

Nesiya High Holiday Study Guide 5772/2011
Social Justice: Far Away and Close By

Like a Source Whose Waters Never Fail

"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... 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. 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? No, this is the fast I desire: To unlock the fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free... 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. 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. 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, 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. 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 fully watered garden, like a source of water whose waters never fail. Men from your midst shall rebuild ancient ruins, you shall restore foundations laid long ago.

– *From the Yom Kippur Haftarah, Isaiah 58:5-12*

Making Miracles

A story is told of our wise Rebbe, Baal haTanya: On Yom Kippur Eve, after he had wrapped himself in his *tallit* and readied himself with holy devotion to begin the Kol Nidre prayer, he abruptly removed his *tallit* and hastily exited the synagogue. No one succeeded in running after him to see where he was going, except one youth, who followed him without his noticing. The youth observed and related this story:

A light snow was falling and a freezing wind blew. The Rebbe passed from alleyway to alleyway until he reached a tiny home on the edge of the city. In the dilapidated house, which seemed about to topple over, lived a sickly young widow who was cared for by two small children. Quickly the *tzaddik* grasped an old axe which was in the yard and began chopping wood in order to light a fire in the empty hearth. The sun was already setting, Yom Kippur was beginning, and Jews in every synagogue were already standing in prayer – except the Rebbe. As the youth peered through the window, he was astounded to see how swiftly the *tzaddik* chopped vegetables for soup, and how he set the pot on the stove.

"May you have a good and sweet year," the Rebbe blessed the widow, who was so overwhelmed with happiness that she couldn't find words to thank this strange man for the miracle that had happened to her.

But we know that this was no miracle. Someone remembered why and for what purpose we truly fast on Yom Kippur.

– *Hasidic Tale*

This is the Fast I Choose

On your fast day you wear clothes that were made by Chinese prisoners, and shoes that were cried over by terrified children in loathsome sweatshops, and the books you hold in your hands are filthy with the tears of dying forests... The fast I want is one that will inspire you to share your food with the hungry, to redistribute the wealth of this land fairly, to build affordable housing for the homeless, and to welcome back the people you have thrown out of your hearts, even the ones in your own family.

– *Rabbi Shefa Gold, Interpretation of Isaiah 58*

Nesiya Thoughts

The verses in the Torah about Yom Kippur tell us that the goals of the day are atonement and purification, but they don't reveal how we are supposed to achieve them. The Yom Kippur Haftarah reading, however, leaves little room for doubt: our fast needs to lead to acts of social responsibility and justice. The Haftarah's central message is that we must sacrifice that which is pleasant and enjoyable in order to fulfill the needs of the downtrodden and vulnerable – both those who are strangers and those within our own families.

The prophet Isaiah criticizes those who transform the fast from a means to an end. The fast that God chooses, according to the prophet, is one that leads to dramatic acts of giving and heightened responsibility in several realms: the world, the Jewish people, and our own families. He wants us to free the captives, to feed the hungry, to find homes and food for the poor.

Isaiah also reminds us that when we act passionately on behalf of others, we must not forget those closest to us: "When you see the naked, clothe him, and do not ignore your own kin." Isaiah emphasizes that it is not just the physical signs of oppression and weakness which we must address, but also the ways we relate to one another: we must "banish... the menacing hand and evil speech" from our midst. Some commentators understand the "menacing hand" as the tendency to blame others, and evil speech seems obviously to refer to malicious gossip.

Isaiah teaches us that real spiritual growth requires us to make changes both in the outside world and within ourselves, and that the results should benefit those far away, with whom we have no daily or easy ties – as well as those who are close by, within our own families and community.

When we fast, we recognize that we are limited and imperfect vessels, dependent on forces greater than ourselves. Through fasting, we also experience the lack and distress that others experience daily. Isaiah challenges us to translate this acknowledgement of our limitations into giving. This giving, which is grounded in our personal identification with others, connects us to an infinite cycle: seeing ourselves as lacking leads to an awareness of receiving blessings which, in turn, leads to a desire to give.

Isaiah encourages us with the promise of a paradoxical reward. By strengthening our moral sensitivity and by taking responsibility for others, we develop both our own well-being and a boundless capacity to give more and more. Isaiah promises that if we direct our fast toward giving, our "light will shine in darkness" and we will become "like fully watered gardens, like a source of water whose waters never fail." If we take care of others, we ourselves will become continuous sources of life and blessing.

Questions for Reflection

- When is the last time I gave something, and ended up feeling that it was ultimately I who received a gift?
- Which of my limitations teaches me about my dependence on someone else?
- I have been blessed with different forms of material and spiritual abundance. Of all this abundance, what can I grant to someone else – and to whom?
- What is the relationship in my life between giving to those "far away" and giving to those "close by"? Which is easier for me?