

Early Kol Nidrei Sermon 5775
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The Trees Are Important But Don't Miss The Forest

Some of the most ridiculous videos started by panning in on over 1200 pounds of ice or with footage of several teens with industrial goggles standing under the edge of a dump truck filled with ice. They would sometimes end with epic failure – a Styrofoam cooler crushing into dozens of pieces under the weight of falling ice or the sound of sad yelping as the person being filmed fell on a slippery shower floor.

This summer the ALS ice bucket challenge took the US – and the world – by storm. Across just about every screen – from TV to the world wide web – videos popped up from regular people living in towns and cities across America to celebrities from Ethel Kennedy to Justin Timberlake to Patrick Stewart. The challenge, as I am sure you are familiar, began with individuals filming themselves stating their names and who they had been nominated by to take the ALS ice bucket challenge, often saying a word or two about their desire to raise awareness for ALS, sometimes even taking a moment to explain that ALS stands for Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis and is commonly known as Lou Gehrig's disease, then challenging a couple of friends or loved ones to either dump a bucket of ice over their heads in the next 24 hours or to donate \$100 to ALS research, and finally dumping a bucket of ice over their own head.

When the challenge began, it seemed like nothing other than a great thing: raising money for a good cause and spreading awareness about a devastating disease in critical need of funding for research for a cure. Over a 30-day period, the ALS Association raised over 100 million dollars in donations.¹ Who knows how many Americans and people across the globe learned about ALS who had no idea about the disease just months before? In August, Facebook told TIME that 2.4 unique videos related to the Ice Bucket Challenge had been uploaded to their site.² How could this be a bad thing? There could be no detractors, right? Well, not exactly. Some of the videos posted barely made mention of ALS at all, did not provide a lot of substantive information about the disease, why the money being raised is needed, or how it would be used.³ Ice bucket challengers quipped about the need for those they challenged to get right on top of making their video so they wouldn't have to succumb to the seemingly terrible fate of having to donate instead. The videos themselves also became more and more elaborate. People even wrote articles with ideas for how to make the most outrageous ice bucket video yet.

Then came the backlash. There were those who questioned whether the focus of this viral trend was actually still on ALS itself or on the production value behind the videos and the growing pressure to make an even more outrageous video than the next person. There were also those who took issue with the philanthropic model of making a video *or* donating. Was this really how we wanted to teach our children? Others – myself included – took issue with the incredible

¹ <http://www.alsa.org/news/media/press-releases/ice-bucket-challenge-082914.html>

² <http://time.com/3117501/als-ice-bucket-challenge-videos-on-facebook/>.

³ http://www.slate.com/blogs/future_tense/2014/08/12/icebucketchallenge_you_don_t_need_an_ice_bucket_to_donate_to_als_research.html.

amount of useable drinking water being wasted. Will Oremus, Slate's senior technology writer, proposed the No Ice Bucket Challenge. He wrote:

1. Do not fetch a bucket, fill it with ice, or dump it on your head.
2. Do not film yourself or post anything on social media.
3. Just donate the money, whether to the ALS Association or to some other charity of your choice. And if it's an organization you really believe in, feel free to politely encourage your friends and family to do the same.⁴

Hipsters and the environmentally-concerned alike forwarded and posted Oremus's article far and wide.

The detractors had some valid points. Yes, an enormous amount of water had been wasted, and, no, we don't want to teach our kids an either/or model of philanthropy. Yes, there were times when the video makers became so caught up in the trappings of the challenge, so caught up in making the most entertaining, out-there video possible, that they missed the point of the challenge in the first place. But it wasn't quite that simple. Many of those who took the challenge both donated *and* made a video – and others really took the time to say something about ALS. Couldn't we see this as a way to educate that there are more ways to be philanthropic than just with your checkbook – like raising awareness about an incredibly important cause? Also, some of us need the trapping to help us understand the point, and that is just fine.

After I calmed down about all the water waste, I watched two more ice bucket challenge videos before the craze came to the end. In the first, my colleague, Rabbi Ben David, posted his with a note that read: "The Challenge' has been politicized, but I'm happy to contribute and teach our kids that *tzedakah* can indeed be...cool. (The check we are sending in tomorrow morning to the ALS Foundation will be in honor of [our family friends])." Sitting on his front porch, he announced that he had his two helpers there with him, his young son and daughter, and, amidst their sweet giggles, the three of them tossed a bucket of water over their dad's head – a moment they will likely not soon forget, in connection to an important value that will be forever connected to family and to fun. Sometimes we need a mechanism – goofy, silly, or otherwise – that helps us learn a bigger lesson.

One of the most unifying, universally-observed customs for Jews is fasting on Yom Kippur. The way Americans eat turkey on Thanksgiving? Jews fast on Yom Kippur. Even the most secular Jews, who perhaps do not observe any other Jewish rituals or acknowledge any other Jewish holidays, will fast on Yom Kippur. And they will fast with unwavering, unflinching, fervent devotion! You know the ones.

Yom Kippur is sometimes referred to simply as The Fast. We might think, therefore, and understandably, that it is the fast itself that matters most on this Day of Atonement. But is it? Why *do* we fast on Yom Kippur? Is it to give ourselves something to do while we sit through hours of worship . . . and endless minutes of sermons? Is it to give ourselves a distraction? I am sure you can surmise the answer to these questions is no.

⁴ *ibid.*

When we are given the biblical commandment to observe Yom Kippur, the Torah tells us that on this day, in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, we should afflict our souls. The passage from Leviticus reads:

And this shall be a law to you for all time: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month,

תַּעֲנוּ אֶת־נַפְשֵׁיכֶם (*t'anu et-nafshoteichem*)
you shall afflict your souls,
and you shall do no manner of work.

כִּי־בַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יִכָּפֵר עֲלֵיכֶם (*ki va'yom ha'zeh y'chaper aleichem*)
For on this day, atonement shall be made for you
to purify you of all your sins, you shall be pure before Adonai.
It shall be a Sabbath of complete rest for you

וְעֲנִיתֶם אֶת־נַפְשֵׁיכֶם (*v'ee'nee'tem et-nafshoteichem*)
and you shall afflict your souls;
it is a law for all time.⁵

We learn that the substance of Yom Kippur is not only a complete cessation of labor but also the commandment to *afflict* our souls. What, though, does it mean to afflict our souls? From various other biblical passages, including Psalms and the prophet Isaiah, we learn that afflicting our souls means abstaining from food and drink (amongst other worldly delights). The Psalmist writes:

וְאָנִי | בַּחֲלוֹתָם לְבוֹשֵׁי שָׂק עֲנִיתִי בְצוּם נַפְשִׁי וַתִּפְלְתִי עַל־חִיקֵי תְּשׁוּבָה :
(V'ani ba'chalotam l'voshi sak ee'nai'ti va'tzom nafshi ut'filati al-hai'ki tashuv.)
 But as for me, when they were sick,
 my clothing was sackcloth,
I afflicted my soul with fasting;
 and my prayer, may it return into mine own bosom.⁶

In the haftarah portion we will read tomorrow, the prophet Isaiah asks:

לָמָּה צָמְנוּ וְלֹא רָאִיתָ עֲנִינוּ נַפְשֵׁינוּ וְלֹא תִדְעַ
(Lama tzamnu v'lo ra'ee'ta? Ee'nee'nu nafsheinu v'lo tai'dah?)
 "Why have we **fasted** and You do not see?
 Why have we **afflicted our souls** and You do not notice?"⁷

⁵ Leviticus 16:29-31.

⁶ Psalm 35:13.

⁷ Isaiah 58:3.

We know, then, from these verses that we should afflict our souls - **תַּעֲנוּ אֶת־נַפְשֵׁיכֶם** (*t'anu nafshoteichem*), as God says, by fasting; that fasting is one of the most major ways we participate in the ritual of atonement on this day. Why is this though? What does it do for us? Is it just about the fast itself? Is the fast the end rather than the means?

One of the most common greetings on Yom Kippur is “may you have an easy fast.” For years at Rodeph Sholom, we have instead encouraged one another to say, “may you have a meaningful fast” or, better still, “may you have a meaningful Yom Kippur.” This is because the fast itself is just the vehicle. The fast is meant to help us pay attention. Pay attention how, though? Many rabbis explain – and I have even said this before – that we fast so that we can focus on our souls, on our spiritual quest, rather than on our bodies.

I am guessing that, at this point, many of you are raising an eyebrow, maybe rolling an eye, and, the truth is, I don't blame you. It is not that we take the focus off of our bodies when we fast and magically focus only on our *tefilot* (prayers), on our process of *teshuvah* (repentance) and of change. We know this doesn't happen. If we are being honest, though some of us started fasting just hours ago – or perhaps have not yet even started fasting – we are already obsessed with the hour that the fast began and the hour that it will end. If we are *really* being honest, we are already counting down the hours and minutes until the bagel and schmear will hit our mouths. As tomorrow comes to a close, our thoughts will wander . . . *four hours, three hours, two hours, one hour, fifty-nine minutes, fifty-nine minutes and forty-seven seconds, fifty-nine minutes and thirty-five seconds . . . 40 pages until lox, 39 pages until lox, 38 pages until lox . . .* the count-down continues. We will dream of what will be on the breakfast table and we may even get catty about it. If the brisket isn't just right? DISOWNED!

So how is this fast supposed to make us pay attention? It is not that we are supposed to stop thinking about our bodies or supposed to feel no hunger. Rather, every time we feel one of those pangs of hunger, we are supposed to redirect our attention. The physical hunger can push us back into our prayers, push us back into our process of *teshuva*, push us back into our process of change, push us deeper into a desire to figure out what it will take to make the New Year ahead of us different. The physical hunger can push us back towards a focus on our spiritual hunger. On this Day of Atonement we have a singular task that requires a tremendous amount of focus, and, in a strange way, the fast can become, through self-discipline, a vehicle for redirecting our focus back onto the task at hand.

At the end of the day, though, this is to be a passive affliction.

In the Talmud, the rabbis teach:

You shall afflict your souls. One might assume that one must sit in heat or cold in order to afflict oneself, therefore the text reads: And you shall do no manner of work; just as the prohibition of work involves only a passive attitude, so the affliction of soul intended by the law must be only a passive one.⁸

⁸ BT Yoma 74b.

The rabbis mean to say that we should not understand the affliction of the Day of Atonement as a time to beat ourselves up beyond repair. If we take this a step further and use that mindset with regard to fasting, if we cannot make it through the day without a sip of water or a saltine, then we should do what we need to do so that we can focus on the task at hand: the challenge to stand before our God as a community, make confession for that which we regret about the year past, and to reflect on our hope for change in the year to come. If we become so physically hungry that we think our health or safety is at risk, we have missed the point; it is then that our hunger cannot be used for the purpose of pursuing our spiritual hunger. There are those who the rabbis exempt from fasting altogether: those who are pregnant and those who are ill. We may extend this exemption or leniency to include those who are taking medication that requires food, those who are breastfeeding, or those who have struggled with an eating disorder whose recovery is put at risk by abstaining from food. The point is to know our limitations and to challenge ourselves, not to actively afflict and endanger ourselves. When we endanger ourselves or focus so much on the fasting as an ends rather than a means, it is then that the fasting becomes merely a trapping without a larger lesson.

It is so easy to get caught up in the trappings of our lives or the ultimately insignificant details and fail to miss the bigger picture.

A teenager brings home his algebra test to share the results at the dinner table. Mother, father, son, and daughter sit around the table. Father, son, and daughter chat away, happily enjoying their time around the dinner table. Mom pounds away on her iPad, returning emails she didn't get to at the office. The son waits and waits for mom to be done so he can share his test results. Eventually, he proudly removes the test from his backpack, and declares, "Look, I got a 91!" His father oooo's and ahhh's. His older sister pats him on the back and says, "Way to go!" His mother, seeming to barely hear the announcement, continues to churn out emails. The son wonders if she even heard him. Finally, looking up only for a moment, she raises her glasses and snidely remarks, "What happened to the other nine points?" Deflated, the teen puts his test back in his backpack and changes the subject. An opportunity missed. Worried more about work and college admittances, mom forgot what really mattered: the opportunity to be with her family, to celebrate her kid's hard work, to press pause and focus on the task at hand – family time.

Isaiah has much to say to us about seeing the bigger picture amidst the trappings, about finding meaning from the rituals in our lives. Of fasting, Isaiah says:

Is not this the fast I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Adonai shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and Adonai will answer; you shall cry for help and God will say, Here I am.⁹

As we fast this Yom Kippur, let our fast compel us towards spiritual journey and toward action by focusing on the bigger picture, rather than the minutia. For Isaiah, the fast was a call to social

⁹ Isaiah 58:6-9.

justice. For us, the message of the fast can be a reminder to be careful with the words we throw around – to be slow to nitpick one another’s physical appearance and instead focus on the words that come out of each other’s mouths. For us, the message of the fast can be a reminder to worry less about what the Bar or Bat Mitzvah party theme will be, how the cake will look, and whether the tablecloths will match the chairs, and more about how to include family in the occasion and make sure that the months of preparation are an opportunity to learn Torah as a family and do community service together. For us, the message of the fast can be to spend less time worrying about how many extracurricular activities we can jam into our schedule and then onto our resume and more time pursuing what really interests us with people who inspire us.

The second and last ice bucket video I watched was Anthony Carbajal’s. The video begins with Anthony in a bikini top and short shorts doing a not-suitable-to-be-described-in-this-sermon dance and nominating others, including Ellen DeGeneres, to take the ALS ice bucket challenge. It continues with some scandalous car-washing scenes and Anthony running down the street. Then things change. Anthony sits in a kitchen, eyes red, tears running down his cheeks. He explains that ALS runs in his family. His grandmother had it, he says. His mother was diagnosed while he was in high school, and now, just five months prior to making the video, at the age of 26, Anthony was diagnosed himself. Head in hands, Anthony talks about how incredibly scary the disease is through sobs and the video then shows footage of him caring for his mom, who is now bedridden with the disease. He talks about the fact that no one wants to talk about ALS because nobody wants their day ruined. He talks about the fact that people are getting bothered by the ALS videos, but he says that’s fine because soon our Facebook feeds will go back to cat videos and *Let It Go* covers but that, right now, for just a moment, the ALS community has the main spot light. He educates his audience, he draws us in, he makes it personal, and he makes us cry right along with him. And, of course, he ends with more not-suitable-to-be-described-in-this-sermon dancing.¹⁰ The trapping is there and so is the point.

It is OK to need the mechanism, to need the trapping, to get to the message, to learn the lesson. We are human beings, and this is how we learn. As we fast this Yom Kippur, though, and as we move through all the days of our lives, hopefully we will hear Isaiah’s voice in the back of our minds reminding us to ask why, reminding us to break the yokes we place upon ourselves when we focus only on the minutia and instead find the freedom to dream bigger, to believe in the possibility of change. In so doing, may we not only hear God’s voice say, “Here I am,” but may we also hear our own.

¹⁰ <http://www.upworthy.com/the-last-ice-bucket-challenge-you-need-to-see-and-you-really-should-see-it>