

Fasting Without “Fasting” on Yom Kippur
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“And you shall afflict your souls.” This text from Leviticus is one from which we learn to fast from food on Yom Kippur. But what if we do not feel like refraining from eating and drinking is safe for us? What if we do not feel like fasting from food is going to elevate us spiritually? What if afflicting ourselves doesn’t feel right?

Yom Kippur can be very lonely for those of us who cannot fast or choose not to fast from food on Yom Kippur, no matter the reason. If you are someone who will not be fasting on Yom Kippur, but still want to intentionally connect to the day, this resource is meant for you, AND, if you are someone who fasts, but is looking for additional spiritual intention to enhance your fasting experience, this resource is also for you. Beyond that, here are a few ways you can celebrate and connect to Yom Kippur without fasting from food, on your own or with your community:

1 - Start with the Themes

Ultimately, fasting may be intended to help us realize some of the themes of Yom Kippur, which include: Teshuvah (Repentance for one’s past mistakes, or Return to oneself), Introspection, Confession, Letting Go, Change, Death, Purification, and yes, even Joy. **To celebrate Yom Kippur, consider creating a program or experience that elevates one of these themes.**

2 - Pursue Tikkun Olam (Social Justice)

Isaiah 58:5-8 (~2,700 years ago)

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 LORD is favorable? **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. 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 kin. *There were hesitations about the practice of fasting long ago! Fasting was not enough for the Jewish prophet, Isaiah. Rather, he encouraged ethical conduct and social justice. **Who is hungry in your community - for physical, emotional, or spiritual nourishment? What Tikkun Olam activities might you facilitate to honor this spirit of Yom Kippur?***

3 - Practice a Little Less Pleasure and Vanity

Mishnah Yoma 8:1 (~1,800 years ago)

On Yom Kippur it is forbidden to eat, to drink, **to wash, to anoint oneself, to put on sandals, or to have intercourse....**

*Even the Mishnah, one of Judaism’s core texts, does not limit Yom Kippur observance to fasting for eating and drinking. **What would it feel like to physically hold back from other activities on Yom Kippur, if not food?** To avoid washing your hands and body for the way, putting on make-up, wearing uncomfortable shoes, or avoiding sex and romance on Yom Kippur? Would that help distinguish Yom Kippur for you and facilitate feeling more in-tune with the spirit of the day?*

4 - Choose Something Specific to Fast From

Beyond the Mishnah, we may want to choose to “fast” from things like the doom scrolling and social comparison social media, thoughtlessly wasting resources, or negatively judging others or ourselves. Check out [these three alternative ways to fast this Yom Kippur](#) from Gather DC.

5 - When You Eat, Consider it a Mitzvah and Make a Special Beracha (Blessing)

From an Ancient High Holiday Prayerbook (Machzor):

Behold I am prepared to fulfill the mitzvah of eating and drinking on Yom Kippur, as You have written in Your Torah: "You shall observe My statutes and My ordinances, which a person shall do and live by them. I am the L-rd." In the merit of fulfilling this mitzvah, seal me, and all the ill of Your nation Israel, for a complete recovery. May I merit next Yom Kippur to once again fulfill [the mitzvah of] "you shall afflict yourselves [on Yom Kippur]." May this be Your will. Amen.

If you are going to be noshing, how about sanctifying the moment? This ancient text echoes a sentiment we might be feeling: that we see it as a mitzvah to eat, for survival! Maybe next year will be different, maybe not. But for now, we can frame our eating in the context of Mitzvah, or commandment. You might even have a [Yom Kippur Seder](#) for those who cannot eat.

6 - Increase Your Intention and Focus

Jaclyn Novatt, PhD, MS

First, I consider that one purpose of fasting is to **prevent distraction on this day of inner focus.**

Therefore, I plan my meals in advance, even prepare them in advance when possible, so that there's no thought or effort involved on the day. I know exactly what I'm going to eat and when. I plan simple meals—nothing fancy or extravagant, just what is needed to provide me the right nutrition and keep me on track.

Second, I **eat round things** on Yom Kippur to symbolize the cyclical year—for example, cheerios with an apple for breakfast, an English muffin sandwich and grapes for lunch. I then join my family for a late dinner at break fast.

Finally, I try and find other ways to **practice self-denial and increase my focus.** I am not normally *shomer* Shabbat (observant of the laws of Sabbath), but I try and avoid the computer or television on Yom Kippur.

*Dr. Novatt gives us a few other ideas for how we can add intention to our day and get to the core of what she believes Yom Kippur is about. **What else can you do to increase your inner focus?***