

Fasting on the 9th of Av

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The fast of the Ninth of Av, Tisha B'Av, falls this coming Monday night and Tuesday. All other so-called "minor fasts" in Judaism run from dawn to dusk—like Ramadan. Unlike Ramadan, which lasts for a month, we have many fewer fast days. But we also have two fasts during the year that run for over 24 hours—Yom Kippur and Tisha B'Av. I'd be interested to see a physiological study as to the comparative impact of a month-long daytime fast as opposed to the four obligatory rabbinic fasts (leaving out the mystical and ascetic options). What would this show about any cultural and attitudinal differences between Jews and Muslims? Or perhaps religion plays much less of a role than society at large.

I used not to understand how ordinary mortals could go about their daily business on minor fasts without the necessary fuel. I find it hard to concentrate when I fast. I feel weak. It's not the food I miss as much as the liquid. If I could drink I'd have no problem. I wonder if it isn't the fact that they are normal working days that affects me psychologically.

The spiritual function of fasts, I believe, is to encourage self-analysis. But if you are feeling physically weak, it's difficult to concentrate on serious self examination and thought. And if fasting is merely an endurance test, it has no spiritual value than doing it to diet.

Yet I can fast on Yom Kippur without too much difficulty. Perhaps psychologically I know I must, because it is so important religiously. Whereas on the other days, because my brain tells me they are less important, my body tries persuading me to perhaps give up halfway through. Even if all the empirical evidence is that I CAN do it. Perhaps it's autosuggestion trying to undermine me.

This is why the rabbis said (Eiruvin 21b) that keeping a rabbinic command is even greater than keeping one from the Torah. One is inevitably inclined to want to treat what the rabbis say less strictly (they are after all only human) than something coming from a Higher Authority! What this indicates is a perfectly natural human tendency to seek the easy way out.

We who are religious seem much better at keeping the less significant things than we do the more important ones. We are more inclined to bother about strictness in matters of food than we are in matters of personal relations. Yet if one were to weigh up the number of what we would call moral and ethical statements in the Torah, they by far outweigh the ritual ones (except for two areas that are no longer applicable—sacrifice and priestly purity). So why do so many religious people seem to fail to live up to their own standards?

There are two strains of thought in the Talmud that seek to explain Tisha B'Av and the destruction of the two Temples, two Jewish states, and

Jerusalem. One is the collapse of the moral order. The other is the collapse of the political order, and this emerges from those on both the "right" as well as the "left". Read the story of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza in the Talmud (Gittin 55b to 56a). A invitation to a banquet was mis-delivered. An unwanted guest humiliated. And rabbis fearful of offending the rich man, refused to protest. The narrative goes on to listen in on a rabbinic debate as to how they should respond to a crisis. They find every reason not to act, to avoid a catastrophe. But they persuade themselves that the right thing to do is to do nothing or stick to the letter of the law and let circumstances determine the outcome.

It sounds just like some of those Haredi rabbis today who know there are problems in their communities of finance, corruption, abuse, lack of employment and refusal to consider even minimum national service. But they choose to do nothing constructive. And I don't even mention those of us who have completely abandoned Judaism and Israel. This part of the Talmud, which custom requires us to study on Tisha B'Av, illustrates all the self-justification, holier-than-thou cowardice, and false piety that led to such cataclysmic results.

I suggest it was and is our inability or reluctance to go beyond our comfort zones that distorts our minds. Someone who is ritually particular and disciplined finds it difficult to know when to bend the law towards humanity. And someone who focusses on the broader human scheme of things finds it difficult to focus on the smaller, more mundane practices and community obligations. I know these failures are mine, too. I do not claim any status as a whited sepulcher.

This tendency to blind oneself to moral issues is typical of many humans. If it's our vanity at stake, we will select the foods we know are better for us and minimize those we know are not. But we won't do it for our souls. It is vanity that will find time for hours in a gym or on a yoga mat, but we won't do it for study or prayer. And religious vanity too often puts the needs of self before the needs of others. It is vanity to focus on externality rather than internality.

If Yom Kippur takes us out of our comfort zone for spiritual matters, I suggest Tisha B'Av should take us out of our comfort zone on political issues. So much suffering and death in almost every generation has come from making the wrong political decisions. This has been as true (dare I say it) of our greatest rabbis as it has of ordinary simple folk. But unless we are prepared to step outside of ourselves every now and then, however difficult, we will never get a different perspective on our own limitations.

There will be many people fasting on Tisha B'Av who have, during these past weeks, slandered, humiliated, condemned, berated, trampled on, and verbally attacked other Jews who did not deserve it. All in the name of religion. They will have told themselves they were doing it for holy reasons. And they seem incapable of learning. After failing to win one battle against a controversial rabbi, they have launched another against a community center in London that dares to provide services for people they disagree with. Such battles also go on in Israel, within Orthodoxy and without, all the time. I

have no doubt that those who dragged two Jewish states into oblivion also thought they were acting in good faith and with noble intentions.

What pathetic human beings we are. How easily we can fool and delude ourselves. That is precisely why we need these moments of pain and self-reflection. Except that the people who need to reflect most, seem to do it least. As the Israeli greeting goes, Tsom Moiy! May your fast be effective.