

Kol Nidrei: Tisha B'Av vs. Yom Kippur: A Study in Two Fasts

As solemn as it may seem, Yom Kippur is ultimately an opportunity for renewal.

Hope and faith in humanity underpin the central elements of the Yamim Nora'im, culminating in Yom Kippur. The Divine, in our tradition, does not want to punish, does not want to cause suffering, but wants us to return, to reconcile, to heal, and to help. Our tradition reinforces our agency and our resiliency, our ability to engage in teshuvah and tikkun for ourselves, for our communities, and for the world.

In that way the essence of Yom Kippur contrasts with the other main fast day in the Jewish tradition (though there are a number of fasts) – Tisha B'Av, which falls in the late summer.

Tisha B'Av commemorates the destruction of the two Temples in Jerusalem as well as various other calamities that have befallen the Jewish people.

Regarding Tisha B'Av, the Talmudic rabbis taught that the Second Temple was destroyed not because of a lack of Torah study or observance, but rather due to ***sinat chinam***, or baseless hatred (BT Yoma 9b:8).

Such hatred isn't irrational; rather, I understand *sinat chinam* as **self-righteous indignation**; it is smug indifference to the concerns of others, fueled by the belief that "I must be right, and you must be wrong." It happens when we stop listening and only talk at each other rather than with or to each other.

In short, the Temple was destroyed out of a failure to be able to recognize the holiness – the Godliness – in each other.

[Rav Kook taught a beautiful lesson](#) about how to repair the damage wrought by *sinat chinam*. He wrote:

"If we were destroyed, and the world with us, due to baseless hatred, then we shall rebuild ourselves, and the world with us, with baseless love – *ahavat chinam*." (Orot HaKodesh vol. III, p. 324).

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Ahavat chinam, baseless love, is love without measure – love without an expectation of reward, of something in return.

The solemnity and ritual, the **repentance** of Yom Kippur is all designed to help us clean away our tendencies towards self-righteousness and help focus us towards healing and care for each other and our world. The fast of Yom Kippur in this way is the **tikkun, the repair**, to that of Tisha B'Av.

The late Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel z"l famously [said the following](#) about repentance and Yom Kippur:

“We are all failures. At least one day a year we should recognize it. I have failed so often; and I am sure those present here have also failed. We have much to be contrite about; we have missed opportunities. The sense of inadequacy ought to be at the very center of the day... to put contrition another way, develop a sense of embarrassment... It would be a great calamity for humanity if the sense of embarrassment disappeared, if everybody was an all-rightnik, with an answer to every problem. We have no answer to ultimate problems. We really don't know. In this not knowing, in this sense of embarrassment, lies the key to opening the wells of creativity. Those who have no embarrassment remain sterile.”

We all have blind spots, and we all have work to do. Selichot, apologizing and seeking forgiveness, is not just found in our Yom Kippur liturgy but in traditional daily prayers, and in the bedtime Shema.

Exercising our apology muscles activates our empathy system. It opens us up to each other, and to the mystery and challenge of existence.

The acts of selichot, of seeking forgiveness for how we have missed the mark, enable us to return to a healthy sense of self, imperfect as we are, unburdened and open. This is the gift of Yom Kippur.

And yet if we lose our ability to recognize when we miss the mark, to feel embarrassment or contrition, then we are lost. We become ever more susceptible to **sinat chinam** and its destructive tendencies. We lose sight of the other, of each other. We become sterile.

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We cannot afford any more of this right now. The challenges facing our world are deep and vast. We need each other more than other, and sometimes we need to get beyond ourselves in order to get there.

We need each other to solve the climate crisis.

We need each other to overcome COVID-19.

We need each other to end the scourge of racism, particularly against Black and Indigenous People of Colour.

We need each other to make the world a safer place for all its inhabitants.

We need each other to put a stop to anti-Semitism in its myriad forms.

We need each other to end discrimination on the basis of sex, gender identity and gender expression, and sexual orientation.

We need each other to help the most vulnerable in our society, in the words of our Torah, to care for the widow, the orphan and the stranger, those living in poverty or with addiction.

As I have said before, quoting R' Zalman Schachter Shalomi z"l, the only way to get it together, is together.

Ahavat chinam, love without measure, love without strings attached, sounds hard. But we need it. And we can do it. We are taught in Torah , *v'ahavta l're'acha kamocha*, you shall love thy neighbour as yourself.

Love means honouring the fundamental value in each of us. However, it does **not** mean that we have to agree about everything, or even about most things.

Indeed, as I read recently, *“Coalition building is an art. More than anything else, it requires individuals and groups to be willing to rise above their feelings of separateness and to actively collaborate in a spirit of mutual understanding, patience, and flexibility.”* (Source: Oak Ridge Institute for Science and Education, [“Coalition-Building Primer”](#))

Through selichot, through kapparah, we are able to look inside ourselves and do just that – rise above our *sinat chinam* tendencies and embrace our connective, *ahavat chinam* capacity.

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Only by opening ourselves up, exposing ourselves and recognizing that yes, we have messed up, yes, we have hang-ups, can we ultimately repair and rebuild ourselves and our world with ***ahavat chinam***, to really see and hear and care for each other without strings attached, honouring the holiness within each of us.

As we journey through the next 24 or so hours together, I invite us to reflect on the blockages, or fears or hang-ups that we may have that are inhibiting us from being able to join with others who may be different from us, in order to help heal our world.

May this exercise help us all clean out our shmutz and inscribe ourselves for life and blessing grounded in ***ahavat chinam***. Shanah tovah and g'mar chatimah tovah.