

The Limits Built Into The Day

Yom Kippur 5787

OHR HACHAIM • VAYIKRA 16:29

Why Fasting, Specifically

The Torah could have commanded almost any form of self-affliction for Yom Kippur — hard labor, physical exertion, anything difficult to bear. The Ohr HaChaim asks why the Torah specifically withholds food. His answer: affliction built around exertion lands unevenly. A strong person barely feels a day of hard labor; a weak person is crushed by the same task. That isn't affliction of the nefesh in equal measure — it's affliction of the guf, and an uneven one at that.

Withholding food is different. It takes the same thing away from every person regardless of strength, so the words the Torah actually uses — תענו את נפשתיכם, afflict your souls — land the same way on everyone who hears them.

עינוי הכולל לנפש

בהשוואה

an affliction equal for every soul

KLI YAKAR • VAYIKRA 23:27

Why Erev Yom Kippur Doesn't Count

Chazal teach that whoever eats well on the ninth of Tishrei is considered by the Torah as though he had fasted on both the ninth and the tenth (Berachos 8b). Given that, the Kli Yakar asks why the Torah bothers writing the limiting word אך — “only” — before naming the tenth as the day that atones. Without it, a person might assume the ninth carries some of that same power.

That's exactly the mistake אך is there to prevent. Eating well on Erev Yom Kippur may be credited to you as an extra day of fasting — but only the tenth itself can atone. The buildup counts. The kapparah doesn't transfer.

אך בעשור

‘only’ – the tenth atones, not the ninth

MALBIM • VAYIKRA 16:30

The Pasuk's Own Word Order Gives It Away

יכפר עליכם לטהר אתכם מכל חטאתיכם לפני ה' תטהרו — read plainly, the words sit in an odd order. “Before Hashem” should stand beside “will atone,” since that's what it logically modifies — not stranded at the end, attached to “from all your sins.”

The Malbim notes that this apparent misplacement is exactly what led Rabi Elazar ben Azaryah to his famous drasha (Mishnah Yoma 8:9): לפני ה' isn't describing where the atonement happens. It's describing which sins qualify — only those בין אדם למקום, between a person and Hashem. Sins against another person sit outside the pasuk entirely, until the person you wronged is at peace with you.

לפני ה' תטהרו

misplaced on purpose

FOR THE TABLE

Before assuming Yom Kippur will cover everything, make the calls it can't make for you.

WORTH ASKING

If Yom Kippur's kapparah is built to land equally on everyone, why do the days before it ask us to repair relationships one person at a time?