

Concentrating the mind on what matters

WRITTEN BY
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A common explanation as to why the Torah commands us to afflict ourselves on Yom Kippur is that we are to engage in an act of self-mortification. It is meant to be a penance, symbolizing self-punishment, to impress upon us our sinfulness, and thus bring to our awareness our great need for repentance and forgiveness.

There is also a substantially different, more subtle view, which holds that the material deprivations to which we subject ourselves serve essentially as a means to make us mindful of our essentially spiritual nature: to focus attention on our ability to activate the dormant extramundane dimension of our true selves. This important aspect of Yom Kippur is in need of elabora-

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tion, since it is not so commonly known. In fact, the more usual sentiment heard on Yom Kippur, even by fairly well intentioned and observant individuals, is that much of their time is spent on trying to resist the persistent demands of the body, and their powers of concentration are spent on

merely trying to keep up with the Baal Tefillah.

Some time ago a colleague of mine who works in another department of the university had a very severe toothache. Because of his irrational dread of all dental treatment he kept postponing his visit to the dentist. During this period of agony my friend received a proposal to write an evaluation of a certain project. The deadline for submitting his detailed opinion was set very close, but the honorarium offered was colossal relative to his modest circumstances. He not only accepted the assignment but at once began an intense study of several dozen articles on the subject matter. He ran to the library to make photocopies of dozens more essays, made many phone calls asking to interview several experts in the field, and instead of going home at around 5. pm, he stayed in his office feverishly typing preliminary notes until way past midnight. The interesting feature of this episode was that for several hours at least, my acquaintance ceased to experience any pain. His was an instance of a not so uncommon phenomenon, whereby a person may become so absorbed in an intellectual undertaking, completely focusing all his mental resources, that there is just no part of his mind left with which to take notice of anything else. I may add, that the infection did not disappear, and the next day his pain returned, and he picked up enough courage to visit his dentist. This is but a minor illustration of the human capacity to transcend, at least temporally, physical pain.

Often total immersion in the world of



ABOVE AND RIGHT ILLUSTRATIONS BY HAIM SHERFF

thoughts to the exclusion of everything else, can become a permanent condition. A person may even become oblivious to matters that should be of interest to him, but the loss incurred is usually negligible when measured against the great benefits of complete concentration.

There is a fairly well known anecdote concerning the mathematical-physicist, Nobel Laureate, Eugene Wigner, who

spent one year visiting Harvard. One of the graduate students was very keen on meeting the great man but was hesitant to approach him because the latter always seemed to be engrossed in deep thoughts. One day the student saw the famous professor in the local post office. However, he



still didn't feel comfortable about approaching his hero, since the latter seemed engaged in an immense inner struggle: his face was in deep contortion, and he kept slapping his forehead, while running up and down the hall, showing all the obvious signs of the birth-pangs which precede the production of a major new idea. After a minute or so of this, Wigner collided with our student who apologetically exclaimed, "I am terribly sorry Professor Wigner." This at once elicited a triumphant cry by the latter, "Of Course? Wigner!" which he quickly wrote down on an envelope under the words SENDER'S NAME.

Many people have had a good time with this joke. What a ludicrous thing; to forget your own name! But Wigner was not a laughable individual. He was one of the physicists who helped to warn Roosevelt about the dangers of the atomic bomb

being made by the Germans; he made many important contributions to nuclear physics, and of course, the 'Wigner effect' is named after him. If his great achievements demanded the price of such concentrated thought as to leave no room even for the most familiar thoughts, then surely it was worth it.

Another great man, Abraham Fraenkel, was a professor of mathematics in the Hebrew University; a world authority on set theory, remembered for the Fraenkel Zermelo theorem. He happened to be a strictly Shomer Mitzvoh. One day on his way home from the university, he was so deeply engrossed in a difficult mathematical problem that he was unable to recall the number of the apartment in which he lived. He searched his pocket for some clue from which he might infer that elusive number, but in vain. Almost on the verge of despair, he noticed a little boy playing at the side of the road. The Professor was aware that he was a fairly well-known personage around Jerusalem, thus he ventured to accost the boy, saying "Young man do you by any chance know where Professor Fraenkel lives?" To which the boy, visibly astonished, replied, "Of course Daddy, why would I not know where we live?"

The last two were, of course, unusual examples involving extraordinary individuals. Still, all of us have witnessed the kind of phenomenon they illustrate to one degree or another. All of us have observed people deeply enough enveloped in some highly motivating intellectual pursuit so as to become oblivious to the more humdrum aspects of existence. And it is not too astonishing to discover that when one's whole being ascends to the more elevated plain of abstract thought one has raised the mind to a level beyond the reach of at least some of the mundane concerns and worries of this world. Now spirit is supposed to dwell above the abode of the intellect, and thus a genuinely devout individual may be expected to be even more out of the reach of many of the transient trials and vexations which are so much a part of ordinary, everyday lives.

Prayer is a paradigm example for our purposes. Petitionary prayer is not designed to change the Al-mighty's mind to do for us what He did not want to do earlier. Rather it is an act of worship bringing the supplicant closer to the Divine. An individual who prays with full concentration of the mind may be granted the favor he requested on account of the fact that due to

the transformation he has undergone during prayer, he now deserves it (a view held by the 11th century thinker Bahya ibn Pakuda), or he may cease to feel the need for it because he has reached a higher level of aspiration. On the nature of the required concentration we have, among others, the saying of the Parsischer Rebbe, "Do you wish to know what is proper prayer? When you are so engrossed that you do not feel a knife thrust in your body, then you are offering a right prayer." The Parsischer Rebbe is, of course, referring to the ideal, but many individuals have been known to achieve sufficiently elevated states for their spirits to conquer their material selves.

Reb Zusia was an individual who was known to have been completely consumed by spiritual concerns. He was also known

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to have had many misfortunes; he was very poor, suffered many ailments. Yet he always seemed to be in good spirits. Two Chassidim, who had suffered a catastrophic financial setback, in consequence of which they sunk into deep despair, decided to visit Reb Zusia to seek his advice. "How is it humanly possible to endure major calamities and remain cheerful (as indeed the Talmud bids us to do)? We tried hard, and find ourselves incapable of overcoming our anguish." To which the Rebbe whose afflictions were plentiful, replied, "I am sorry I am unable to help you, simply because I am unqualified to do so. You must seek advice elsewhere: I, thanks to the Al-mighty, have never experienced any suffering." The two Chassidim did, of course, not need to consult anybody else; they had just been given the best possible answer: a man like Rebbe Zusia whose mind is fully occupied at all times with thoughts of how to better serve the Al-mighty and how he may be of help to his fellowman, is a man for whom the vicissitudes of ordinary life simply pass by. One is immune to the effects of misfortunes to the degree to

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which one's mind is engaged with matters of much greater significance and urgency.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berdichev was famous for his concern for his people's well-being. Among others, he was strongly opposed to the practice of self-mortification, which ascetic teachers at his time advocated for purification of the soul. He is known to have made a fascinating, succinct statement related to our topic, the point of which, in the light of the previous section, should at once become evident. R. Levi

"He assumed that on Yom Kippur devout Jews were so totally immersed in holy thoughts that they became oblivious to their material needs"

Yitzchok said, "If I had the authority, I would do away with every Fast Day, except of course, Tishah B'Av and Yom Kippur. The reason for these exceptions: on Tishah B'av (the day when the two temples in Jerusalem were destroyed), who is able to eat? On Yom Kippur, who wants to eat?"

Clearly R. Levi Yitzchok holds the second view we cited in the first section concerning the purpose of fasting. He assumed that on Yom Kippur devout Jews were so totally immersed in holy thoughts that they became oblivious to their material needs. Therefore the desire to eat simply did not arise.

One might be wondering however how relevant are the sayings and behavior of people to whom most of us do not even make the least pretense of resembling. Many a well-meaning individual keen on discharging his religious duties would not dream of placing himself in the same category as some of the sublime individuals mentioned earlier. It may seem sufficiently desirable to most of us if we could just manage to keep our bodies in shul for the whole day of Yom Kippur and remain more or less aware at every juncture what precise stage the congregation is at, as well as having the strength to suppress not so much our wanting, but at least our fierce craving, for food and water.

Yet, it is not pointless to acquaint ourselves with the thoughts, sentiments and behavior of exalted individuals living on a level far above ours. A famous piano teacher once said, "The first thing I do for a new

student is to play a short but complicated piece, say, a difficult passage by Liszt. For the first step toward acquiring the ability to master the piano, is to start believing that it is humanly possible to do so."

Secondly, even if we do not hope to ever come near to the status of the illustrious religious leaders mentioned before, they should be able to impress upon us the deeper meaning of Yom Kippur. True, it is the culmination of the days of Awe. Yet, it does not follow that it is a day that is to be spent essentially in anxiety, fear and discomfort. It is also a day during which we are to contemplate with deep satisfaction the extraordinary magni-

tude of human potential; to focus our thoughts joyfully on the immense latent power possessed by each one of us to overcome negligence and complacency, not through agonizing self-denial, but by elevating ourselves to a level beyond the reach of harassment by unseemly temptations. Even if such ideas do not have much immediate practical impact, the very thought of them is bound to raise our self-esteem and recharge our spiritual energies.

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2,451,601
bagels.

10,228,000
cups of coffee.

45,878
pounds of lox.

1,751,773
smiles.

We hope you had a good year, too. Happy Rosh Hashanah and peace for the new

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