

# Why We Fast On Yom Kippur

Contributed by [Pardes](#).

Source: Rabbi Zvi Hirschfield, Pardes

Fasting on Yom Kippur is not as obvious as one might think. Nowhere does the Torah explicitly command it. Instead, the verses teach us to “afflict ourselves” without defining the nature of this “affliction.”

We do know that Yom Kippur is about atonement and forgiveness. So how does “afflicting” ourselves through fasting relate to *teshuva*? Many assume that fasting is a form of self-punishment, a way of balancing the scales for over-indulgence or rule-breaking. The pietists of medieval Ashkenaz called this *teshuvat hamishkal*, literally repentance of balance. The pleasure brought by sin must be accounted for and balanced by physical discomfort. But this does not connect fasting to the personal growth and psychological transformation.

In his commentary on Leviticus, the Abravanel (1437-1508, Portugal) connects fasting to our capacity to be like angels. When we abstain from food and water we demonstrate our spiritual identities. As another medieval commentator noted, when we fast our bodies are afflicted, but our souls rejoice. I find the sharp dualism hard to connect with. I do not conceive of myself as a good, pure soul in constant conflict with and chained to a corrupt, sinning body. I find an integrated identity more relevant.

The Talmud alludes to another approach that I find to be the most helpful. In the section dealing with fasting, the rabbis note that Yom Kippur is referred to as a *shabbaton*, a day of rest. From this perspective, when we abstain from eating and drinking, we are actually “resting” or “pausing” from these activities. The discomfort we feel on Yom Kippur is not a direct result of the absence of physical pleasure but rather, from the psychic and spiritual pain brought on by sin.

When we act in ways that betray our inner goodness and contradict the essence of who we are as beings in relationship with God and each other, our souls are in pain. While this pain is always present, many of us ignore it, cover it up, or distract ourselves with physical pleasure.

On Yom Kippur we “rest” from these distractions and allow the “affliction” in our hearts (from pain caused, opportunities missed, and alienation from our best selves) to be fully experienced and felt. This type of affliction can then push us towards growth, forgiveness and transformation!

Rabbi Zvi Hirschfield teaches Talmud, Halakha and Jewish Thought.

From “The Pardes Companion to Yom Kippur”: <http://elmad.pardes.org/2016/09/the-pardes-companion-to-yom-kippur/>