

Operation Not By Might, Nor By Power

Hebrew College, December 17th, 2009

Opening/framing questions:

1. Have you ever observed a fast in the context of a normal work day (ie not YK)? What was the experience like? How did you find it affected your behaviour?
2. What is the purpose of fasting? Do you think it can affect anything beyond ourselves? If so, how and why?
3. What is the role of rabbis and communal leadership in these fasts?

Take a look at the following texts, but please prioritize thinking about them and the guiding questions as opposed to trying to get to the end!

Mishna Masechet Taanit 1.6 - 2.1

Masechet Taanit is about communal fast days. The first perek follows the progression of the calendar through fall, winter and spring, instituting a succession of fasts that increase in frequency and severity as certain key dates are reached and the rain still has not come.

The second perek describes what the public ritual for such fast days is.

1) Mishna Taanit 1.6 – 1.7

<p>These [days] pass and they are still not answered. The Beit Din decrees three further fasts upon the community.</p> <p>They may eat and drink while it is still dark, but they are forbidden to work, to wash, to anoint, to wear shoes, and to have sex; and all the shops are locked up....</p> <p>These [days] pass and they are still not answered. They impose limits on buying and selling; on building and planting; on betrothals and weddings; and on inquiring about each other's well-being, like human beings rebuked by God....</p>	<p>א, וְעָבְרוּ אֶלֶּיךָ, וְלֹא נֶעֱנֶה--בֵּית דִּין גּוֹזְרִין שְׁלוֹשׁ תַּעֲנִיּוֹת אַחֲרָיוּת עַל הַצִּיּוּר.</p> <p>אוֹכְלִין וְשׁוֹתִין מִבְּעוֹד יוֹם, וְאִסּוּרִין בְּמִלְאָכָה וּבְרַחֲצִינָה וּבְסִיכָה וּבְנִעִילַת הַסַּנְדֵּל וּבְתַשְׁמִישׁ הַמִּיטָה, וְנוֹעֲלִים אֶת הַמִּרְחָצִאוֹת....</p> <p>א, ז' עָבְרוּ, וְלֹא נֶעֱנֶה--מִמַּעֲטִין בְּמִשְׁאֵה וּבְמִתְנֵן, בְּבִנְיִין וּבְנִטְיָעָה, בְּאִירוּסִין וּבְנִישׁוּאִין, וּבְשִׂאֵילַת שְׁלוֹם בֵּין אָדָם לְחֵבְרוֹ, כְּבָנֵי אָדָם הַנּוֹפִים מִלְּפָנֵי הַמָּקוֹם....</p>
---	---

Questions:

1. What do you infer from this sequence of prohibitions?
2. Why do you think commerce, construction, marriages and greetings are added to the usual fast day prohibitions of physical comforts?

What effect would this have on society? Why might that be desirable?

3. What would it be like to adopt this as a contemporary practice? Would you make any adjustments?

2) Mishna Taanit 2.1

<p>What was the service [<i>sefer</i>] for such fast days? They would bring out the ark into the town square, and put dust and ashes onto it, and onto the head of the mayor [<i>nassi</i>] and the head of the religious authority [<i>av beit din</i>]; and each and every one of them put [dust and ashes] on their head.</p> <p>The eldest among them would speak words of rebuke, saying, 'It doesn't say about the people of Nineveh that God saw their sackcloth and their fasting, but rather that "God saw their <i>deeds</i>, that they turned away from their evil paths" [Jonah ch.3]; and in [Joel ch.2] it says "Rend your hearts, not your clothes."</p>	<p>ב,א סדר תענייות כיצד: מוציאים את התיבה לרחובה של עיר; ונותנים אפר מקלה על גבי התיבה, ובראש הנשיא, ובראש אב בית דין, וכל אחד ואחד נוטל ונותן בראשו.</p> <p>והזקן שבהם אומר לפניהם דברי כיבושים--אחינו, לא נאמר באנשי נינוה, וירא האלוהים את שקם ואת תעניתם, אלא "וירא האלוהים את מעשיהם, כי שבו מדרכם הרעה" (יונה ג,י); ובקבלה הוא אומר, "וקרעו לבבכם ואל בגדיכם, ושובו אל ה' אלוהיכם: כי חנון ורחום, הוא--ארך אפיים ורב חסד, וניחם על הרעה" (יואל ב,יג).</p>
---	--

Questions:

1. What do you learn about the ritual from how and where it is conducted? What would be our equivalent public space?
2. What is the selection and commentary on the texts trying to say? How might we apply that to our contemporary practice? What would be your words of rebuke?

3) Mishna 2.2

<p>They stand in prayer. The one who goes before the ark [as sh"tz] should be an elder, accustomed to prayer, who has children, and whose house is empty: so that his heart should be wholly in prayer...</p>	<p>ב,ב עמדו בתפילה--מורידין לפני התיבה זקן ורגיל, ויש לו בנים, וביתו ריקן, כדי שיהא ליבו שלם בתפילה;</p>
---	---

Questions:

1. Overall, what is the impact of this sequence of texts? What do you find striking about them?
2. Do you think this would work as a contemporary practice? Why or why not?

Talmud Bavli Masechet Taanit 12b

On 12b of Bavli Masechet Ta'anit the rabbis are discussing when fast days take place, during the day and the night or just during the day, and the conversation eventually moves to what happens during the different parts of the fast days, during the different times.

4) Taanit 12b

<p>How did they do it? Abaye said: From the morning until midday, we deal with local matters; from then on for a quarter of the day we read the torah and the haftarah, and from then on we ask for mercy. As it says [in Neh. 9:3]: "Standing in their places, they read from the scroll of the Teaching of the Lord their God for one-fourth of the day, and for another fourth they confessed and prostrated themselves before the Lord their God."</p>	<p>היכר עבדי? - אמר אביי: מצפרא עד פלגא דיומא מעיינין במילי דמתא, מכאן ואילך רבעא דיומא קרינן בספרא ואפטרותא, מכאן ואילך בעינן רחמי. שנאמר <u>נחמיה ט</u> ויקומו על עמדם ויקראו בספר תורת ה' אלהיהם רבעית היום ורבעית מתודים ומשתחוים לה' אלהיהם.</p>
--	--

Rashi on Taanit 12b

<p>We Deal with Local Matters – a thorough examination of witnesses, to look into the dealings of the people of the city, if they have stolen, if there is theft or violence between them, and then we create reconciliation between them.</p>	<p>מעיינין במילי דמתא - דרישה וחקירה, לבדוק במעשיהם בעסקי בני העיר, אם גזל וחמס ביניהן, ומפייסין אותן.</p>
---	--

Questions:

1. What is the model presented here for communal *teshuvah*? What does the context surrounding the proof text in Nehemiah add to the model?
2. What might "local matters" mean in an interconnected age? In terms of our relationship to Israel/Palestine? How is this model applicable to our times?