofetz Chaim said about easy and difficult Mitzvahs. It’s easy to eat and it’s hard to fast, right? Well, it depends why you’re doing it.

It’s “easy” to fast for G-d. Fasting and self-deprivation de-emphasize the physical and accentuate the spiritual. But it’s hard to be spiritual while loading up on carbs and protein. The challenge of Erev Yom Kippur is to eat with the same spirituality and dedication that we use when we fast on Yom Kippur.

If we can accomplish that, then we will truly be fasting on those two days.

This is not just about fasting and eating; it’s a lesson about life. We are asking G-d to Seal us in the Book of Life. Why? Who needs life? Why are we here?

G-d chose to put you and me into the world, and He told us to make it a better world. He didn’t tell us to exist simply to exist. Have a career so you can have money so you can buy food so you can continue to exist? What’s the point?

Numerous times throughout Yom Kippur, we will recite G-d's 13-part "resume:" *Hashem, Hashem, G-d, Compassionate and Gracious, Slow to anger, and Abundant in Kindness and Truth, Preserver of kindness for thousands of generations, Forgiver of Iniquity, willful sin, and error, and Who cleanses...* (Exodus, 34:5-7)

The purpose of our life is to bring G-d into the world by emulating His ways. G-d is *Compassionate and Gracious*; we too must be *Compassionate and Gracious*. G-d is *Slow to anger, and Abundant in Kindness and Truth*. We must, to whatever degree we can, do the same.

Living a G-dly life brings spirituality to even the most mundane and physical parts of life.

If the purpose of my life is to answer a higher calling, it means that I wake up in the morning for G-d. It means that I brush my teeth and eat a good breakfast in order to have the good health necessary to properly serve G-d. It means that when I go to work, when I exercise, and when I sleep, I am constantly involved in that higher calling. Every day becomes a Yom Kippur.

It's living with G-d. It's life in the "fast" lane.

Have an easy and meaningful fast. May G-d seal you and yours in the Book of Health, Prosperity, and Peace.

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