

How Fasting Helps Us Dream a Better Israel

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This is my ninth High Holidays leading services here at FJC, which makes this my 35th High Holidays sermon, and it's only the second time that I'm devoting an entire sermon to Israel. I know this congregation contains a multiplicity of views about Israel; I respect that diversity and generally don't seek to impose my personal views on anyone. But things in Israel have now reached a point where all of us, no matter how critical or how supportive, ought to be concerned. Renowned centrists and conservatives like Yossi Klein Halevi and Rabbi Daniel Gordis have spoken out, calling for American Jews to no longer be silent. I'm not here tonight to retrace their steps or to offer political analysis. Rather, I want to offer a spiritual perspective, through the topics of fasting and dreams. My hope is that you can hear my message regardless of your stance on Israel, and also that what I offer can speak to our personal spiritual lives as well as to the communal and political. So, here we go.

Shir Hama'alot beshuv Adonai et shivat Zion hayinu k'cholmim.

A song of ascents: When God returned us to Zion, we were like dreamers.

We sing this psalm as an introduction to *birkat hamazon*, the blessing after meals, on Shabbat and holidays. It starts out as a joyful psalm of praise and thanksgiving, and then midway through its verb tense seems to shift. From past tense, "we were like dreamers," it moves into the imperative, the verb-form of command or request—*shuvah, Adonai, et sh'viteinu*; Return us, oh God, like streams in the Negev—and from there to the future tense: those who sow in tears will reap in joy.

Commentators and bible scholars interpret this psalm in various ways, but the way I read it, this psalm situates us in an in-between period: looking back to a time of return and celebration, looking forward to another such time, in a present that is sorrowful.

I hope, when we look back on this period a few years from now, that this psalm will ring true for us when it comes to Israel. For most of us, myself included, the founding of the State of Israel and its growth and stability have been sources of great rejoicing, veritable miracles. The current government, and the campaign it has waged against democracy, is an extremely bleak place. There are other psalms I could quote you for despair or pain about what's broken. They have their place in the emotional and liturgical landscape of this moment. But I refuse to believe the dream is dashed. So long as Israelis in the pro-democracy camp hold onto hope, so must we. *Od lo avdah tikvateinu.*

This past year, I had the privilege of encountering a new Israeli movement calling itself *Smol Emuni*, the faithful left. *Smol Emuni* is a diverse group from many walks of Israeli religious life: Ashkenazi, Sefardi, and Mizrachi; Haredi and mainline Orthodox; men and women; both those who oppose the occupation and those who live in settlements. What unites them is a commitment to Jewish life and practice and to pro-democracy values. As one speaker put it, "I'm *smol*—on the left—because I'm *emuni*, faithful." *Smol Emuni* has no intention of becoming a new political party or organization. But it is for sure a banner seeking to unite the religious left against the extreme religious right that is part of this governing coalition.

In one webinar, we asked two leaders of *Smol Emuni* to teach us some of their guiding Torah. Mikhael Manekin, who used to be the Executive Director of Breaking the Silence, taught us a snippet from *Reshit Chochmah*, a 16th century Kabbalistic and ethical text. Book three of *Reshit Chochmah* is all about teshuvah, repentance. After establishing that fasting is a key

component of or vehicle for teshuvah, the author posits: It's not that fasting is beneficial in and of itself. Rather, being overly full—perhaps we might translate, when we are spoiled, gluttoned—is a spiritual malady that leads us to sin, and so fasting helps us escape that state, even for just 25 hours.

Before I go any further, let's be really clear about a few things. First, while fasting is a traditional observance of Yom Kippur, we know that many people aren't able to, for reasons ranging from pregnancy to mental health and eating disorders to diabetes and more. If fasting is unhealthy for you, it is in fact a mitzvah not to fast, to prioritize your health. Second, this line of inquiry about the dangers of being over-full is not about valorizing hunger. There is no benefit, spiritual or otherwise, to being food insecure, which is a crisis in this country of epic proportions. That's why I offer the translation "spoiled, gluttoned" instead of full or satiated. There is a difference between having our needs met and gratifying every single whim. Finally, this is also not about the size and shape of anyone's body, not about fat vs. thin. The shape of our bodies does not indicate anything about our virtue or our worth as human beings.

So if I'm not saying any of those three things, what am I saying? Remember, this is me channeling Michael channeling the *Reshit Chochmah* channeling the Torah's view of how our appetites affect our behavior. When we gorge ourselves, we feel full of power, as if there's no reason for us to be cautious. We feel like what we have consumed was our rightful due, not something we worked hard for or were privileged to receive; this makes us feel self-important, like we are special and more worthy than others around us. We feel no constraints on our behavior, like we can take whatever we want—which leads us to want more and more and more. In the *Reshit Chochmah's* concise summary, "As a result of eating, the heart becomes prideful and comes to rebel."

The *Reshit Chochmah* grounds this psychology in two examples from the Torah. After the Israelites built the the Golden Calf, we read, "They sat down to eat and drink, and they got up *letzachek*"—a word that carries connotations of licentiousness, wild abandon, and definitely sin. And in Deuteronomy, the text we recite as the second paragraph of Shma, he lifts up how verses 15 and 16 abut each other. *V'natati essev b'sadcha livhemtecha, v'achalta v'savata. Hishamru lachem pen yifteh levavchem...* God says, "I will give you grass in the fields for your animals, and you shall eat and be satisfied. Take care, not to be lured away to serve other gods and bow to them." In both cases, sin immediately follows eating. Oddly, he doesn't bring what I think is an even more obvious proof-text, from parshat Vayelech, which we read just two weeks ago. God says: "When I bring them into the land flowing with milk and honey that I promised on oath to their fathers, and they eat their fill and grow spoiled, [they will] turn to other gods and serve them, spurning Me and breaking My covenant." (Deut. 31:20) This seems like a direct link in biblical morality, and Mikhael related it to the emotional and spiritual state of the current Israeli government: Having gained power by the narrowest of margins, they are not humble but prideful, seeking to subvert and deform the system to entrench and extend their power.

To follow the *Reshit Chochmah's* teaching back to Yom Kippur and our personal lives, fasting helps blunt this impulse because it reminds us of our limitations. It reminds us that others are hungry and don't have what we have. It awakens our compassion and dampens our hubris. It is not an act of self-flagellation—suffering is not the point—but rather a way to connect with the vulnerable outside of ourselves, and by extension those vulnerable aspects inside ourselves.

One of those vulnerable parts of our inner being is our ability to dream big dreams. Despair can sap our capacity to think big, or to hold onto the ideas and ideals that brought us to a certain place. That brings me to the second teacher from that *Smol Emuni* webinar, a woman named

Limor Yaakov Safrai. She taught a short modern text about educational philosophy, written by Moshe Unna, a religious Zionist kibbutz leader in the mid-20th century. The specifics of the text are secondary for my purpose tonight. What moved me more was the broader context in which Limor situated it. She reminded us that the religious Zionist kibbutz movement had as its two founding pillars Torah and socialism. Its dream was to build both a more perfect society and a more perfect Torah—because they believed Jewish law would inevitably evolve in the new context of sovereignty and social majority. Alas, that movement has become much more politically conservative, concerned less with building a perfect society than with securing rights for Orthodox Jews. That is a sad shift, for me, but it was refreshing to remember that original spark of creativity, of dreaming, and to wonder how that vitality might be reclaimed in a better Israeli future. *Shuvah, Adonai, et sh'viteinu*. Return us, Oh God, to our founding visions.

And I have to pause here to offer another caveat, that of course the founding of the State of Israel was not neat and clean. Real harm was done to Palestinians; real wrongs were committed by Jews. That, too, is a different d'var Torah. My purpose tonight is to direct us to a middle path. We are morally obligated not to turn a blind eye to the current Israeli government's rampage, not to pretend that everything is fine and we are still living the dream. But we are equally compelled not to turn away in frustration, not forget the dream or lose sight of it amidst all the ways the reality has hurt us and others. Those are the two dominant messages about Israel in the US today. From the right we hear that everything is normal in Israel, the only democracy in the Middle East, America's greatest friend. From the left we hear that it is an evil, imperialist power. We have to reject that false choice. We have to face the reality of a slide towards authoritarianism while also holding onto the dream of a Jewish social democracy.

And this is also true on the individual level, of our personal teshuvah. We cannot afford the luxury of thinking we are already the best versions of ourselves, that we have no teshuvah to do. But we also cannot afford to wallow in self-flagellation, to forget our visions of our best selves. Those visions of who we wish to be are our North Star, our guidance for growth. If we lose sight of them or give up on them because they seem unattainable, we become stuck as who we are now.

What gives me hope in this moment? I turn for inspiration to the prophet Joel, whose words I know best from Debbie Friedman's musical setting: "And the old shall dream dreams, and the youth shall see visions, and our hopes shall rise up to the skies." Here is the more precise academic translation of Joel (3:1):

After that,
I will pour out My spirit on all flesh;
Your sons and daughters shall prophesy;
Your elders shall dream dreams (Hebrew: *chalomot*),
And your youths shall see visions (Hebrew: *chazon*).

On the first half of the verse, I love that this ancient prophet mentions sons and daughters in the same breath; prophecy is not the province just of one gender. On the second half, Malbim, the 19th century Eastern European commentator, asks why Joel uses two different words for prophecy, *chalom* and *chazon*. He interprets this as not simply literary parallelism; he says *chazon*, vision, is a higher level of prophecy than *chalom*, dreams. Now, I'm not taking this distinction between elders and youth literally, because both age groups appear across the political spectrum. I certainly look up to progressive elders who have been lovingly calling Israel to task since before I was born. But let us read Joel's distinction as if it applies to time periods. Our preexisting ways of doing things, the old dreams and ideas, resulted from a lower form of prophecy. What is being born now, new ways of approaching old problems, are *chazon*, a higher level more tuned in to divine inspiration, and maybe they can point to new solutions.

To quote Joni Mitchell in “Circle Game,” “There’ll be new dreams, maybe better dreams and plenty.”

Or, to say the same thing in the words of *Shir HaMa’alot*:

Hazor'im b'bimah berinah yiktzoru.

Those who sow in tears—as Israel’s pro-democracy movement is doing now—will one day reap the fruits of their labors in joy.