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“Rosh Hashonah, Ramadan and Fasting”

Today we will observe our first Frugal Meal, in which we will not have salads or dessert, and the money we save will be sent to OXFAM, a confederation of thirteen organizations that fight hunger and injustice around the world. This Frugal Meal will be the first of thirteen such meals we will observe this year, each of which generating money for charities chosen by the Chapel Committee.

There is a small miracle in the coincidence of our Frugal Meal and Chapel during this particular week in that fasting is an important part of holidays celebrated in Islam and Judaism this coming week: This Sunday is the Jewish Holiday of Rosh Hashanah, the first of what the Jewish tradition refers to as the “Days of Awe,” a ten-day period which culminates in Yom Kippur, also known as the Day of Atonement. Eid ul-Fitr, the Muslim holiday that marks the end of Ramadan, the Islamic holy month of fasting, is this coming Monday. These are seminal observances in each religion, and they have much to teach us about the spiritual riches of self-denial in their own contexts. This talk will be broken into two sections: first, it will consider the personal experiences of Muslims who describe fasting, and then it will consider the corollary experience of wonder as it was understood by one of Judaism’s great contemporary thinkers.

During the month of Ramadan, Islam’s Holiest Month, Muslims all over the world fast from sunup to sundown. Another Ramadan practice is giving to the poor, but the following six Muslims who were interviewed were asked to speak mostly about their experiences of fasting during Ramadan.¹

Ibrahim Almarashi, an Iraqi graduate student at UCLA said the following: “[During one of the days of my fasting] a fellow Iraqi Muslim who did not practice the faith knew that I was fasting yet was still eating her ice cream in my face to taunt my practice of my religion at the university. I remember that moment because usually when you think about Muslims you think about one monolithic block of people who are engaged in Islamic rituals without any deviation. At the same time there was a Jewish man in my class, from Iran, who also was eating ice cream – it was a very hot day – and he knew I was fasting. When he saw me, he [was thoughtful enough to walk] out of the classroom, [to not tempt me]. We have an image of Judaism and Islam locked in an intractable conflict. Yet think of this daily moment. Here was a Jew from Iran who was more considerate of my beliefs than a fellow Iraqi Muslim.”

Yanina Vaschenko, a young woman born in Russia who now lives in Dallas, Texas, said of her first fast when she was a teenager: “When I first fasted for Ramadan, the world felt illuminated. I loved it. It had to be something bigger than my base desires that was driving me. That was the most peaceful I had ever felt. It was unreal. It led me further and further into Islamic practices. Fasting for 30 days was an accomplishment.”

Rajahat Ali, a Muslim from Fremont, California, said, “When I went to university in California with atheists and agnostics and Christians, they would ask how this was fasting if I ate sugar dates at the end of each day. I thought about that and how we do not break the fast with the sugar date we eat after sundown. Rather, linguistically, it is better to say that the fast ends not as it is “broken” but as it is “opened.” Ramadan is an attempt to achieve God-consciousness through the day. It is not just about eating or not eating. We continue to be nice to our neighbors, to repair relations with our family. In fact, our fast continues with the first thing we eat after sundown.

Feruze Faison of St. Albans, New York, said that, “Fasting teaches you that you can do so much more than you think you can. Normally you cannot on a hot day go without drinking water for more than an hour. During Ramadan for

¹ Speaking of Faith, 9/13/09

some reason you can. You can go for a whole day, and at the end of the day when you taste that first sip of water, it is the sweetest thing in the world, that accomplishment, that ‘Wow! I can actually do this! God knows what else I can do.’”

Tayyaba Syed of Glendale Heights, Illinois, says, “[As a young girl who grew up in a Muslim family, I wanted more than anything to fast as I had seen my parents do it. [Still young when the day arrived for my first fast.] I woke up before the sunrise and ate some breakfast. Then I told my father that I wanted to continue the fast for the entire day. He was so concerned and said, ‘No, you are too little.’ He said, ‘I need to fast; it is not obligatory on you. Let’s take baby steps. Here, drink this water, break your fast.’” She continues, “I was so disappointed [but finally broke my first fast before the day ended],” and then she adds, “Ramadan is a beautiful month of spirituality and unity and family and community coming together and a lot of time spent in the mosque and prayer and reading the Quran. I love it.”

Sahar Ullah, a young woman who lives in Florida, said, “I first fasted on the day of my middle school’s first field trip of the year. [The best part of this trip was that we] got to go to McDonald’s and did not have to bring our bag lunches. When I found that Ramadan was on this day, [the very day I was to begin my fasting,] I was furious. We [arrived at] McDonald’s, and my friends ordered their meals, but I just sat there. One of my friends kept eating her fries in front of me, slowly, asking me if I wanted some. Half an hour later, as we were about to leave, the manager approached me with two big bags with meals in them. She said that two gentlemen had asked her to give them to me. The two men had been watching us. They were wearing scrubs, so they must have been med students or physicians. They must have thought that I was too poor to buy the meals or that I was starving myself. It was a really nice gesture. I could not eat [the food, so] I gave away the burgers and the drinks, and I broke my fast by eating the fries on my first Ramadan.”

The experiences of these six people were obviously not all the same, but that fasting fed them in important ways is obvious. We might say that each of the people interviewed found in their Ramadan experiences with fasting a sense of wonder, wonder at the variety of human experience, wonder at the depths of each person and the depth of “daily moments,” wonder at the power of community and family, wonder at the extent of our own resources, and wonder at the potential goodness of the stranger, wonder at the things which simultaneously divide and unite us.

The Rash Hashanah holiday begins the “Days of Awe.” Because of this, Rabbis, that is, Jewish congregational leaders and teachers, often refer to the philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel, who has left us with a vast literature about the idea and experience of “awe” or “wonder.” I would like to speak a bit about him because of what Judaism offers to its believers as well as to those of us who are not Jewish. Like Islam, this is a religious tradition laden with spiritual riches.

Heschel was born in Warsaw, Poland in 1907 and died an American citizen in New York City in 1972. He was not only one of the most admired thinkers of his times; he also acted on his beliefs, marching in civil rights demonstrations in the 1960’s and 70’s to end discrimination. He also risked the anger of fellow Jews when he famously met with the Pope, John Paul VI, at the Vatican to discuss Catholic/Jewish relations. If you would like to see what he looked like, you will find hanging over the desk in my office a picture of him marching with Martin Luther King.

Heschel’s stature as a man and thinker is evident in the following anecdote from his life. (I borrow parts of this story from an address delivered by Rabbi Rob Scheinberg.²) He suffered a debilitating heart attack when he was in his mid-50’s – one from which he never fully recovered. A few days after he had been operated on, when one of his closest students visited him, Heschel spoke slowly, with much difficulty, almost whispering. He told his student and

² Scheinberg, Rob, “The First Day of Rosh HaShanah, 9/2/98” <http://www.hobokensynagogue.org/RH092198.PDF>

friend that when he regained consciousness, his first feelings were not of despair or anger, but of gratitude to God for his life, for every moment he had lived. “I have seen so many miracles in my lifetime,” he said. Then he paused, exhausted by the few sentences he had uttered, and continued: “I have not asked for success. I have asked for wonder. God gave this to me.”

According to Heschel, the most profound blessing one can have in life is not success. It is not material or social prosperity. Surprisingly, it is not even happiness. Rather, it is *wonder* – the ability to spot and appreciate miracles in the world – the ability to experience the world anew every day – the ability to learn from boredom and to fend off cynicism – to experience the world and our lives always as if for the first time. He called this “radical amazement.”

Heschel wrote that “Radical amazement is the chief characteristic of the religious person’s attitude toward history and nature. It is alien to her spirit to take things for granted, to regard events as a natural course of things... She knows that there are laws that regulate the course of natural processes; she is aware of the regularity and pattern of things. However, such knowledge fails to mitigate [lessen] her sense of perpetual surprise at the fact that there are facts at all. Looking at the world, she would say, quoting the Psalms, “This is the Lord God’s doing – it is marvelous in our eyes.”

The miraculous is, then, not so much dramatic or unexplained or unnatural or supernatural events as it is events that elevate us in radical amazement. I can hear this amazement in the stories of the Ibrahim, Yanina, Rajahat, Feruze, Tayyaba, and Sahar. This amazement has provoked in Judaism blessings for just about everything – Jews give thanks before and after each meal, for each sunrise and sunset, for new clothes, new babies, new flowers in the spring, for opening our eyes in the morning, for closing them at night. There is even a blessing for going to the bathroom! (I would like to know how this one is worded.) Further, as you become increasingly mindful of all of the blessings, which are beyond counting, you open yourself to what Heschel called radical amazement.

One of the readings in preparation for Rosh Hashanah is the following quotation from the Bible: If you listen to the voice of your God, “all these blessings (these many, many blessings which you have been saying all year) will come upon you, catch up to you, and overtake you.”

In other words, all the blessings of the world are *behind* us. This spatial orientation sounds counter-intuitive. We think of blessings as way out in front of us, and if we chase them with enough ambition and energy, we might even catch up with them. We Americans have even named this orientation to happiness: we call the proper orientation to the blessings of life the “Pursuit of Happiness.” Happiness, blessedness, is to be *pursued*.

But Heschel’s sense, which he found in the Bible, and which, again, I hear in the stories of the Muslims who observed Ramadan, was that the blessings of the world are not out in front of us to claim, but *behind* us. If we learn to listen to God’s voice, then the blessings and happiness *will pursue us*. That is, blessings will eventually *catch up and overtake us* if we open ourselves up to the experiences and impressions and thoughts that enrich us in practices such as those observed by Muslims during Ramadan.