

## **Food (Yom Kippur 5783, Adas Yeshurun Congregation)**

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It's approaching noon on Yom Kippur. I have a sneaking suspicion that many of us are thinking about food right now...

My elementary school teachers taught me that on Yom Kippur, we pretend to be angels. In many communities, it's customary for everyone to wear white, the color of the angels. Like angels, we spend much of our day in prayer—and we don't eat. Over the years, though, I've come to realize that Yom Kippur isn't just about behaving like angels. More importantly, it's about behaving like humans—and, specifically, like Jews. We're human, so we get tired of praying. We're human, so we get hungry. We're Jewish, so of course we spend the holiest day of the year thinking about food!

I'll get back to that in a few minutes. First, I want to address a different misconception regarding Yom Kippur. Today isn't just about acting like angels, and it's also not just about thinking of ourselves as individuals. Yes, Yom Kippur is a time for personal introspection, for *teshuvah*. That dimension of Yom Kippur has, if anything, become increasingly prominent in today's individualistic society. More importantly, Yom Kippur is a time to remember our obligations to one another, our communal and societal responsibilities. The Torah and haftarah portions we read this morning offer a vision of those obligations and of how our society should address them.

From a modern perspective, of course, the Torah has a funny way of addressing communal and societal responsibilities. This morning's reading described the sacrificial rituals that the high priest performed on Yom Kippur to purify the shrine. What does that have to do

with our obligations to one another? Everything, once we come to understand the worldview expressed in the Torah.

Leviticus teaches that God's presence dwelt in the shrine, providing for the People of Israel and protecting them from powerful surrounding nations. Israelites believed that whenever a member of their society acted immorally, the figurative stain associated with that sin defiled not only the individual but also the communal shrine. This posed a severe problem, because God abhors immorality. If too much defilement built up in the shrine, God would withdraw the divine presence from the community, with disastrous results. One biblical scholar aptly compares the Temple to a nuclear power plant: the energy it provides benefits everyone, but if too many impurities build up inside the reactor, catastrophe awaits. The job of the priests, like that of power plant technicians, is to keep the reactor functioning properly. Yom Kippur was the day designated for cleansing the shrine, especially the holy of holies, from the impurities generated by personal wrongdoings.

The Yom Kippur Torah reading reminds us that no one is fully in control of her or his own fate: we're all affected by the actions of others, and for that reason we're all accountable to one another. Not only that, we all rely on professionals to do jobs that are too big or complicated for any individual. In effect, the Torah depicts the priests as attending to some of the most fundamental responsibilities of government: infrastructure and national defense. Leviticus also presumes a robust criminal justice system to deter and discipline wrongdoers. These are tasks that can only be performed by specially trained and authorized personnel. Our Torah reading reminds us, especially in this election year, of the degree to which we all depend on government services.

Because of its focus on what we might call government responsibilities, this morning's Torah reading has little to say about what the average person should do on Yom Kippur. On the basis of Leviticus alone, one might think that all we have to do is abstain from work and afflict ourselves through fasting and other acts of contrition. The prophet Isaiah disabuses us of this notion with his stirring vision of what this day is all about.

Isaiah complements the ritual focus of Leviticus with an emphasis on ethics. It's not enough to fast or pray or wear sackcloth, Isaiah cries in the name of God. "No, this is the fast I desire: To loose the bonds of injustice and untie the cords of lawlessness; to let the oppressed go free and break off every yoke. 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 them, ומבשרך לא תתעלם."

I left Isaiah's climactic phrase untranslated because the Hebrew is too rich for a single English equivalent. The key word is בשרך, "your flesh." This word alludes to the kinship that binds all Israelites and, indeed, all humans; on that reading, God enjoins us "do not ignore your own kin." בשרך also refers to our common human predicament. We aren't angels: we all have bodies with the same basic physical needs. ומבשרך לא תתעלם: "Do not ignore your own body," God declares. You know how much you need food, shelter, and clothing, so be sure that everyone in your society has access to these basic resources. I suspect that Isaiah also calls to mind a third meaning of בשרך, namely "the meat that you eat." The average Israelite didn't consume much meat during the year, but it was a staple of holiday celebrations. The rabbis taught that even those who rely on the community's food assistance programs deserve to eat meat on these occasions.

The hunger we experience today is a form of self-affliction, meaningful precisely because we know we could eat if we wanted to. Many in our community, however, can't say the same thing. Here in Maine, according to the state's recently published Roadmap to End Hunger by 2030, one in eight people—including one in five kids—are regularly hungry or at risk of hunger. This means that children show up to school too hungry to learn, workers are too economically insecure to thrive, and people of all ages must contend with entirely preventable ill health.

For the past several months, teams of Colby students have partnered with local food banks, soup kitchens, and related organizations to help them more fully realize their missions to support community members in need. The root problem, they've come to realize, isn't a shortage of food: there's plenty to go around. One of the biggest challenges in the Waterville area is transportation: getting food to distribution sites and, especially, getting it from those sites to the people who need it. This summer, students helped a local food bank secure the grant funding it needed to purchase refrigerated trailers that will bring food to housing complexes and smaller food pantries in neighboring towns. This fall, among other projects, students are exploring ways in which the Doordash restaurant delivery service might help get food to individual households.

More importantly, my students have come to recognize that the challenge of addressing hunger in our community isn't purely a technical one that can be solved with improved technology or logistics. To be effective, food distribution programs need to do more than distribute food: they need to foster the dignity of the people who receive it. Kids at the local youth center, for example, wouldn't take backpacks of food home over the weekend, even if they knew they would go hungry, because they didn't want to be seen carrying those backpacks. Maine's new School Meals for All program is important not only because it plugs gaps in the old eligibility system but also because it removes the stigma associated with receiving free food.

One of our state's most effective nonprofit organizations in terms of providing food with dignity is right here in the Midcoast: Rockland's AIO, which Adas Yeshurun has long supported. What makes the AIO Market special is that it's designed to feel like the supermarkets many of us take for granted. Customers with their own shopping carts select their own food, taking as much as their family needs. Options include fresh produce from local farms and prepared foods from top-tier bakeries, coffee shops, and restaurants. Joe Ryan, AIO's executive director, told my students that his goal is to create a market that everyone in Knox County would want to use so that no one feels ashamed to be there.

There are so many ways each of us can address hunger within our community. Charitable contributions matter, whether in the form of canned and dried foods or, better yet, financial donations: food pantries have far more purchasing power than we do as individuals. Volunteering is even more important. You can help Adas Yeshurun prepare and serve meals each month at Rockland's soup kitchen—just speak with Linda Garson Smith. You can volunteer at AIO—I'm sure Mitch Kihn would be happy to help you get started. For those who don't live in Rockland, you can get involved in a pantry or meals program closer to your own home. Providing food in a dignified fashion is an especially important responsibility, and it's also a very Jewish way to express concern for another person.

Our *machzor* emphasizes that *tzedakah*—contributions of money, time, and effort to improve the lives of others—has the ability to transform the harshness of our fate. To transform society so that everyone has the food they need to thrive, however, we can't rely solely on *tzedakah*: we need our government to play a major role as well. The Torah and the Jewish tradition are emphatic in their insistence that the responsibilities of government encompass not only national defense and infrastructure but also maintaining a basic social safety net. Whenever

Jews lived in autonomous communities, they levied taxes on community members so as to provide food for the needy in their midst. Federal and state programs have been crucial to reducing hunger, especially during the pandemic years, and it's important that we express our support for continued efforts on this front, both in this election year and beyond.

ומבשרך לא תתעלם. Yom Kippur prompts us to feel the needs of our own bodies, to empathize with the needs of others, and to appreciate the value of dignified access to food. It calls us to recognize our personal obligations and to engage politically so that our government continues to fulfill our collective social responsibilities. Yom Kippur is a day to think about food. The days to come, including next week's harvest festival of Sukkot and next month's harvest festival of Thanksgiving, provide opportunities to take action to reduce food insecurity in our community. As Isaiah declared, "When 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. God will guide you always, satisfying your thirst in parched places and making your bones strong. You shall be like a watered garden, like a spring whose waters do not fail." So may it be for all of us.