



HIGH HOLIDAYS

Yom Kippur Day
Eating While Fasting
September 30, 2017

**DOES G-D WANT US TO FEAST OR TO FAST?
EATING WHILE FASTING**

ABSTRACT

All Shabbats and holidays are marked by feasting. Indeed, eating a festive and pleasurable meal is a mitzvah in celebrating the day.

So why is the holiest day of the year, which is called Shabbat Shabbaton, marked by fasting and affliction, instead of feasting in heavenly delight? If we celebrate Shabbat with special meals, how much more so should we do that on the Shabbat of all Shabbats?

This question is even more pronounced this year, when Yom Kippur coincides with Shabbat: Why does the affliction of Yom Kippur supersede the pleasure of Shabbat?

A heart wrenching story of a cynical Jew giving his life to sanctify G-d's name on Yom Kippur, and a novel interpretation in *Noam Megadim* from Rabbi Eliezer Halevi Horowitz, a student of Reb Elimelech of Lizhensk – answers this question and teaches us a life-changing lesson in serving G-d: what is true pleasure and what is true affliction.

By appreciating the essence of Yom Kippur and the essence of a Jew, we discover that we can digest something deeper when we are not digesting food.

Sometimes a fast is greater than a feast. And we first need to fast in order to truly appreciate a feast.

1. Opening: Yizkor

In a few moments, we will begin the Yizkor service. On the holiest day of the year, between Shacharit and Mussaf, we pause from our own personal prayers to memorialize our loved ones, to remember, to pray for and pray with our parents, grandparents, great grandparents all the way back to Abraham and Sarah, the first Jews.

Today is Yom Kippur and today is also Shabbat. We find in the Torah that Yom Kippur is called Shabbat. Actually, double Shabbat – *Shabbas Shabbosson*¹. We can thus say that in this year's calendar we have a double or even triple Shabbat – the double Shabbat of every Yom Kippur, and the Shabbat (the seventh day) of the week!

¹ Leviticus 16:31.

Shabbat has something in common with Yizkor. Both are related to remembering: Yizkor means memorial – when we remember our loved ones. Shabbat too, as we said last night in the Lecha Dodi prayer, has both the commandment of *shomor* and *zachor*, of observing (or literally protecting) the Shabbat and *remembering* it.

Both Yizkor and Shabbat, on this Shabbat Shabbaton of Yom Kippur, behoove us to ask ourselves: How do we best remember important things? How do we best remember and protect Shabbos? How do we best remember and guard the memory of our parents and loved ones?

2. Pleasure or Affliction?

To capture the essence of Yom Kippur, as well as Shabbat, and to prepare us for Yizkor, allow me to pose a simple, yet fundamental, question and answer it with a powerful and humbling story.

The question addresses what seems to be a blatant paradox: Today is both Yom Kippur and Shabbat. And, as just mentioned, they are both called Shabbat. Yet, they are celebrated and observed completely differently, in diametrically opposite ways.

Yom Kippur is observed by fasting, based on the verse “you shall afflict your souls.”² Yet, on Shabbat one is prohibited from fasting or afflicting one’s soul. Indeed, Shabbat is celebrated with lavish feasts and pleasure, *Oneg Shabbat*, “and you call the Sabbath a delight,”³ the exact opposite of *inoi*, affliction?!

This suggests that by observing Yom Kippur with affliction and fasting we are compromising the pleasure and delight of Shabbat! How could the holiest day of the year ever compromise the holy Shabbat?

The question is not just this year, when Yom Kippur is on Shabbat, but all years: All Shabbats and holidays are marked by feasting. Indeed, eating a festive and pleasurable meal is a mitzvah in celebrating the day. So why is the holiest day of the year, which is called Shabbat Shabbaton, marked by fasting and affliction, instead of feasting in heavenly delight? If we celebrate Shabbat with special meals, how much more so should we do that on the Shabbat of all Shabbats?

Does G-d want us to feast or fast on His holy days?

3. Even the Transgressors (Story)

Often the best answers to fundamental questions are found in real life experiences, more than in academic dissertations.

² Leviticus 16:29-31.

³ Isaiah 58:13.

I would like to share a moving story, which captures the core essence of Yom Kippur and Yizkor. This story was told by Rabbi Israel Spira, the Rebbe of Bluzhov to his Chassidim, and was later published by Dr. Yaffa Eliach in her outstanding book, *Chassidic Tales of the Holocaust*.

In the Janowska Concentration Camp, there was a Jewish brigadier (a foreman of a brigade) from Lvov by the name of Schneeweiss, one of those people one stays away from if he values his life. He had known Rabbi Israel Spira in Lemberg (Lvov), but was not aware that the latter was an inmate at the Janowska Road Camp. Only a handful of Chassidim who were close to the rabbi knew the rabbi's identity and they kept it secret.

The season of the Jewish holidays was approaching. As the date of Yom Kippur was nearing, the fears in the camp mounted. Everyone knew that the sadistic Germans especially liked to use Jewish holidays as days for inflicting terror and death.

It was the eve of Yom Kippur. The tensions and the fears were at their height. A few Chassidim, among them Mendel Freifeld and others, came to the Rabbi of Bluzhov and asked him to approach Schneeweiss and request that on Yom Kippur his group not be assigned to any of the thirty-nine main categories of work, so that their transgression of the law by working on Yom Kippur would not be a major one. The rabbi was very moved by the request of his Chassidim and despite his fears, for he would have to disclose his identity, went to Schneeweiss. He knew quite well that Schneeweiss did not have much respect for Jewish tradition. Even prior to the outbreak of World War II, he had publicly violated the Jewish holidays and transgressed against Jewish law. Here in Janowska, he was a cruel man who knew no mercy.

With a heavy heart, the rabbi went before Schneeweiss. "You probably remember me. I am the Rabbi of Pruchnik, Rabbi Israel Spira." Schneeweiss did not respond. "You are a Jew like myself," the rabbi continued. "Tonight is Kol Nidrei night. There is a small group of young Jews who do not want to transgress any of the thirty-nine main categories of work. It means everything to them. It is the essence of their existence. Can you do something about it? Can you help?"

The rabbi noticed that a hidden shiver went through Schneeweiss as he listened to the rabbi's strange request. The rabbi took Schneeweiss's hand and said, "I promise you, as long as you live, it will be a good life. I beg you to do it for us so that we may still find some dignity in our humiliating existence." The stern face of Schneeweiss changed. For the first time since his arrival at Janowska, there was a human spark in it.

"Tonight I can't do a thing," said Schneeweiss, the first words he had uttered since the rabbi had come to him. "I have no jurisdiction over the night brigade. But tomorrow, on Yom Kippur, I will do for you whatever I can." The rabbi shook Schneeweiss's hand in gratitude and left. That night, Kol Nidrei night, they were taken to work near the Lvov cemetery. To this very day, the rabbi has scars from the beatings of that night. They returned to their barracks at one o'clock in the morning exhausted, beaten, with blood flowing from fresh wounds. The rabbi was trying to make his way to his bed, one level of a five-tiered bunk bed made of a few wooden planks covered with straw. Vivid images from the past, of Yom Kippur at home with his family and

Chassidim, passed before his tear-filled eyes that wretched night at Janowska.

Suddenly the door opened and into the barracks came a young Chassid named Ben-Zion. “Rabbi, we must recite Kol Nidrei.”

“Who can say Kol Nidrei now?” the rabbi replied. “The people can’t even stand on their feet.”

“Rabbi, I used to pray in your *shtibel*. Do you remember the tune?” In the darkness of the barracks, among tens of hungry, beaten, exhausted Jews, a melody was heard, the soothing, comforting melody of Yom Kippur, as Ben-Zion chanted a prayer...

And may the entire congregation of the children of Israel, as well as the proselyte who dwells among them, be forgiven, for all the people acted unwittingly.⁴

“Rabbi, the heart wants to hear a prayer, we must say Kol Nidrei...” As Ben-Zion was talking to the rabbi, about twenty men gathered around them. How could he refuse? He took out his prayer shawl, which he kept hidden underneath the straw on his bunk bed, and was about to begin to chant the Kol Nidrei.

No one knew how, but the news spread fast: In Barrack Number 12 they were chanting the Kol Nidrei. In the dark shadows of the Janowska barracks one could see dark shapes against the barrack walls as they made their way to Barracks Number 12.

They recited with the rabbi whatever they could recall from memory. When they reached the prayer, *Hear our voice, O L-rd our G-d; have pity and compassion...* their voices were drowned in tears.

In the morning, the rabbi and a small group of young Chassidim were summoned to Schneeweiss’s cottage. “I heard that you prayed last night. I don’t believe in prayers,” Schneeweiss told them. “On principle, I even oppose them. But I admire your courage. For you all know well that the penalty for prayer in Janowska is death.” With that, he motioned them to follow him.

He took them to the S.S. Quarters in the camp, to a large wooden house. “You fellows will shine the floor without any polish or wax. And you, rabbi, will clean the windows with dry rags, so that you will not transgress any of the thirty-nine major categories of work.” He left the room abruptly without saying another word.

The rabbi was standing on a ladder with rags in his hand, cleaning the huge windows while chanting prayers, and his companions were on the floor polishing the wood and praying with him.

“The floor was wet with our tears. You can imagine the prayers of that Yom Kippur,” said the rabbi to the Chassidim who were listening to his tale while he was wiping away a tear.

At about twelve o’clock noon, the door opened wide and into the room stormed two angels of death, S.S. men in their black uniforms, may their names be obliterated. They were followed by a food cart filled to capacity.

⁴ Numbers 15:26.

“Noontime, time to eat bread, soup, and meat,” announced one of the two S.S. Men. The room was filled with an aroma of freshly cooked food, such food as they had not seen since the German occupation: white bread, steaming hot vegetable soup, and huge portions of meat.

The tall S.S. man commanded in a high-pitched voice, “You must eat immediately, otherwise you will be shot on the spot!” None of them moved. The rabbi remained on the ladder, the Chassidim on the floor. The German repeated the orders. The rabbi and the Chassidim remained glued to their places. The S.S. men called in Schneeweiss. “Schneeweiss, if the dirty dogs refuse to eat, I will kill you along with them.” Schneeweiss pulled himself to attention, looked the German directly in the eyes, and said in a very quiet tone, “We Jews do not eat today. Today is Yom Kippur, our most holy day, the Day of Atonement.”

“You don’t understand, Jewish dog,” roared the taller of the two. “I command you in the name of the Fuhrer and the Third Reich, *fress!*”

Schneeweiss, composed, his head high, repeated the same answer. “We Jews obey the law of our tradition. Today is Yom Kippur, a day of fasting.”

The German took out his revolver from its holster and pointed it at Schneeweiss’s temple. Schneeweiss remained calm. He stood still, at attention, his head high. A shot pierced the room. Schneeweiss fell. On the freshly polished floor, a puddle of blood was growing bigger and bigger.

The rabbi and the Chassidim stood as if frozen in their places. They could not believe what their eyes had just witnessed. Schneeweiss, the man who in the past had publicly transgressed against the Jewish tradition, had sanctified G-d’s name publicly and died a martyr’s death for the sake of Jewish honor.

“Only then, on that Yom Kippur day in Janowska,” said the rabbi to his Chassidim, “did I understand the meaning of the statement in the Talmud:⁵ *Even the transgressors in Israel are as full of good deeds as a pomegranate is filled with seeds.*⁶”

4. The Soul’s Essence

Many, many lessons can be derived from this heart wrenching story. The dignity of the Jewish people even under the worst possible duress. The beauty of a Jew, who everyone may have written off. The devotion of tortured souls desperate to connect to G-d on Yom Kippur. The emotions evoked when hearing about the tears shed by those Jews as they said the *Shema* on Yom Kippur eve – I mean, how can anyone not weep hearing that?... The lessons go on and on.

5 Berachot 57a. End of Chagigah (27a).

6 Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust, Yaffa Eilach (p. 155).

I want to touch upon one awesome lesson related to our earlier questions about Yom Kippur and Shabbat, about affliction and celebration, about fasting and feasting, and about remembering our loved ones in Yizkor.

Schneeweiss the renegade was not moved by any Jewish traditions. He openly mocked them. One can assume that he certainly did not observe or remember the Shabbat. That he did not partake in festive Shabbat and Yom Tov meals.

Yet, when it came to fasting on Yom Kippur, his Jewish heart suddenly awoke, and he declared “We Jews do not eat today. Today is Yom Kippur, our most holy day, the Day of Atonement.”

How to explain this?

It’s one thing if Schneeweiss would have been drawn to a delicious serving of succulent lamb chops at a Shabbos or Yom Tov table. But how are we to understand his being so impacted by Yom Kippur fasting, to the point that he gave his life for it!

How is it possible that a fast – a painful affliction – should have more power than a festive feast?!

But this indeed is the power of Yom Kippur: The holiest day of the year, *itzumo shel yom*,⁷ touches and awakes the core essence – the pintele Yid – of every Jew, even it is completely dormant. The Kabbalists and Chassidic masters call it *yechida* of the soul – the quintessential center of a Jewish *nesbama*, which is revealed on the one day a year, *achas b’shana*,⁸ when the oneness (*achas*)⁹ of the Divine and of the essential soul (*yechida*) radiates.¹⁰

And this essence, of the divine and of the soul, manifests specifically through fasting, not through eating and drinking.

As sad as the story is, through the fast of Yom Kippur and through his death sanctifying G-d’s Yom Kippur, Schneeweiss became more alive than ever. His sacrifice brought to life the undying and eternal power of the Jewish soul!

5. When No Is Greater than Yes

This story can help us appreciate the true power of Yom Kippur fasting.

There are two general ways to experience divine pleasure:

⁷ Shavuot 13a.

⁸ Exodus 30:10. Leviticus 16:34.

⁹ See Tosafos Menachot 18a.

¹⁰ See Birchas Erev Yom Kippur 5747.

1. One through tangible pleasure, which is revealed on a very practical level in good food and drink. This channels the revelatory levels of the divine, dimensions that we can relate to in our daily lives.
2. The second, is the essence of divine pleasure, which defies any form of tangible expression, and can only be experienced by a not – by *not* eating and drinking; by fasting.

The first level of divine pleasure is experienced on Shabbat and holidays. On those holy days we can access the first four levels of the soul – *nefesh*, *ruach*, *nes homo* and *chaya* – which correspond with the four dimensions of biological life, emotional life, intellectual life and transcendent life.

But only one day a year, *achas b'shana*, on Yom Kippur, we reach the core essence of *yechida* – the fifth and deepest level of the soul – which is connected, *yechida l'yachdecho*,¹¹ with the Divine essence that transcends any form of revealed manifestation of pleasure.

This day is called *Shabbat Shabbaton*, the Shabbat of all Shabbats, because on Yom Kippur we experience the ultimate essence of Shabbat, higher than its defined expression on a “regular” Shabbat through conventional eating and drinking.

This fasting on Yom Kippur is not a negative act of pain and affliction (as it is on Tisha B'av, when we fast due to the pain of the destruction), but rather an even deeper form of divine pleasure – one that cannot manifest in a meal, only in a non-meal.¹² The Arizal calls this¹³ “inner eating” (*achilah pnimis*), in contrast to “outer eating” of a regular meal.

On a conventional Shabbat the mitzvah is to eat a “physical meal” (actually, three meals), to refine and elevate our bodies. On Yom Kippur, the Sabbath of Sabbaths, we “eat” a “spiritual meal,” which sustains and energizes our souls and our bodies.

We find more pleasure in fasting for G-d then in eating for G-d.

Thus, Yom Kippur doesn't compromise the mitzvah of pleasure through eating on Shabbat. Quite the contrary: It reveals an even deeper form of pleasure, the pleasure of the soul being sustained and energized by the “spiritual meal” – the ethereal soulfulness – of Yom Kippur. And in the process it elevates Shabbat to the level of Shabbat Shabbaton.

We can say that the “inner, spiritual meal” of Yom Kippur (Shabbat Shabbaton) imbues all the “outer, physical meals” of Shabbat through the year with the unifying power of the divine essence and *yechida*.

11 Piut of Hoshanos Day 3.

12 A “taste” of the future world, *olam haba*, when there will not eating and no drinking (Berachot 17a).

13 Pri Etz VChaim Shaar Yom HaKippurim chapter 1. See Brocho in note 14 p. 7-8.

6. One Shabbat That's Really Two

We will now understand the answer to the questions raised above, why we fast on Yom Kippur, unlike all Sabbaths and holidays when we have a mitzvah to eat festive meals. And also, how, in a year like this when Yom Kippur is on Shabbat, Yom Kippur's fasting does not contradict or violate the mitzvah of *seudat Shabbat*, the Shabbat meals, when we are prohibited from fasting.

Put another way: How can we call both these days (Yom Kippur and Shabbat) by the name both Shabbat when Yom Kippur and the seventh day of the week are celebrated and observed completely differently: Shabbat is observed with pleasure and feasting; Yom Kippur is observed through affliction and fasting.

7. One Shabbat or Two?

Rabbi Eliezer Halevi Horowitz, a student of Reb Elimelech of Lizhensk, in his *Noam Megadim*¹⁴, offers us a novel and innovative explanation to this ostensible contradiction.

And in keeping with the Jewish custom to answer a question with a question, he reconciles this seeming contradiction with another apparent discrepancy between the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmud:

The Babylonian Talmud states¹⁵ that if Israel were but to observe two Shabbatot, *kebilchtan*, according to the full halacha, then Israel would be redeemed immediately.

This seems to contradict the Jerusalem Talmud¹⁶ (and Midrash¹⁷), which clearly says that if Israel were to but observe only **one** Shabbat, not two, it would be immediately redeemed?

So which one is it, does Israel have to observe one or two Shabbatot to be redeemed?¹⁸

Explains the *Noam Megadim*: The first Talmud that says Israel will be redeemed after it keeps two Shabbatot according to the law, is referring not to two regular Shabbatot, but to the two days called Shabbat – Shabbat and Yom Kippur – when they both fall on the same day (as it is today, in this year's calendar).

Initially, one could think that when they both fall on the same day it would be impossible to halachically keep both (*kebilchtan*) – if you are fasting you are not rejoicing in the pleasure and delight of Shabbat, and if you are rejoicing than you are not afflicting (oneg and inoi are seemingly mutually exclusive)?

14 *Noam Megadim*, Emor.

15 Shabbat 118b.

16 Yerushalmi, Taanit 1:1.

17 Exodus Rabbah 25:12.

18 Indeed, the commentaries to Shabbat 118b ask: A few lines earlier on the same page, Rabbi Yochanan himself, who states that Israel requires two Shabbatot for redemption, says that if the greatest idolater were but to observe even one Shabbat he would be forgiven immediately. So why would Israel collectively require two?

Physical beings find pleasure in physical things – and that is why fulfilling Shabbat *kehilchatan* requires physical pleasure, feasting and the like. However, spiritual beings find pleasure in less ephemeral things such as food and material pleasure and more in spiritual and eternal things.

All year round, including on Shabbat, we are physical beings imbued with spiritual souls. On Yom Kippur, when we are compared to angels¹⁹, we are spiritual beings, merely bedecked in physical garments. On Yom Kippur we cannot find pleasure in food, only in spirit. On Yom Kippur we celebrate and rejoice by focusing on our souls and not our bodies.

As such, we could think that we cannot observe both Shabbats together, because one is observed through eating and the other through fasting.

However, when we realize the true meaning in the fasting of Yom Kippur – as demonstrated in the story with Schneeweiss in the Janowska Concentration Camp – that it reaches the deepest form of pleasure which lies at the essence of the divine and the essence of a Jewish soul, we come to understand that Yom Kippur and Shabbat join as one, with Yom Kippur's fasting actually enhancing and elevating the pleasure of Shabbat.

Says the *Noam Megadim*. When we reach such a state of awareness, when both Shabbatot are observed as one, on one and the same day, this constitutes immediate redemption.

Redemption is a state of total integration and fusion of spirit and matter. When we see everything through the eyes of the soul. When we see the material world for what it is: A means and a garment for the spiritual – like a glove to a hand.

Redemption is not only when we find pleasure in the ethereal more than in the ephemeral. But when the ethereal infuses the ephemeral with its spiritual power.

Redemption is when we keep two Shabbatot as one – Shabbat (the seventh day of the week Shabbat) and Yom Kippur (the Shabbat of Shabbats) – and realize that one G-d gave us both, and that the ethereal and intangible pleasure of fasting on Yom Kippur not only doesn't compromise the tangible and ephemeral pleasure of Shabbat, but it enhances it.²⁰

8. Yizkor: Remembering Souls and Bodies

Yizkor, like Yom Kippur, also reflects the spiritual dimension of our lives: How we see all of life, including our material lives, through the prism of the soul.

¹⁹ Pirkei D'rebi Eliezer chapter 46. Shulchan Aruch Admur HaZakan Orach Chaim 610:9. See Tur Orach Chaim 619. Mogen Avraham ibid 619:8. Shulchan Aruch Admur HaZakan ibid 619:9;17.

²⁰ This works well with the mystical understanding of the two Shabbatot that are really one, the upper Shabbat (Shabbat Ilaah) and the lower Shabbat (Shabbat Tataah). See Likkutei Torah, Behar 41a at length.

In Yizkor we remember the souls of our loved ones. The souls that live on long after the bodies. We remember their personalities, their passions, their smiles, their legacies, that endure forever.

We also remember how our loved ones provided for us, the sacrifices they made for us, the prices they paid.

We also fondly remember the physical appearances of our loved one, the meals we ate together, the places we traveled to, the day to day activities we enjoyed together. Perhaps even their favorite foods and drinks. But in Yizkor we see it all through the eyes of the soul. And that elevates even their material lives to an ethereal and eternal level. Just like the soulfulness of Yom Kippur elevates Shabbat to Shabbat Shabbaton.

As we prepare to remember our loved ones, let us keep all this in mind, and also remember and appreciate all the blessings in our lives.

Let us remember the suffering our parents or grandparents endured so that we can today give the comforts and peace we enjoy, including the fasting in peace on Yom Kippur and the meals we eat all year long in peace.

There was a time... a time that our parents or grandparents lived through, when a Jew could be killed for eating on Yom Kippur. And indeed, the Jew Schneeweiss, and many others, were killed just for that: wanting to fast on Yom Kippur. Six million others were killed just for being Jewish.

There was a time when the mitzvah of eating on Shabbat could be looked at cynically by a Jew like Schneeweiss. And, yet, when it came to fasting on the holiest day of the year, his soul awoke and he gave his life for his Creator.

And his sacrifice lives on in our memories, a living testimony to Am Yisroel Chai!

Our parents were challenged with oppression; we are challenged with abundance, with the ability to freely serve G-d in any and all ways. To freely send our children to any Jewish school we like. To practice and celebrate our Judaism any way we see fit.

Redemption happens when we fuse these two Shabbatot simultaneously: when we realize that the pleasure of the body is to reveal the pleasure of the soul, and when the soul controls the body, like the captain of a ship, not the other way around.

By remembering this (zochor) level of Shabbat we observe and protect (shamor) all levels of Shabbat.

And celebrating these two Shabbat's as one is redemption!

Gut Yom Tov and Gut Shabbos!

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