

Why do we fast on Yom Kippur

One of the questions that is often asked as we celebrate Yom Kippur is, “why do we fast on this festival day”? The answer to that question is found in the book of Leviticus chapter 23 where a listing of all the “feasts unto the L-rd” can be found. In Leviticus 23:27 we are commanded to “afflict our souls” on the Day of Atonement. The only difficulty that we have is that Leviticus nowhere defines for us what exactly “afflicting the soul” means. Most likely the original listeners and readers of Leviticus knew what the phrase “afflict the soul” meant but since we are so far removed in time and space that meaning is not apparent to us.

While Leviticus does not give us the meaning of the phrase “afflict your soul” we do find other places in Hebrew Scripture where this phrase occurs. Since we take all of Scripture as inspired and use Scripture to interpret Scripture we are able to ascertain the meaning by thinking in a canonical mindset.

In Ezra 8:21 we find these words written by Ezra: “I proclaimed a fast there by the Ahava river to afflict ourselves before our G-d, to beseech Him for a smooth journey for us and for our all our possessions... Notice that the word for “fast” and the phrase “to afflict ourselves” are used as a synonym. The same word for afflict in Ezra 8:21 is the word translated “afflict” in Leviticus 23:27.

For further light on this one can also look at Isaiah 58:5 where as in Ezra the word for “fast” and the word “afflict” are used in tandem. Isaiah goes on to say that fasting goes beyond just the issue of not eating but includes the willingness to pursue justice and eradicate injustice. While fasting is definitely a necessary element of Yom Kippur we should not neglect to make sure that those within our community have their needs met. Since most of the festivals of Leviticus 23 had a harvest connected with them it was a natural time to make sure that those who had needs were being thought of and considered by the community.