

In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall practice self-denial, affliction - it shall be a Shabbat of complete rest for you. . . And you shall afflict your souls:

ועניתן את נפשותיכם

This is the first reference in the Torah to the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur.

You shall afflict your soul. Why? What does it mean to “afflict our souls?” The word for soul, as you know, is nefesh, or neshamah. We sometimes say, “He or she has a beautiful neshamah, a beautiful soul.”

So why are we told to afflict it?

Affliction comes from the Hebrew ענה aneh, meaning abase, chasten, humble. And in Psalm 35, David declares, “I afflicted my soul with fasting. . .

The Prophet Ezra declares:

"I proclaimed a fast . . . that we might afflict ourselves before our God."

And Isaiah cries out in today's Haftarah:

"Why, when we fasted, did You not see? When we starved our bodies, did You not listen?"

So, unmistakably, there is abstinence from food.

But I believe, admitting one's sins and seeking forgiveness, is fueled not just by a lack of carbohydrates or protein, but by our laying ourselves naked before our Creator, and revealing ourselves to God. In other words, it's not simply the absence of food that defines Yom Kippur.

Now, before you reach into your pocket for a power bar or some dark chocolate, let's explore the idea of spiritual fasting.

By the rumblings in my tummy, it's right around lunchtime. (I know, it's terrible - I'll have to say an extra al het or two later on.) But, just about now, I really begin to feel the fast. I think the rabbis knew exactly what they were doing. It's lunchtime: the haftarah. And God says, "You call that a fast?"

"What? I haven't eaten for who knows how many hours - I am slowing down, I would love to have . . . anything, maybe even a nap, and God questions whether this is a real fast?"

But Isaiah clarifies: "This is the fast I desire: to share your bread with the hungry, to take the wretched poor into your home; when you see the naked, to clothe them. "

A true fast, Isaiah says, is actually doing mitzvot.

And we need to know what it means to be hungry, as so many Americans are, every day of their lives. And *on* this day, we should feel what it's like *to be in need*. Others suffer, but we may not see it. So today, we suffer ourselves, even just a bit, so that we might identify, even just a bit, with those less fortunate.

But then Isaiah declares a final and unusual admonition:

ומבשרך לא תתעלם

Do not ignore your own flesh.

Do not ignore your own flesh. Isn't this contradictory? Don't we ignore our own needs in order to be empathic? Why am I commanded not to ignore "my own flesh?"

It could mean that when you see someone in need, don't ignore them. Rashi says this means not to ignore our family. The Ba'al Shem Tov says, it means don't ignore what your body is telling you. Your soul will not grow spiritually if you do.

And not just on Yom Kippur. He means for every day, because your soul will not grow spiritually.

A thousand years ago, the RAMBAM, the great codifier of Jewish law and physician to the sultan of Egypt, says that working to be healthy is a pathway to God. It's very hard to study or contemplate God if you are sick or in pain. (How many of us here today, coping with chronic pain, know this already?) The RAMBAM tells us to what to eat, how to eat, not to wait to go to the bathroom, - it's incredible.

He tells us to listen to our bodies.

It sounds so basic, doesn't it? But it is actually really hard to do what Maimonides says. I find it hard.

I have been a rabbi at Kol shofar for five years. I pride myself on maintaining healthy personal boundaries in my life. But this Yom Kippur, I thought it would be important to share something with you about my personal spiritual journey.

For years, I acted like my body was a machine. I thought that I should be able to get up at the same time every day, to always work out on a schedule, not to miss a meeting because my body wouldn't cooperate.

But in my late 40's, I began to see this wasn't sustainable. I finally understood what "do not ignore your own flesh" means. In the Hasidic sense, I was letting my body master my soul.

At age 52, I am grateful to be in good health. But both of my parents suffer, or suffered, from adult onset diabetes and obesity. I didn't want to share their fate. I exercised, modified my diet, but not so much.

Twenty years passed - the “baby weight” hadn’t magically dropped off. Actually, it was a lot more than baby weight. I knew what to do and I thought I could do it on my own.

But I couldn’t. I was frustrated, alone and felt I was failing my body.

I had always known other people had personal trainers. When I lived in LA, I thought, “Oh, that is so L.A. I will never do that.” Then I moved to Marin and I thought, “Oh, that is so Marin. I will never do that.” And, it’s expensive. It is not in my nature to do something like this. And I was beating myself up, almost in despair because, I couldn’t do it **by myself**.

Finally, . . . I did. . . . I got help. The rabbi needed help. .

. . .which for me is a very difficult admission. It is astonishing to me, because I **so** get this in other parts of my life. I study with my hevruta at a fixed time every week. It’s noisy, dialectical, engaged, not done in isolation. The Talmud says: “Hevruta o Mituta - Give me a study partner or give me death.” And hevruta means connection. I would never think about stopping my hevruta practice. And now, I have to apply the same understanding to my physical commitment.

I was learning the lesson of “hevruta o mituta,” all over again.

Anyone who has ever worked their tuhs off, keeping a relationship or a marriage together, a friendship, knows that the work is ongoing. You have to do it every day. And while Yom Kippur comes once a year, it is not a Bar Mitzvah, a brit, or a baby naming. It is not a one and done. If we’re fortunate, we come back every year, trying to improve our souls, engaging in spiritual practice, to make the story of our lives meaningful and purposeful.

And in working on it every day, we are, in effect, writing that very story: who we are, what we would like to be. Every day we go about our lives and enact our story, our plot. And the kind

of person the main character is, well, that is up to us. Are we shallow and indifferent, or compassionate and involved? Do we live in encompassing community or in isolated individualism?

Teshuvah builds our soul. It gives us depth and richness. We become like a good character in a wonderful novel, grappling with serious issues. It makes our story eloquent.

And in these troubled and polarizing times, with a lack of civil decency, natural disasters fueled by unnatural global warming, and so much more, - it's hard to believe that it is 2017. But it is also during these trying times, that we realize that it starts with us, it begins within each one of us, every single day.

The other day, I was visiting with a black pastor from Marin City. I wanted to commiserate with her about the racist and polarizing conditions of our country right now. I naturally assumed that she too, would be outraged. But she wasn't. She was focusing her community on internal spiritual growth, not on looking outward at external conditions. . . I was stopped in my tracks. Here I am, assuming that as a black woman pastor, she would be lambasting our racist society. But instead, she and her congregation were focused on spiritual growth and looking internally, like us, involved in discovering teshuvah. I felt so much more hopeful. Maybe we are not all going to fall apart next week, next month, next year, who knows? Maybe there's hope after all.

As the Buddhist saying goes, "If you don't change direction, you are going to end up where you were headed." *Teshuvah* — is the ability to move, to change course, to come back, to reconcile.

And it's very interesting that, in two distinct ways, teshuvah and Yom Kippur are so intrinsically entwined. Yom Kippur is the time of year where we plant wheat, that most fundamental grain. And in teshuvah, we plant our seeds of hope and expectations, pray for nourishment, and that they sprout and grow. It's the rainy season and with any luck the wheat

grows. For us, these seeds, hopefully, will also have grown. As Ecclesiastes says, “To everything there is a season.” Yom Kippur is a time for planting, a time for uprooting, a time for tearing down, and a time for building up, a dynamic, continuing process of life. We remember who we are, why we are here and how we can change the world: vulnerable and hopeful.

The great William Shakespeare says in Hamlet, “To thine own self be true,” and I am not one to argue with the Bard. But we cannot do it alone. That is why we are here today.

And I think another Bill, Bill Withers, also a poet, had a pretty good take on it when he said:

Sometimes in our lives  
We all have pain  
We all have sorrow  
But if we are wise  
We know that there's always tomorrow

Lean on me, when you're not strong  
And I'll be your friend  
I'll help you carry on  
For it won't be long  
'Til I'm gonna need  
Somebody to lean on

You just call on me brother, when you need a hand  
We all need somebody to lean on  
I just might have a problem that you'll understand

We all need somebody to lean on. .