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YOM KIPPUR

ANONYMOUS LEADERSHIP: THE EMOTIONAL DRAMA IN ISHAY RIBO'S SEDER HA-AVODAH

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Ishay Ribo has had a record-breaking year.[1] The French-Israeli singer, who has become popular with both secular and religious Israelis, released a version of Amir Benayoun's *Nitzaht Itti ha-Kol* earlier this summer, garnering over a million views on YouTube in the first week it was posted and 4.5 million as of this writing. Then, in September, his rendition of the Yom Kippur Temple service, *Seder ha-Avodah*, "the order of the service," was released to instant acclaim, in part for blurring the lines between secular and religious. It, too, was viewed more than a million times in short order.

One of the major tensions in *Seder ha-Avodah* comes to the musical fore in the penultimate movement of the song, as it moves to an intensification as it nears the climax. After the High Priest has been accompanied to his home and thrown a party for his friends and family, two parallel musical celebrations follow. The choral voices sing:

אשרי העם שככה לו!

אשרי העם שה' אלהיו!

Fortunate the people who have it thus/

Fortunate the people whose God is the Lord!

The communal focus, then, is on the people. Ribo's own solo voice, however, praises the solo High Priest. This focus on the priest's appearance at the end of the day draws on the prayer *Mar'eh Kohen*, which itself has its roots in the Second Temple period (Ben Sira 50). Here there is no attention paid to the people or the results of the day, but on the individual at the center of it all:

כאהל הנמתח בדרי מעלה מראה כהן

כברקים היוצאים מזיו החיות מראה כהן

כדמות הקשת בתוך הענן מראה כהן

כחסד הניתן על פני חתן מראה כהן

As the canopy of the heavens stretched out on high/

was the appearance of the Priest.

As the flashes emanating from the shine of the Hayyot/

was the appearance of the Priest. As the figure of the bow in the clouds/

was the appearance of the High Priest.

As the grace reflected in the face of a groom/

was the appearance of the High Priest.

The simultaneous voices, one drawing our attention to the nation and the other to the High Priest, compete for our attention. In fact, this tension lies at the heart of the Yom Kippur service, brilliantly dramatized and brought to life in Ribo's piece.

The song is a poignant and powerful reflection on leadership, individuality, and the emotional experience of Yom Kippur. It asks us to ponder the role of the leader vis-a-vis the community and the relationship between the actions in front of our eyes and the internal dramas playing out within our hearts and minds. Although the focus of the entire song is the High Priest, he is never actually introduced: the listeners are thrown into the story, expected to recognize the character. We know immediately who he is, and we know that we have just opened a window onto the powerful ritual of Yom Kippur. We know this partly because much of the song – some details, some key words and phrases, and even the rhythms – derives from classical descriptions of the service on Yom Kippur, in the Mishnah and especially in the long, detailed poems recited in *Musaf* of the day (Askenazic and Sephardic). Of course, we were primed for this by the song's title, a phrase that in rabbinic literature refers to the sacrificial service of Yom Kippur. Ribo assumes that his audience will find its bearing immediately as the song begins with a staccato description of the priest's opening moves:

נכנס למקום שנכנס ועמד במקום שעמד

רחץ ידיו רגליו טבל עלה ונסתפג

He entered the place he entered, and stood in the place where he stood/

He washed his hands and legs, immersed, emerged, and dried off.

[1] Our thanks to Dr. Daniel Beliavsky for help with the analysis of the music.

The next line sounds like more of the same, but actually takes an existential turn:

בא ממקום שהוא בא והלך למקום שהלך

He came from the place whence he came/

And he went to the place thence he went.

This line is not found in any earlier source, and is Ribo's way of focusing our attention on an aspect of the ritual not usually fronted. Who is this High Priest? How did he come to occupy our attention on this holiest day? Was it through personal merit? Did he inherit? Is he tolerant? Is he a zealot? For the purposes of the song, it matters little. He has come from wherever he has come; he will go wherever he will go. For now, he is the one who is, and he is the one who matters.

The audience – about whom we will hear in a moment – is silent, waiting, watching, as the priest transitions from just a figure arriving anonymously to the star of the show: he removes his street clothes, and puts on the white garments of the priest. And the show begins. The service that will ensue has the feel of performance art. It begins with confession, a formula essentially taken from the Mishnah, a plea for forgiveness: "Please, God, forgive the sins, iniquities, and misdeeds that I have committed before You, I and the whole house of Israel."

In the Mishnaic script, this confession is recited at the time of a sacrifice. But there are no sacrifices in Ribo's song, no flesh and no blood. Instead, much more attention is paid to the human experience. In the Mishnah, the high priest takes the blood and sprinkles it on the curtain separating the Holy of Holies from the rest of the Temple, famously counting as he does: "One, one [up] and one [down], one [up] and two [down]," and so on, until "one [up] and seven [down]." The counting is here in the song, but it is not of drops of blood being counted:

ואם אדם היה יכול לזכור את הפגמים את החסרונות את כל הפשעים את כל העוונות

בטח כך היה מונה :אחת, אחת ואחת, אחת ושתים, אחת ושלש, אחת וארבע, אחת וחמש

ישר היה מתייאש כי לא יכול היה לשאת את טעם מרירות החטא, את הבושה, את

הפספוס, את ההפסד

If a person were able to remember/

The flaws, the imperfections, the sins/

Surely he would count this way:

One, one and one, one and two, one and three, one and four, one

and five…

He would quickly give up/

Unable to bear the flavor of the bitterness of sin/

Of chances missed, of loss

Although it sounds like we have moved away from the Temple, away from the High Priest, we suspect we are meant to imagine the High Priest himself thinking this. What *was* he thinking as he sprinkled? Perhaps just this: I stand here, alone, representing the people. But who am I to represent the people? I have my own flaws, my own skeletons, my own lapses and regrets. One, one and one, one and two…

He, and we, are brought back out of his thoughts, and to the performance, by the response of the people. As the Mishnah describes, when they hear the name of God, they lay prostrate in the courtyard, and proclaim in unison: "Blessed is the name of the glory of his kingship, forever and ever."

The musical transition takes a cinematic turn with a brief dramatic interlude before the next section of lyrics. We feel the drama, the power of the proclamation issuing from the crowd. The High Priest is alone on stage, but he is far from alone; the throngs are hanging on his every word. Is he a leader? He hopes for no followers. He has shouldered the burden entirely on his own, taken the sins and the hopes of the entire community with him. And as he counts, is he counting only his own? Is that infinitely long list to be multiplied again and again, as he looks at the faces around him? It is hard to see the individuals in the crowd, but as his gaze lingers on one face, and then another, as these strangers come into focus, he is crushed by the expectations laid upon him. "Blessed be the Name."

When the High Priest emerges again, he has changed from *a* priest into *the* priest, changing from the priestly white garments to the golden garments worn only by the High Priest. Then again, a confession. And again, counting. But this time:

ואם אדם היה יכול לזכור את החסדים את הטובות את כל הרחמים את כל הישועות

בטח כך היה מונה :אחת, אחת ואחת, אחת ושתים, אחת ושלש

אחת מאלף ורב רבי רבבות נסים נפלאות שעשית עמנו ימים ולילות

If a person were able to remember/

The kindnesses and goodnesses, all the mercies and all the

redemptions Surely he would count this way: one, one and one, one

and two, one and three

One of a thousand, many tens of thousands, wonders and miracles,

which You have done for us, day and night.

If the first time, he was crushed by the sins he could not enumerate, his own and those of everyone around him, this time he is uplifted by the thought of the innumerable kindnesses bestowed by God. Again, his thoughts run along, counting one, one and one, one and two – and the magnitude of the count overwhelms, filling him with thoughts of good fortune and covenantal kindness.

The music at this point pauses, and then again soars. The arrangement captures something profound about the end of Yom Kippur, not often palpable in many congregations: the tension of the day that is released the moment after *Neilah* comes to a crescendo. The High Priest steps out ("he emerged from where he emerged") and is overcome with the emotion of the moment: "He trembled in the place where he stood." For those standing in terror of the closing gates, in anxiety over the fate of the High Priest and his rituals, the end of the day brings a wave of relief. Those of us fortunate enough to have spent a Yom Kippur in the presence of Jews profoundly terrified by the day, quaking at the gates' closing, may have experienced, or at least seen, this release, the profound joy as the day ends and the new year, hopefully now sealed for life, gets underway. The moment of relief explodes into joyous song.

It is at this point that our attention is divided between the priest, described in near angelic terms, and the people, "fortunate" that thus is their lot. The High Priest plays a stirring role in the drama, but his own identity is beside the point. On the other hand, he provides a model of leadership starkly different than the one in vogue today. Rather than facilitating the development of his flock, he takes all the work upon himself. Bearing their sins, their hopes, their anxiety, and their dreams for the future, he performs alone, under the watchful eyes of the entire nation. This sense of individualism clashes with the anonymity of the priest, "who came from wherever he came, and who went to wherever he went."

In our world, filled with conflicts – individual vs. communal, secular vs. religious, public vs. private – the lonely figure of Ribo's anonymous High Priest draws us in. He captivates our imagination and prompts us to think about ourselves in his place. We all know the feeling of being the actor on the stage, with the expectations of others on our shoulders. But inside our heads – that is entirely our space. Yom Kippur may be that experience, as we stand waiting, alone, counting, trying to find ourselves in the infinite world that surrounds us.

Akeidah

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Every angel's abrupt, placing some ram
in the foreground where once
there was only an altar.

There are things you learn you knew
before being born
at the end of your life—

that resignation is mourning
in advance, like paying a bill
before your statement is ready.

That self-help is astrology
without stars.
That medicine works

in worst-case scenarios
and faith saves
save when it doesn't.

At the end of your life
you do not know it's the end
though you practice dying

recite a confession each night
you can't know is a confession.
The life you want to live, yet can't

appears as a ram caught in the hedge
while a disembodied voice simulates
the coo of your infancy

which you interpret
"Do not raise your hand
against the lad,"

this moment,
your only moment,
the one you love, now.

You don't need a knife
to substitute another life
for this one.

What do we give up by focusing our attention on what is immediately in view? What do we overlook when we look only into the distance? Decision comes from the Latin, *de-cidere*, to kill off possibilities. Every life-choice, small or large, conscious or unconscious, intentional or accidental, is a sacrifice. Sacrifice exists because we are mortal, temporal creatures. "Abraham got up early in the morning." *Teshuvah*, repentance, is at once a return to yourself, a re-commitment to live your life in a certain way, and a sacrifice of all the lives you cannot live. *Teshuvah* is at once a movement into the past, of "returning," and a movement towards an uncertain and inimitable future (making Maimonides's idea that complete *Teshuva* means not doing the same sin twice a kind of absurdist twist on Heraclitus). *Teshuvah* describes not just a process of penitence, but the structure of time itself, in which, as Heidegger says, we are "always ahead of ourselves" and "thrown." Hard choices presume deciding between competing values, competing aspects of our identity; yet the choices we make make us who we are, manifest the latent knowledge we had but didn't know we had until we were forced to decide. Abraham may not sacrifice Isaac, but the decision to the ascend the mountain cannot be undone by the sacrificing of the ram in his place. This midrashic poem is a meditation on the paradox of living in time, of both knowing and not knowing, of being the kind of people we are because of what we choose and of choosing what we do because we are the kind of people we are. *Teshuvah* presumes agency, yet the source of our agency remains, experientially and metaphysically, a matter of mystery, if not grace.

"Like a Fleeting Dream": U-netaneh Tokef, Dreams, and the Meaning of the High Holy Days

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U-netaneh Tokef is the centerpiece of the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur *Mussaf* services. It's stirring and emotional ("And let us now relate [the holiness of this day]"). Tradition has it that this prayer was authored by the medieval sage Rabbi Amnon of Mainz. Many *siddurim* and commentaries relate the famous legend of how Rabbi Ammon refused to convert to Christianity. His body was mutilated, and, before he died, Rabbi Amnon recited the *U-netaneh Tokef* prayer. Though scholars doubt the facts of Rabbi Amnon—even his existence—its reception in traditional lore makes its theme worthy of consideration.

U-netaneh Tokef touches on three major themes: God judges and determines the fate of mankind on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur; man is powerless in the face of God; God endures for all time. After its stirring declarations, the prayer bleeds into the *Kedushah* service.

A certain phrase in the middle of *U-netaneh Tokef* is striking: *ki-halom ya'uf,* as the ArtScroll editors render it, "like a fleeting dream." The phrase appears at the end of a list of analogues to man: man is compared to "a broken shard, withering grass, a fading flower," and a few other transitory and dying things. But among all of the comparisons, "a fleeting dream" is the only one that is truly invisible and intangible. Unlike the others, it exists only in the mind. It also closes out the second theme of *U-netaneh Tokef*, leaving a lasting impression on the reader before he transitions to the theme of God's greatness and eternalness.

What is the significance of "a fleeting dream," and what makes it so appropriate for a prayer that ties into Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur?

It is worth taking a look back at the legend surrounding the first recounting of the *U-netaneh Tokef* tale, leaving the debate surrounding its origins aside. The thirteenth century talmudist, Rabbi Yitzhak ben Moshe, tells the tale in his Talmudic commentary *Or Zarua* (2:276). His retelling concludes with the following:

> [R. Amnon] appeared in a night vision to our Rabbi Kalonymos … and he taught him that very *piyyut*: *U-netaneh tokef kedushat ha-yom;* and he commanded him to distribute it throughout the far reaches of the Exile, that it might be a witness and memorial to him—and the *gaon* [the sage] did so (translation, Lawrence A. Hoffman, *Who by Fire*, 26-28).

According to this, *U-netaneh Tokef* has **endured** as a part of the High Holidays liturgy because of a "**fleeting** dream." Something so transitory—a dream never lasts long, and is difficult to remember well upon awakening—brought about something that has lasted a millennium.

On the most basic level, the parallel between the story's conclusion and the prayer itself hint at the theme that dreams—as an analogue for man—could be less fleeting than they seem, even if they are infinitely less than eternal. Intangible dreams, paradoxically, can have an impact. The ideas a person gets from a dream could change his life and the lives of others, like *U-netaneh Tokef*'s impact on the Jewish people through its placement in the liturgy because, according to the story, Rabbi Kalonymos heard it in a dream.

This might be meant to hint that, similarly, man's actions—even those that seem fleeting and insignificant—can have an impact, positive or negative. A few words of gossip can ruin someone's reputation; a moment of carelessness in a store could damage hundreds of dollars of goods. A *raison d'être* of the High Holy Days is to examine those actions and repent for those which caused devastating effects.

Dreams also tie into a common Rosh Hashanah practice, albeit in an indirect way. Rabbi Moshe Isserles—the Rema)—on *Shulhan Arukh*, *Orah Hayim* 584:2, writes: "There are also those who do not sleep during Rosh Hashanah during the day, and this is the correct thing to do." In other words, it isn't right to spend the day in slumber but rather to use it for prayer, learning, and other pursuits--not for sleeping and dreaming. *Mishnah Berurah* (583:9) cites a possible source for this custom, a quote in the *Talmud Yerushalmi* (the exact location in the *Yerushalmi* is no longer extant): "One who sleeps on Rosh Hashanah, his *mazal* [luck; fortune] sleeps, [as well]." A person who takes the holy day lightly by using it for some rest is said to be doomed to a sleepy, unlucky year.

But the absence of dreams during the day of Rosh Hashanah might also be relevant.

Perhaps Rosh Hashanah and, by extension, Yom Kippur are not days for dreaming about the future. God Himself is the one who creatively deliberates our fates; as the prayer itself says, "so shall You cause to pass, count, calculate, and consider the soul of all the living; and You shall apportion the fixed need of all Your creatures and inscribe their verdict." The act of dreaming—including when it comes about by sleeping on the day of Rosh Hashanah—is also rather passive. In the midst of slumber, a person doesn't put his dream together through any sort of action. Instead, it just comes.

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are days for looking inwards, examining past deeds, and connecting with God actively—not through passive means. Dreams can be significant, but at this juncture, they are simply fleeting. Right after "like a fleeting dream," the prayer exclaims what must be done next, something far more tangible and active than a dream: "But repentance, prayer, and charity remove the evil of the decree!"

Jonah and the Varieties of Religious Motivation

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> The consolations of Religion, my beloved, can alone support you; and these you have a right to enjoy. Fly to the bosom of your God and be comforted.
> — Letter of Alexander Hamilton to Elizabeth Hamilton, 4 July 1804

> **Rust Cohle:** What do you think the average IQ of this group is, huh?
> **Marty Hart:** Can you see Texas up there on your high horse? What do you know about these people?
> **Rust Cohle:** Just observation and deduction. I see a propensity for obesity, poverty, a yen for fairy tales, folks putting what few bucks they do have into little, wicker baskets being passed around. I think it's safe to say that nobody here is gonna be splitting the atom, Marty.
> — *True Detective*, Season 1, The Locked Room

The journey towards more fervent religious life so often begins with personal turmoil. Some people turn to religion because they are lonely, some are looking to cope with feelings of mortality, while others may turn to religion in the hopes that it will serve as a respite from a broken family. As a religious educator, it is hard to ignore the gnawing feeling that the object of these people's search is not authentic spirituality, but a very, almost secular driven, emotional catharsis from the everyday pain of life. Of course, as an educator, there is a duty to remain egalitarian as to the religious motivations of those who seek counsel; but can I be faulted for noticing that so many people who are seeking religious commitment would seem to be better suited in finding simple healthy social

interactions? Does the teenager looking to make sense of her or his parents' impending divorce really need theological purpose or would she or he be better suited with the guidance of a mental health professional and a friend?

I don't think I am the first educator to develop fatigue from watching many who began with intense motivation and then slowly watch said motivation (d)evolve into either disappointment or disuse. The prime suspect, in my eyes, of such abortive entrances into religious life was often the nature and substance of the motivation that brought them there in the first place. Perhaps, I wondered, if people came to religion for the "right reasons," if such can even be said to exist, the resulting religious experience would be more fruitful.

Of course, I recognize that everyone is welcome to seek meaning where they see fit, but my frustration was couched not so much in the breadth of what motivates religiosity than by incredulity towards the religious commitment that emerges from such fleeting emotional pain. A person can surely find God after a devastating diagnosis, but what enduring sense of duty could such motivation produce? Can religious motivation devoid of theological urgency still foster lasting religious commitment? It is an uncomfortable question to ask, for who has the authority to question others' religious search, but it was a question I nonetheless found myself asking, however quietly.

I don't know if I ever found a definitive answer to my difficulties, but my frustrations were assuaged, somehow. In December of 2014 I was invited to deliver a series of classes at a weekend program for teenagers. Many of the participants would have the personal backgrounds that typically irked me in my endeavors at religious education. But, those classes changed my view on the varieties of religious motivation and experience. My classes focused on a personality, who I learned, dealt with a set of frustrations and difficulties similar to the ones with which I had been grappling. His name was Jonah.

II.

Jonah was approached by God to convince the people of Nineveh to repent and return to Him. Instead of listening, Jonah chose to run. Why did Jonah, a prophet, decide to run?

Like many biblical characters Jonah's underlying religious ethos was alluded to in his name. He was Jonah the son of Amittai, which derives from the Hebrew word *emet* – meaning truth. Jonah was a man of truth. He was not interested in religious comfort or convenience. He was not concerned with escaping the terror of death and finitude. Jonah was motivated by truth. Jonah's religiosity was founded on theological fact and doctrinal integrity.

After fleeing, Jonah found himself on a boat in a tempestuous storm. His fellow sailors began to panic. "And the mariners were afraid, and cried every man unto his god." Throughout the story the operative description of the sailors is fear. The religious motivation of the seamen was based on the impending crisis of their own mortality. Jonah, however, took a nap. He was not interested in being a prophet on this boat. The task of reminding them of repentance so as to escape death's grasp is the very job he absconded by running away from Nineveh. Jonah understood that the people on that boat were not seeking religious truth, but rather religious comfort.

After being thrown overboard in the midst of the storm, Jonah is saved from drowning by miraculously being swallowed by a fish. Inside the fish, Jonah prays and recommits himself to God, who in return ensures he is safely returned to dry land. Jonah, now seemingly reformed, agreed to return to Nineveh – which he did. The Nineveh community, hearing Jonah's exhortations to repent, promptly responded with a communal commitment to return from evil, which God just as promptly accepted.

Jonah, however, is still in pain. His outreach work still leaves him unfulfilled. He finally discloses to God why he ran:

> וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל אֶל ה' וַיֹּאמַר, אָנָּה ה' הֲלוֹא זֶה דְּבָרִי עַד הֱיוֹתִי עַל אַדְמָתִי— עַל כֵּן קִדַּמְתִּי, לִבְרֹחַ תַּרְשִׁישָׁה: כִּי יָדַעְתִּי, כִּי אַתָּה אֵל חַנּוּן וְרַחוּם, אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם וְרַב חֶסֶד, וְנִחָם עַל הָרָעָה.
>
> He prayed to God and said: Please, God, was this not my contention when I was still on my own soil? Because of this I fled towards Tarshish; for I knew that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abundant in kindness, and who relents of evil.

While Jonah clearly intends to offer an explanation as to why he ran, his justification at first glance still remains unclear. A close reader, however, will notice that Jonah invokes the opening of the familiar refrain of Moses (or God, depending on who you ask), known as the Thirteen Attributes, that are repeated throughout the High Holiday season – albeit, with one exception. The standard sequence of God's attributes that most readers are surely familiar with ends **not** with the term "*nicham al ha-ra'ah*," but rather with the term "*emet*"—truth. The word *nicham* derives from the word *nechamah*, comfort. Jonah in his aggravated description of God substitutes comfort for truth. Jonah the son of Amittai finally discloses his frustration with outreach to God. "You want to know why I ran away? Because for most people God, religion, spirituality—it's not about truth—it's about comfort."

Why did the fear of death and mortality seem to have no bearing on Jonah's religious outlook? Perhaps, it was his childhood. I Kings ch. 17, presents the story of the widow Zarephath, whose son died only to be revived by the Prophet Elijah. That son, according the Midrash, was Jonah. Death for Jonah, then, was not an abstract fear lurking in his future, but a reality he had already experienced. Having already lived through the terror of death, Jonah sought another motivation to ground his religious commitment: truth.

Jonah's concern has been articulated by many critics of religion. David Hume, in his *History of Natural Religion*, considers the concerns which motivated the advent of religion commitment. Hume, who was quite skeptical of religion, assumes that religion began not in the search for truth, but rather in a search for comfort:

> But what passion shall we here have recourse to, for explaining an effect of such mighty consequence [i.e., religion]? Not speculative curiosity surely, or the pure love of truth. That motive is too refined for such gross apprehensions; and would lead men into enquiries concerning the frame of nature, a subject too large and comprehensive for their narrow capacities. No passions, therefore, can be supposed to work upon such barbarians, but the ordinary affections of human life; the anxious concern for happiness, the dread of future misery, the terror of death, the thirst of revenge, the appetite for food and other necessaries. Agitated by hopes and fears of this nature, especially the latter, men scrutinize, with a trembling curiosity, the course of future causes, and examine the various and contrary events of human life. And

> in this disordered scene, with eyes still more disordered and astonished, they see the first obscure traces of divinity.

His pessimistic view of the underlying motivation for religion is shared by many philosophers. Ernst Becker, in his Pulitzer Prize winning book *The Denial of Death*, flatly declares that "religion solves the problem of death." No doubt, this view is best encapsulated in Karl Marx's often cited declaration that "religion is the opiate of the masses." An opiate does not bring its users truth, of course; it is a specious solution for the harsh pain of a harsh world.

Long ago, Maimonides was also concerned with this issue. In his Laws of Repentance (10:2), Rambam makes an important distinction regarding the proper motivation for religious commitment:

> Whoever serves God out of love, occupies himself with the study of the Law and the fulfillment of commandments and walks in the paths of wisdom, impelled by no external motive whatsoever, moved neither by fear of calamity nor by the desire to obtain material benefits—such a man does what is true because it is true…

The ideal form of religious commitment, according to Maimonides, is founded upon truth as opposed to the solace religion proves in the face of calamity. Of course, he readily concedes, most will never achieve such purity of motivation – but it stands as an ideal nonetheless.

In 1967, Gordon Allport wrote "Personal Religious Orientation and Prejudice," an important essay that invoked a similar dichotomy in religious motivation to that of Maimonides. According to Allport, religious motivation can be characterized based on two binary poles – intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation. He succinctly defines this scale as follows:

> Perhaps the briefest way to characterize the two poles of subjective religion is to say that the extrinsically motivated person uses his religion, whereas the intrinsically motivated lives his religion. As we shall see later, most people, if they profess religion at all, fall upon a continuum between these two poles. Seldom, if ever, does one encounter a "pure" case.

Using Maimonidean terminology, those motivated by truth could therefore be considered intrinsically motivated, while those motivated by fear of calamity or, for that matter, by social, emotional, or any other form of temporal comfort could be typified as extrinsically motivated. Thus, what plagued Jonah was his insistence on pure intrinsic motivation.

The story of Jonah can be read as the narrative of a frustrated outreach professional. As a prophet, Jonah has proclaimed God's impending wrath to wayward communities and time and again he sees them repent out of fear. Man, when confronted with his own mortality, finds comfort in the community and eternal promises offered by religion. Jonah, however, grew tired of serving as the temporal haven for man's fear of crisis and transience. If religion is only a blanket to provide warmth from the cold, harsh realities of life, did concerns of theological truth and creed even matter?

III.

What was God's response to Jonah's religious torment? The story of Jonah ends abruptly. God provides a tree for the ailing Jonah to find shade. After momentarily providing Jonah comfort, God summarily destroys the tree. Jonah is crestfallen. With the sun beating down on Jonah, he pleads for death. God, in the closing statement of the story, rebukes Jonah for becoming so attached to the comfort of the tree, while still failing to develop any empathy for the religious struggle of the people of Nineveh.

Comfort, God reminds Jonah, is a need inherent in the human condition. The comfort provided by a tree no more obscures the role of God, than the comfort that religion provides. The means through which we find solace need not obscure the ultimate source from which all comfort derives.

Christian Wiman, a noted American poet, knows that his religious motivations are looked at with suspicion. After living as an atheist for much of his teens, he rediscovered God following a bout with cancer. As he acknowledges in his brilliant collection, *My Bright Abyss: Meditations of a Modern Believer*, "[t]hat conversion often happen after or during intense life experiences, especially traumatic experiences, is sometimes used as evidence against them." As he surely was accused of himself, "The sufferer isn't in his right mind. The mind tottering at the abyss of despair or death, shudders back toward any simplicity, any coherency it can grasp, and the man calls out to God." Wiman, however, does not accept this skeptic narrative of religious motivation, "[t]o admit that there may be some psychological need informing your return to faith does not preclude or diminish the spiritual imperative any more than acknowledging the chemical aspects of sexual attraction lessens the mystery of enduring human love."

Religious motivation, however fleeting, however fearful, can still beget dignified religious commitment. Many people seek out religion, just as Jonah thousands of years ago desperately sought shade. Few, if any, are purely and intrinsically motivating by theological truth – but the story of Jonah teaches that their stories are still endowed with religious depth and significance. Perhaps this is why the story of Jonah is read on Yom Kippur. People come to synagogue for all sorts of reasons on Yom Kippur; many come only on this day. Reading the story of Jonah is an apt reminder that it doesn't matter what brought you to synagogue, be it comfort, truth, or otherwise.

Religious integrity is not determined by the door through which you enter, or even the length of your stay. Our momentary religious experiences are meaningful, regardless of their motivations or durations. So whatever brings you to prayer on Yom Kippur, know that your presence has meaning. We're glad you're here.

Yom Kippur, Fasting, and the Poor: Considering the Message of Isaiah 58

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What is Yom Kippur about? Reflexively, many of us would say "fasting," in the sense of refraining from eating and drink. But the *haftara* read on Yom Kippur, taken from Isaiah 58, gives a radically different conception of what a fast day should be, focusing on matters other than refraining from eating. This essay will take a close look at the literary artistry of Isaiah, trying to discern its literary-theological message, and considering what this tells us about fasting and Yom Kippur in general.

Isaiah 58: 1-12

קָרָא בְגָרוֹן אַל־תַּחְשֹׂךְ כַּשּׁוֹפָר הָרֵם קוֹלֶךָ וְהַגֶּד לְעַמִּי פִּשְׁעָם וּלְבֵית יַעֲקֹב חַטֹּאתָם׃

Cry with full throat, without restraint; Raise your voice like a ram's horn! Declare to My people their transgression, To the House of Jacob their sin.

וְאוֹתִי יוֹם יוֹם יִדְרֹשׁוּן וְדַעַת דְּרָכַי יֶחְפָּצוּן כְּגּוֹי אֲשֶׁר־צְדָקָה עָשָׂה וּמִשְׁפַּט אֱלֹהָיו לֹא עָזָב יִשְׁאָלוּנִי מִשְׁפְּטֵי־צֶדֶק קִרְבַת אֱלֹהִים יֶחְפָּצוּן׃

To be sure, they seek Me daily, Eager to learn My ways. Like a nation that does what is right, That has not abandoned the laws of its God, They ask Me for the right way, They are eager for the nearness of God:

לָמָּה צַמְנוּ וְלֹא רָאִיתָ עִנִּינוּ נַפְשֵׁנוּ וְלֹא תֵדָע הֵן בְּיוֹם צֹמְכֶם תִּמְצְאוּ־חֵפֶץ וְכָל־עַצְּבֵיכֶם תִּנְגֹּשׂוּ׃

"Why, when we fasted, did You not see? When we starved our bodies, did You pay no heed?" Because on your fast day You see to your business And oppress all your laborers!

הֵן לְרִיב וּמַצָּה תָּצוּמוּ וּלְהַכּוֹת בְּאֶגְרֹף רֶשַׁע לֹא־תָצוּמוּ כַּיּוֹם לְהַשְׁמִיעַ בַּמָּרוֹם קוֹלְכֶם׃

Because you fast in strife and contention, And you strike with a wicked fist! Your fasting today is not such As to make your voice heard on high.

הֲכָזֶה יִהְיֶה צ֫וֹם אֶבְחָרֵהוּ יוֹם עַנּוֹת אָדָם נַפְשׁוֹ הֲלָכֹף כְּאֲגמֹן רֹאשׁוֹ וְשַׂק וָאֵפֶר יַצִּיעַ הֲלָזֶה תִּקְרָא־צוֹם וְיוֹם רָצוֹן לַיהוָה׃

Is such the fast I desire, A day for men to starve their bodies? Is it bowing the head like a bulrush And lying in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call that a fast, A day when the LORD is favorable?

הֲלֹוא זֶה צ֫וֹם אֶבְחָרֵהוּ פַּתֵּחַ חַרְצֻבּוֹת רֶשַׁע הַתֵּר אֲגֻדּוֹת מוֹטָה וְשַׁלַּח רְצוּצִים חָפְשִׁים וְכָל־מוֹטָה תְּנַתֵּקוּ׃

No, this is the fast I desire: To unlock fetters of wickedness, And untie the cords of the yoke To let the oppressed go free; To break off every yoke.

הֲלוֹא פָרֹס לָרָעֵב לַחְמֶךָ וַעֲנִיִּים מְרוּדִים תָּבִיא בָּיִת כִּי־תִרְאֶה עָרֹם וְכִסִּיתוֹ וּמִבְּשָׂרְךָ לֹא תִתְעַלָּם׃

It is to share your bread with the hungry, And to take the wretched poor into your home; When you see the naked, to clothe him, And not to ignore your own kin.

אָז יִבָּקַע כַּשַּׁחַר אוֹרֶךָ וַאֲרֻכָתְךָ מְהֵרָה תִצְמָח וְהָלַךְ לְפָנֶיךָ צִדְקֶךָ כְּבוֹד יְהוָה יַאַסְפֶךָ׃

Then shall your light burst through like the dawn And your healing spring up quickly; Your Vindicator shall march before you, The Presence of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

אָז תִּקְרָא וַיהוָה יַעֲנֶה תְּשַׁוַּע וְיֹאמַר הִנֵּנִי אִם־תָּסִיר מִתּוֹכְךָ מוֹטָה שִׁלַּח אֶצְבַּע וְדֶבֶר־אָוֶן׃

Then, when you call, the LORD will answer; When you cry, He will say: Here I am. If you banish the yoke from your midst, The menacing hand, and evil speech,

וְתָפֵק לָרָעֵב נַפְשֶׁךָ וְנֶפֶשׁ נִעֲנָה תַּשְׂבִּיעַ וְזָרַח בַּחֹשֶׁךְ אוֹרֶךָ וַאֲפֵלָתְךָ כַּצָּהֳרָיִם׃

And you offer your compassion to the hungry And satisfy the famished creature— Then shall your light shine in darkness, And your gloom shall be like noonday.

וְנָחֲךָ יְהוָה תָּמִיד וְהִשְׂבִּיעַ בְּצַחְצָחוֹת נַפְשֶׁךָ וְעַצְמֹתֶיךָ יַחֲלִיץ וְהָיִיתָ כְּגַן רָוֶה וּכְמוֹצָא מַיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יְכַזְּבוּ מֵימָיו׃

The LORD will guide you always; He will slake your thirst in parched places And give strength to your bones. You shall be like a watered garden, Like a spring whose waters do not fail.

וּבָנוּ מִמְּךָ חָרְבוֹת עוֹלָם מוֹסְדֵי דוֹר־וָדוֹר תְּקוֹמֵם וְקֹרָא לְךָ גֹּדֵר פֶּרֶץ מְשׁוֹבֵב נְתִיבוֹת לָשָׁבֶת׃

Men from your midst shall rebuild ancient ruins, You shall restore foundations laid long ago. And you shall be called "Repairer of fallen walls, Restorer of lanes for habitation.

The charge to fast on Yom Kippur stems from the biblical phrase תענו את נפשותיכם (Lev. 16:29), usually translated as "you shall afflict/debase yourselves" but probably better construed as "you shall deny your gullet."[2] This phrase, cited several times in the Torah and clearly associated with Yom Kippur, will be the key to decoding the literary message of Isaiah 58.

Isaiah 58 comes to correct the people's severe misimpression of fast days. They saw the technical observance of the fast, namely debasing oneself and abstaining from eating, as the be all and end all of its observance. While meticulously following the ritual technicalities of fasting, they were oppressing their workers – even having them work on the fast itself! – and they failed to assist those less fortunate.

For Isaiah, however, the fast must be directed towards helping others. One is to practice self-debasement precisely in order to support others. We see this in the multiple cases of inversion that the chapter offers to the phrase ענוי נפש (self-affliction), which function on both a literary and a thematic level. The passage is uniquely constructed so as to complicate the standard understanding of mortification of flesh that people generally associate with Yom Kippur.

Rather than affliction (ענוי), the people are bidden to do the opposite: they are to feed the hungry (v. 7; הלוא פרס לרעב לחמך), and satiate the gullet (v. 11; והשביע בצחצחות נפשך). In fact, there is a charge precisely to satiate those souls that are afflicted (v. 10; ונפש ענה תשביע), the exact opposite of תענו את נפשותיכם!

Not only is the opposite of ענוי called for, but the root עני itself is redirected, as well: by punning on the root for affliction (ענוי) the text shows that it cannot be simply followed as it sounds. The poor (עני) are mentioned, but they are to be brought in (v. 7; עניים מרודים תביא בית). If one acts properly, God will respond (v. 9; אז תקרא וה' יענה), clearly a pun replacing affliction (יְעֻנָּה) with divine response (יַעֲנֶה).

Additionally, the word נפש (soul/person/gullet) is redirected in various manners. Instead of denying themselves/their gullet, the people are expected to "give themselves," i.e. their compassion, to the hungry (v. 10; ותפק לרעב נפשך), and satiate the gullet of the oppressed (v. 10; ונפש ענה תשביע), such that God will in turn satiate their gullet (v. 11; והשביע בצחצחות נפשך). The soul needs to be sated rather than oppressed.

[2] The word נפש is cognate of the Akkadian nappisu, which means throat. In the context of debasement, it seems to use the word נפש as a metonym for consumption.

The literary assault on עינוי נפש thus includes the deployment of antonyms to affliction as well as the use of both the root ע.נ.י and the noun נפש to promote the *opposite* of affliction – supporting the poor is what will cause God to respond.

These linguistic inversions are accompanied by several thematic inversions, as well. It is clear that the standard understanding of a fast, as understood by Isaiah's addresses, was to not eat or drink (see vv. 3 and 5), to wear sackcloth (v. 5) and to bow one's head and ignore one's flesh (v. 5). These practices correlate to the additional ענויים (Yom Kippur observances) familiar from the Talmud and contemporary practice – one neither eats nor drinks, afflicts one's flesh by neither washing nor applying oil, refrains from sexual activity, and practices sartorial debasement by not wearing shoes.

Yet Isaiah's account of the fast required by God inverts each of these themes:

Isaiah charges the people to eat and drink and be healthy, the opposite of the prohibitions against eating and drinking. Specifically, the people are told to feed the poor and downtrodden, to *reverse* their affliction.

The people are charged to clothe the poor, *inverting* the concept of mourning by wearing sackcloth and/or not wearing shoes.

The nation is urged "do not forsake your flesh," which clearly opposes a conception of carnal debasement. However, there is another inversion at work. This verse is understood, in various Second Temple and Rabbinic traditions, as relating to a scenario where a man would marry his niece in order to support her financially.[3] This is another counterweight to the prohibition against carnal activity for the fast day, as one is urged to consider undertaking a sexual relationship for the purpose of assisting someone in an unfortunate financial position.

The key to reading this critique is the overturning and re-directing of the fast day, accomplished through punning and re-deployment of the phrase ענוי נפש that is paradigmatic of fast days, and especially Yom Kippur.

A true fast, one God desires, will inspire those fasting to utilize the self-abnegation for the purpose of caring for those less fortunate than themselves. The failure of the people was that their fast was accompanied by doing business, and doing so on the back of others (vv. 3-4; הן ביום צמכם תמצאו חפץ, הן לריב ומצה תצומו). In doing so, they doubly missed the point – they were not truly denying themselves, and they certainly were not helping others. A successful fast, says Isaiah, must – either by reallocation of resources (v. 7; פרס לרעב לחמך) – or a reassignment of sympathies (v. 10; ותפק לרעב נפשך) – redirect one's attention from preoccupation with one's self (נפש) to concern for others. In the long run, he promises, the self-affliction (ענוי) leads to God listening (ה' יענה), and leads to ultimate self-fulfillment (והשביע בצחצחות נפשך).

Whether by redirecting food not eaten to a food pantry or becoming inspired through fasting to identify with those who are starving, Isaiah's message – equally important now as then – is that we ensure that the practices of Yom Kippur reinforce our awareness of those less fortunate and our capacity to support them. Failing to do so would mean that we have become so self-absorbed in our own affliction that we missed its point entirely.

May we all merit to internalize Isaiah's rebuke, and to fulfill the fast with its full significance!

[3] Aharon Shemesh has treated this matter in various places. See his "Scriptural Interpretations in the Damascus Document and their Parallels in Rabbinic Midrash," in *The Damascus Document: A Centennial of Discovery*, ed. J. Baumgarten (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 163-167, which cites CD 6:21-7:1, CD 8:4-8, and *Yevamot* 62b.