

## BRINGING OUR BODIES INTO PRAYER

I haven't always fasted on Yom Kippur. I began trying when I was 12, and usually got to about lunchtime when I would come home from shul and stuff myself – and then of course feel guilty about it! The first time I managed to fast properly was when I was 18 and in Jerusalem for my gap year. And I can remember the times after that that I didn't fast – when I was pregnant and when I was breastfeeding. I missed the action of fasting – it's very physical. My experience of fasting, and I can only speak for myself, is that it enhances the day. It puts me into a slightly altered sense of consciousness and enhances my ability to think about what really counts and about my place in the universe. And about what relationships I need to nurture.

So surprisingly for a festival that is all about stepping out of the world and out of one's body, Yom Kippur, is one of our more physical festivals. It's very embodied. And it's not just the fasting. There are lots of other physical manifestations of atonement today.

You may have noticed that I'm wearing a large white shirt. It's a Kittel, which is a Yiddish term for a smock. You can now buy them in Judaica shops, because for very orthodox men, the practice is not just of wearing a Kittel at Yom Kippur, and sometimes Rosh Hashanah too, but for one's wedding, and for seder night. I have been thinking about this for ages – I always wear white for Yom

Kippur, I never wear leather shoes, but in the end I decided that wearing white was an approximation of the Kittel, so this year I'm going all the way. It's a powerful symbol.

White is associated with purity and the forgiveness of sins. The High Priest, whose Yom Kippur ritual we will act out in Musaf, wore pure white garments. It is worn at beginnings and endings. Today is the first day of the rest of our lives, the day we begin again. That's why it's sometimes worn by bridegrooms, or at a Seder – because Pesach represents a new life of freedom and rebirth for the people. And of course it is part of the traditional clothing for burial. So just wearing a big shirt can symbolise birth, death, and rebirth.

Judaism is never just a religion of the mind – in the Torah service we re-enact the march to the Temple as we process the scrolls, we call people up, we hold up the scroll. And afterwards, in Musaf, at the heart of the day, we re-enact the peak moment of the ancient Temple ritual.

Why do we do this? Who cares what was done more than 2,000 years ago, at a time of animal sacrifices and a priestly elite? Isn't the whole point that now, as we'll read this afternoon, the Torah is in our hearts and minds? Well you know, we're not really re-enacting anything. This is real, this is happening right now.

We are a kingdom of priests, we are all going deep into the sacred centre of our own hearts and for a moment, whether or not we

believe in a personal God, we encounter our existence, our reality, our becoming. For a moment we face up to the truth about ourselves. In the Avodah service, we get down on our knees and we bow right down to the ground. This is not a ritual for the Rabbi, this is an invitation for all of us to bow down. I began to do this in my 20's in a radical new Reform shul called Beit Klal Yisrael, in Notting Hill. The Rabbi, Sheila Shulman, zichrono levracha, did not bow during the Aleinu or the Barchu. She was not a traditionalist and as a radical feminist not keen on metaphors of God as King. But in the Avodah service, at the heart of Yom Kippur, she lay down the ground face down and many of us did it with her. Why? Because sometimes you have to let the ego go. If, just for a moment, you can let go of your ego enough to bow down to the floor, then you might be able to access the deeper parts of the self. And if it's difficult, well acknowledging that I'm not quite the amazing person I try to project to the world, acknowledging that I struggle with relationships, acknowledging that my heart needs to break open before I can start my life again – well that's not always going to be easy. It wasn't either for the High Priest, who's ritual we recreate. If he got the ritual wrong he would die. If he didn't say it right, perhaps the community would die. During Musaf we stand poised between life and death. One of the meanings of Kapparah, the root of Yom Kippur, is to cleanse. To clean ourselves out. It's a kind of catharsis. It's what was

done to the Temple after it was defiled – to make it clean you had to get into the dirt and scrub it away. Getting into the dirty stuff, our own personal dirty stuff, isn't always easy. But it will take you on a journey of discovery. And for those who physically can't get down, then a moment of bowing in your seat, or even just covering your eyes and shutting out distractions for that part of the service, might work just as well. Try it with me after the Torah service.

On Yom Kippur we surrender to the unknown, we bring our whole selves into this process of Kapparah, of cleaning ourselves out, making ourselves ready to face the world again. You can't release what you don't first discover and accept. Soul-searching and catharsis, chesbon hanefesh and kaparah are two sides of the same coin.

And bowing is not just about giving up the ego, it's not just about going down to that danger zone between life and death. It's about giving up and going down in order to get back up. All the way up. Up further than you have ever been. Up with new energy, power, openness. Up with renewed purpose and renewed strength.

From where does our strength come from? From that encounter we each have in that moment of meditation. Because Yud Heh Vav Heh, that concept often called God, but which actually means Being (and come to my study session to find out more) is so fully present in

every moment that it's often impossible to grasp. But at this sacred moment we get just a glimpse.

It is a glimpse that, in our first Torah reading, Moses is desperate to have. He pleads with God to let him see his face, to let him know God. But instead of seeing God's face, he is hidden in a cleft of the rock and God calls out while passing before him, the thirteen attributes of God that are the motif of the High Holydays. Thirteen metaphors by which we can identify God and perhaps act in God's image. Being merciful, gracious, patient, kind, truthful, extending kindness to thousands, forgiving mistakes.

We are getting into the heart of Yom Kippur. We are preparing for a moment of complete surrender, but for many of us we still have one foot in the world, in the physical. And our Torah service ends with Kedoshim, a toolkit for how to bring this sense of complete unity, one-ness that we encounter in the Holy of Holies, out into the world.

Respect your parents, look after the poor, do not stand by while your neighbour is being attacked, keep Shabbat, do not pervert justice, act honestly in business, love your neighbour as yourself. And why do we have this ethical toolkit to make the world a better place? Because that is what it means to be holy. There is no separation, no difference, between being holy and being a good person in the world.

We bring our bodies into our prayer, through wearing white, through prostrating during the Avodah service, through fasting. And we bring our spirit into the material reality of our daily lives, by acting in God's image to seek holiness by making practical provision for the poor and the vulnerable, by campaigning for justice, and by helping others.