



STAYING POSITIVE: REPENTANCE AND EATING DISORDER RECOVERY

Among the myriad of traditions and prayers experienced on Yom Kippur, two stand out: fasting and repentance.

For most adults, these are uncomfortable but benign practices whose pain is quickly forgotten when the fast is over. Unfortunately, the experience of fasting can be much more challenging for someone struggling with disordered eating. The rhythm of the holiday, with its large meals before and after the period of fasting, can be at best extremely stressful to someone in treatment for an eating disorder. At worst, it can be dangerous — both physically and emotionally. A person in recovery will often be assigned a structured meal plan of set portions at set times in an effort to establish a pattern of healthy eating. This schedule is crucial to their recovery, and disrupting this pattern at sensitive stages of recovery can be extremely harmful to the recovery process. Putting the brain and body into a state of deprivation can also be detrimental to the biology and chemistry of the brain.



For these reasons, fasting on Yom Kippur simply isn't an option for people struggling with disordered eating. And while many conceive of the day as a time when people are meant to “suffer” or “punish themselves” for things they did wrong, the Jewish value of Pikuach Nefesh — protecting human life — is first and foremost to any religious setting. After all, the Torah tells us:

You shall keep My laws and My rules, by the pursuit of which man shall live: I am the LORD. (Leviticus 18:5)





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Furthermore, the Talmud utilizes this verse to explain that one must not sacrifice their life in the service of the commandments.

The verse states: “You shall keep My statutes and My judgments, which a person shall do, and he shall live by them” (Leviticus 18:5), thereby teaching that the mitzvot were given to provide life, but they were not given so that one will die due to their observance. (Sanhedrin 74a)

This ultimately means if you are participating in a mitzvah that is actively causing you harm, it is not a mitzvah you are commanded to perform. This perspective is crucial to one who is recovering from an eating disorder. One of the first lessons someone in recovery is taught is the importance of taking care of yourself, your body and your recovery, and that includes feeding your body, brain and soul.

Repentance, or "**teshuvah**," also can be tricky territory for someone struggling with an eating disorder. Most eating disorders have several things in common: a pattern of negative thinking, poor self-image and low self-efficacy (a belief in what you can accomplish). For someone in this mindset, taking an inventory of mistakes, flaws and misgivings about oneself can intensify these distortions and severely affect their mental health. This is not at all what teshuvah is meant to achieve.





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Whether you are someone in recovery from disordered eating or someone who simply doesn't connect to fasting as a means of repentance, Yom Kippur has a lot to offer a practitioner. At its core, it is a holiday all about self-reflection, transformation and setting positive intentions for the coming year, and there are approaches to making that process a positive and healthy one.



Activity - Writing Our Way to Repentance

One activity that has been proven to be a healthy and effective way to reflect is [journaling](#). It helps you collect your thoughts in a structured and slow-paced way, avoiding most forms of unhealthy reflection like overloading yourself or getting lost in your thoughts. Journaling also helps accomplish what cognitive scientists have called reinforcement, or calling attention to something in regular intervals. Reinforcement is one of the most effective ways to change our behavior, as it allows us to notice the things we are doing right or wrong and adjust our actions accordingly over time.

This can be complemented with “[Positive Psychology](#),” the process of identifying and engaging more frequently in the thoughts, feelings and behaviors that benefit you, rather than focusing on negative ones and avoiding them. The goal is to focus on doing more good things and creating a growth-focused mindset that makes us feel good about who we are and [what we ARE doing](#) — rather than on [what we SHOULD or SHOULDN'T be doing](#).

As Yom Kippur approaches, the following journaling and thought activities can be helpful in cultivating healthy reflection and evolution, [whether you are struggling with disordered eating or just looking for a different approach to repentance this year](#).



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What are you currently doing that you would like to do MORE of? How can you feed your mind, body and spirit in a way that will help you to meet your goals and be the best version of yourself?

I want to feed my body by...

I felt grateful my body was able to do _____ for me this year.

My mind/body protected me by _____. If I do _____ I can experience this more often.

I felt good about myself when I _____. I can set myself up for success by finding tools and reminders to keep close at hand when I need them like _____.

I liked when I was able to solve a problem by _____. I'd like to remember how I started that strategy with this:_____.

I felt grateful my body was able to do _____ for me this year.

What makes me feel connected to others?

What makes me feel connected to myself? To my body? To my spirit?

What makes me feel connected to the Earth?

What makes me feel connected to Judaism? To G-d?

