

Fasting

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

What is religion to you? Pleasure or pain?

We are in the fasting season. We started with the Seventeenth of Tamuz, a full day from dawn till dark. Next week we move on toward the Ninth of Av (Tisha B'Av), a 25-hour marathon in the height of summer.

I am intrigued by the role of fasting in Judaism. In theory it goes against the grain of a tradition that delights in the permitted pleasures of this world and encourages one to enjoy, to eat, drink, and be merry and thank God for the pleasure. The Torah only mentions one fast, Yom Kippur. But over time we have added plenty, to mitigate disaster, record tragedies, as antidotes to anything from bad dreams to excessive celebration, or just to increase piety.

Zechariah (8:19) looks forward to a day when fasts are abolished (other than the Torah fast, of course); so clearly he has reservations about the spiritual validity of adding fasts.

There is plenty of published literature about the extent to which customs have been influenced by the different Christian and Muslim environments in which Judaism has survived. Cycles of strictness, reformations, and counterreformations in Judaism seem to have followed external conditions pretty closely. The medieval pious Hasidei Ashkenaz movement, for example, coincided with the Crusades. A rash of pseudo-messiahs came with the post-expulsion traumas of Sefardi Jews, as did popular mysticism. Self-laceration, particularly before Yom Kippur, appears to come from both Christian monastic and Shia Ashura customs. But I do not think that is the complete story.

Religions are not simple monolithic structures, despite the impression some like to give, and Judaism contains many different types of spiritual expression. The spirit of the prophets was different than that of the Temple priesthood, and Temple Judaism had different rules and regulations than what went on outside. Pharisees battled Sadducees, then the Rabbinate fought Kaarites. It is true that Rabbinic Judaism won the battle of history. But even within there were differences, Sefardi, Ashkenazi, kabbalists, rationalists, Hasidism, and on to the multifaceted variations of Judaism nowadays, both within Orthodoxy and without. Even all those that technically follow the same constitution do so in markedly variegated ways. To give one trivial example, some Jews fast on the anniversaries of their parents' deaths while others drink LeChayim!

There are two strains of Greek philosophy, the Stoic and the Epicurean. Stoicism is the more ascetic approach to life. Think of Diogenes and his barrel, rejecting this world. Epicureanism delights in physical pleasures. Of course, I am being very simplistic here to make a point. Even within Hasidism you have those charismatics who fasted all week and only reluctantly ate on Shabbat because they were obliged to by law. On the other hand, you can find

those Dionysian characters that delighted in all the halachic pleasures of life and made an issue of appearing well fed and watered.

As a child, I noticed how some religious kids simply seemed more naturally pious. They positively reveled in self-denial, in praying longer than anyone else, in fasting as often as they could, in denying pleasure, in studying rigorously and with apparent delight. People are different and asceticism comes naturally to some that is fine, but not everyone is like that or has to be like that.

I was reared in a family where Torah was joyous. Those who know me are aware that I delight in Torah. A halachic way of life brings me immense pleasure. I am in the "religion can be enjoyable" camp, not in the "it's good to suffer" one. I guess I am an epicurean by nature. I know the dangers of Epicureanism, just as I know the dangers of asceticism. I decided early on that there seemed too many killjoys in Orthodoxy, so I consciously took a different path to show people that you could enjoy it and it needn't be a self-denying ascetic penalty. But I also know that for many the disciplines of religion are essential and the rigors of halacha can be beneficial in other ways.

All religion contains these different trends, elements, fashions. It seems to me that both sides of the religious spectrum need balance. Therefore, despite my visceral objection to fasting, I force myself to see the positive. Partly it is communal. I am associating with, participating in, Jewish community togetherness, in pain as well as joy. Given the extent to which I feel alienated from so much Jewish community life, I feel it a necessary antidote to fast with those I might not always feel close to. And I feel that materialism has gone too far.

On a very epicurean level, if I am prepared to suffer for the sake of physical fitness and vanity, then why not do it for religious reasons too? Fasting as a diet need not just be for vanity. Sometimes it can be for a higher good!!!