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Guest Columnist: My Yom Kippur

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Since beginning treatment for a life-threatening medical condition, my 'posek' has consistently ruled that I should not fast.

As a young boy approaching my bar mitzva, I looked forward to various perks to which my entry into Jewish adulthood would entitle me. Most prominent, perhaps, was becoming obligated in the mitzva of wearing tefillin.

Then there was the opportunity to be counted as a member of a minyan and to be called to the Torah for an aliya. There was also the privilege of being counted as part of a *mezuman* (quorum) for *bentching* or, better yet, to actually lead the Grace after Meals.

And then there was fasting. There are six fasts in the Jewish calendar, which are observed with varying degrees of stringency. For most people, it is not easy going without food and drink for 25 hours or so, as is required on a major fast. Even fasting from dawn to dusk, as is the case with minor fasts, can be uncomfortable. While, as a child, there was a certain pride to be felt on fasts in going without eating for increasingly longer periods of time, there was at the same time some dread associated with reaching an age when it was no longer voluntary but mandatory to do so. And so fasting was one aspect of reaching the age of majority that filled me with ambivalence.

Nevertheless, a committed Jew does what he is obligated to do, as best he can. After bar mitzva I fasted when the calendar called for it. At first, it seemed a challenge – a dare almost – and, because I had a

younger, stronger physical constitution, it usually did not impact me much.

And yet I found that as I aged, I began to notice things about how I responded to fasting. I started to suffer from headaches, sometimes migraines, which were brought on by, among other things, a lack of food or drink.

Also, I found myself experiencing anxiety before the onset of a fast. Although once a fast began, I could take comfort in counting down the amount of time remaining until I could eat, I grew to fear the six- to 12-hour period prior to the commencement of a fast because I was afraid I'd begin the fast in a hunger or thirst and would then have to suffer the next 24 or so hours in agony until I could eat or drink again. Not that I'd ever really had this experience, but it seemed such a real possibility that it would plague me, like clockwork, every time a fast neared.

Still, I fasted, except on the rare occasion where my physical condition was compromised enough that I received a dispensation from my posek – halachic authority – not to.

Approximately two and half years ago, I was diagnosed with a life-threatening medical condition. I underwent surgery, followed by an intensive treatment that steadily weakened me. Since I began treatment, my posek has consistently ruled that I should not fast. His dispensations even include Yom Kippur, the strictest of all fasts, and one for which many individuals who would otherwise receive a dispensation must still fast.

ONE MIGHT surmise that given my recent history with fasting, the halachic rulings I've been given might secretly come as a relief, and the truth is, on a certain level, I do find that the fact that I am not required to fast does make life a bit easier, at least for those six days of the year.

And yet, this dispensation has, in its own way, engendered a new anxiety that relates to the very reasons we go without eating on those days. Four of the six fasts (the Fast of Gedalia, the 10th of Tevet, the 17th of Tamuz and the culmination of it all, Tisha Be'av) constitute a cycle commemorating our collective Jewish catastrophe of the destruction of our holy Temples. Regarding these fasts, the Talmud tells us that one who mourns on account of the destruction of Jerusalem (i.e., the Temple) will merit seeing its joy when it is rebuilt (*Ta'anit* 30a). In instituting this set of fasts, the sages imposed a shared responsibility on all Jews to mark milestone national tragedies and to experience them together.

In a similar vein, the fifth fast, the Fast of Esther, marks the mortal risk the Jews undertook in going to battle

against their genocidal enemies during the time of the Purim story. Thus, this fast, too, is at least in part designed to generate the sense of unity and shared purpose and fate that is part of being a committed Jew.

With regard to these five fasts, then, the effect of my dispensation has been to exempt me from sharing in my brothers' lot. That's not to say that I don't understand why I have received this dispensation; after all, how can I meaningfully share with my fellow Jews in our plight when my fasting imperils my health? Nevertheless, I have to say that it is not an entirely comfortable feeling to know that my condition allows me to avoid this collective responsibility.

Then there is the matter of the sixth and arguably most important fast, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. If the other five fasts stand for an obligation to recall and mourn our national historical experiences together, Yom Kippur, especially as it has been experienced since the destruction of our Temples, has an intensely personal feeling to it (although, at the same time, we do confess (e.g., *ashamnu, al het*) in the plural, which perhaps expresses the sentiment of "*kol Yisrael areivim zeh baze*h," the idea that we are responsible for each others' actions.

The fasting on Yom Kippur is meant to convey, on one level, the seriousness with which we take our duty to seek atonement. It is characterized as an "affliction" that we each take upon ourselves – one of five, actually, including prohibitions on washing, wearing leather shoes, anointing oneself with creams and marital relations – in our quest for forgiveness of our own individual transgressions.

Along these lines, I think of Hillel's maxim in *Pirkei Avot* (1:14): "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" In the context of fasting on Yom Kippur, it is a question I ask myself: If I cannot demonstrate my seriousness about my spiritual state and my acknowledgment that I require and indeed desire forgiveness for my sins – expressed in part by observing these prescribed afflictions – who will do so for me in my stead? Again, I understand my exemption, which in its own way also reflects Hillel's saying. If I am not allowed to eat and maintain my health under potentially life-threatening circumstances, how will I be in a position to better serve my Creator? Nevertheless, after a lifetime of fasting, it feels strange not to.

Ultimately, I'm working on coming to terms with my dispensation, just as I continue to work on accepting my medical condition. The nature of Judaism is not to impose unrealistic limits on those who cannot be expected, for justifiable reasons, to abide by them. In fact, my responsibility to foster my recuperation is so important that my dispensation is not voluntary, but rather a ruling I must honor – i.e., I do not have the option of choosing to fast if I feel like it, without consulting my posek – in recognition of the fact that he

understands what is required (or not required, as the case may be) of me to best fulfill my spiritual potential in this world.

My brother recently related to me a story he heard from Rabbi Simcha Hakohen Kook. There was an observant Jewish doctor in early 20th-century Jerusalem who treated many of the city's rabbis. On one occasion, a rabbi from the Lithuanian yeshiva community visited the doctor around the time of the High Holy Days to discuss his health. After the doctor examined the rabbi, he informed him that he would have to eat on Yom Kippur. The rabbi did not take the news well; he grew sad and wept because he would not be able to observe the mitzva of fasting on the holiest day of the year.

In another instance, a hassidic rebbe came to the doctor, and, upon examination he, too, was told that he would not be able to fast on Yom Kippur. The rebbe, though, did not react to this news as had the *Litvish* rabbi. Rather, he danced and exclaimed that the same God who had commanded him to fast on Yom Kippur was now "commanding" him to eat. Just as the the rebbe had been overjoyed to follow the commandment not to eat, he would now happily comply with the commandment to eat.

Certainly, the responses of both the rabbi and the rebbe were appropriate. Rather, the difference between them reflects the focus of the paths that distinguish the Lithuanian approach to serving God from that of Hassidism. Still, though both reactions were valid, I have found that for me the more joyous approach of the hassidic rebbe is the one I aspire to emulate in order to maintain a positive outlook during this period of my life. And that need for optimism helps me in this specific area of Judaism where I have been searching to understand and come to terms – and ultimately to get to the level where I rejoice – in this ruling, which reflects God's apparent desire that I not fast on Yom Kippur, Tisha Be'av and all of the public fasts that most adult Jews are required to observe.

So it has come to this: I seek God's mercy in restoring my health, on behalf of myself and all those who depend on me, as well as those concerned about my welfare. And what is one way that I quantify this desire? By simply praying that I once again be granted health so that I am able to go without food in the service of my faith. And that I can achieve the strength of character to observe Yom Kippur in joy, and every other fast in the appropriate frame of mind, whether I fast or not.



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