



A SELECTION FROM THE SERVICE FOR KOL NIDRE

A Day of Affliction

Yom Kippur is a day of many moods: of sorrow and sadness, of anxiety and guilt, of contemplation and pensiveness, of memory and loss. And also, it is a day of hope and the happiness of a life renewed.

According to the Bible, Yom Kippur is a day for affliction, as it says: "You shall afflict yourself, and shall do no work...for on this day shall atonement be made for you, to cleanse you." (Leviticus 16:29f)

Affliction, we are led to believe, acts as a purging agent, but what this entails is not specifically defined. Fasting seems to have been the affliction of choice of the Psalmist, but this was not without controversy. The prophet Isaiah (58:3-10) challenged people whose fast was insincere, and who posed as humble and self-righteous. He taught that acts of self-abnegation were no substitute for deeds on behalf of others.

"Is not this the fast that I choose," he exclaimed, "to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free...? 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 him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?"

Of course, the voice of a prophet is often a lonely one and Isaiah's plaintive cry has been largely ignored. To this day, we are, as a society, still insufficiently caring for the homeless and the hungry. In our day, too, the practice of fasting is no longer universally observed. While many Jews still find meaning in this ritual, many others do not and no longer practice it.

For Humanistic Jews, the question of whether or not to continue this practice is a matter of choice, not commandment. Many see fasting as an archaic ritual that brings unnecessary discomfort. They also do not feel that it is necessary to voluntarily deprive themselves of food for one day in order to be more compassionate towards those who suffer hunger daily. For them, it is not our fasting that is required but our feeding of others. It is not the humbling of ourselves that is needed, but the helping of those who find themselves humbled.

Others among us also affirm these lessons, and continue to fast. Some teach that when we control our appetites on Yom Kippur, we remember that on other days, too, we can be masters, not slaves, of our desires. They do not regard fasting as a form of self-affliction, but as an annual opportunity to focus on reflection and atonement. They believe that fasting enhances introspection and contemplation without the distractions of worldly indulgences. Others simply want to link themselves to tradition and family ties. For them, fasting is a way to make a connection to their heritage.