

Yom Kippur: A Hunger Text Study

Fasting to Understand Hunger

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Yom Kippur is the most well-known of the Jewish fast days. We willingly deny ourselves sustenance in order to be drawn closer to God and also to help us **recognize the pain of those suffering hunger throughout the year**. We turn our thoughts and our actions to the millions of people around the world who cry out daily in hunger.

We encourage you to use the **High Holy Day Hunger Fact Sheet** (see www.rac.org/holidayguides) as well as the following texts and discussion questions to engage in dialogue about hunger on Yom Kippur:

Text 1 & 2: Self-Denial

וְהָיְתָה לָכֶם לְחֻקַּת עוֹלָם בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי בְּעֶשְׂרֵי לַחֹדֶשׁ תַּעֲנוּ אֶת-נַפְשֵׁיכֶם וְכָל מְלָאכָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ הָאֶזְרָח וְהַגֵּר הַגֵּר בְּתוֹכְכֶם.

And this shall be to you a law for all time: in the seventh month on the tenth day of the month, you shall practice self-denial; and you shall do no manner of work, neither the citizen nor the stranger who resides among you.

- **Leviticus 16:29**

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On Yom Kippur eating, drinking, washing, anointing, putting on sandals and marital relations are forbidden.

- **Mishnah Yomah 8:1**

1. Why do you think the rabbis chose to include these six things in their interpretation of self-denial?
2. What would you consider to be 'practicing self-denial'?
3. Can you think of reasons why we should practice self-denial on Yom Kippur? Do you find it surprising that these are neither discussed in the Mishnah nor in the Talmud?

### Text 3: The Fast I Desire

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 Eternal is favorable? <sup>6</sup>No, this is the fast I desire: To unlock fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke. <sup>7</sup>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. - **Isaiah 58: 5-7**

1. In the Haftarah read on Yom Kippur, the prophet Isaiah questions physical self-denial. Does your own hunger make you more aware of the suffering of the poor?
2. What is the relevance of Isaiah's words today?

**Text 4: Feeding the Hungry**

One who comes and says, "Feed me," we don't investigate to see if he is deceiving, rather we feed him immediately. If he were naked and comes and says, "Clothe me," we investigate to see if he is deceiving. – *Tur, Yoreh De'ah 251*

1. The concept of feeding the poor is explored in the halakhic (Jewish legal) sources, as seen here. How can this text contribute to the Jewish understanding of the value of feeding the hungry?
2. What differentiates hunger from other basic human needs? What would it mean to investigate someone's need for food?
3. When do we/should we investigate requests for help?

**The Food Stamp Challenge**

You might recall the 2007 Food Stamp Challenge that politicians, clergy members (including Rabbi David Saperstein, the Executive Director of the Religious Action Center), and community activists. The challenge was to try to live for one week solely on an average food stamps budget, which was \$3 per day. This was criticized by some for giving a distorted picture as it is impossible to understand what it means to live of food stamps when you only try it for one week.

1. Do you think that the Food Stamp Challenge can help one understand what it means to live in a food insecure household (defined as a household which lacks "access at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life")?
2. How does the idea of the Food Stamp Challenge compare to practicing self-denial on Yom Kippur in order to appreciate basic human needs?

**Text 6: A Chassidic Tale of Wealth**

A story is told about Rabbi Israel, the famed "Maggid of Kosnitz," who once asked a rich man what he usually ate. The rich man was rather ascetic; he proudly described to the Chassidic master his one daily meal, in which he ate and drank nothing more than bread with salt and a jug of water. "Fool," scolded the Maggid. "Go home and eat meat and other delicacies. Drink aged wine. If you don't, I am not finished with you yet!" Later, the Maggid's disciples wondered why their master spoke as he did. Rabbi Israel explained: "If the rich man dines on meat and wine, then he would at least feel that the paupers in his town should be given bread and salt. But if he himself subsists on dry bread and salt, he might think that poor people could live on stones..."

1. What lessons can be learned from this story?
2. How can one make a difference to the lives of people suffering from hunger in your community?