

## Is Fasting Required on Yom Kippur? by Matthew Janzen (2010; slight revision 2019)

A few years back I ran across a gentleman who explained to me through email that he did not believe fasting was required on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 23:26-32). I was amazed at that statement, because I thought it was clear that fasting (abstaining from food and drink) was required, and I had never before heard anyone state that it was not. I attempted to explain my understanding of Scripture to him, but it was to no avail. I honestly did not give it much thought, because I was persuaded that such a position would never fly among students of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Since then, I have from time to time ran across others who have felt the same way. I recently (in the year 2012) had someone send me a very lengthy email explaining why we *should not* fast on the Day of Atonement, and then just yesterday (September 27, 2012) I saw a post on a *Facebook* page where someone was wondering if fasting was required on the Day of Atonement.

Seeing that I believe fasting is commanded on this day, and that there is such a strict requirement about it (Lev. 23:29), I am compelled to place my study notes into a paper for others. My hope and prayer is that others benefit from these notes, and that this teaching about not fasting on the Day of Atonement will be answered accordingly.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. The Meaning of Afflict

**Le 23:27** Also on the tenth *day* of this seventh month *there shall be* a day of atonement: it shall be an holy convocation unto you; and ye shall afflict your souls, and offer an offering made by fire unto Yahweh.<sup>2</sup>

#### Strong's Exhaustive Concordance

Afflict = H6031 *'anah aw-naw'*

a primitive root (possibly rather ident. with 6030 through the idea of looking down or browbeating); to depress literally or figuratively, transitive or intransitive (in various applications, as follows):--abase self, afflict(-ion, self), answer (by mistake for 6030), chasten self, deal hardly with, defile, exercise, force, gentleness, humble (self), hurt, ravish, sing (by mistake for 6030), speak (by mistake for 6030), submit self, weaken, X in any wise.

---

<sup>1</sup> I believe the understanding of "afflict one's soul" (Lev. 23:27, 29) is to practice self denial. While the most obvious way to accomplish this is to deny one's self of the pleasures of eating and drinking, there are other ways in which we can deny ourselves. A couple of which are refraining from personal grooming, and also refraining from sexual relations with one's spouse. The Day of Atonement is all about humility, sorrow, repentance, forgiveness, etc. We are required to recognize our sin and be sorrowful, and not to indulge in the pleasures that we normally partake of.

<sup>2</sup> All Scripture in this article is taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

## 2. Some Uses of *Anah* in the Tanak

**Ge 16:6** But Abram said unto Sarai, Behold, thy maid *is* in thy hand; do to her as it pleaseth thee. And when Sarai **dealt hardly** with her, she fled from her face.

**Ge 34:2** And when Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite, prince of the country, saw her, he took her, and lay with her, and **defiled** her.

**Ex 1:11** Therefore they did set over them taskmasters to **afflict** them with their burdens. And they built for Pharaoh treasure cities, Pithom and Raamses.

**De 8:2** And thou shalt remember all the way which Yahweh thy Mighty One led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to **humble** thee, *and* to prove thee, to know what *was* in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep his commandments, or no.

**De 22:24** Then ye shall bring them both out unto the gate of that city, and ye shall stone them with stones that they die; the damsel, because she cried not, *being* in the city; and the man, because he hath **humbled** his neighbour's wife: so thou shalt put away evil from among you.

**Ps 102:23** He **weakened** my strength in the way; he shortened my days.

**Isa 53:7** He was oppressed, and he was **afflicted**, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.

## 3. Fasting as a way of Affliction

**Ezr 8:21** Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava, that we might afflict (*anah*) ourselves before our Mighty One, to seek of him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance.

**Ps 35:13** But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth: I **humbled (*anah*) my soul with fasting**; and my prayer returned into mine own bosom.

**Isa 58:1** Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins.

**Isa 58:2** Yet they seek me daily, and delight to know my ways, as a nation that did righteousness, and forsook not the ordinance of their Mighty One: they ask of me the ordinances of justice; they take delight in approaching to (the) Mighty One.

**Isa 58:3** Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not? wherefore have we afflicted (anah) our soul, and thou takest no knowledge? Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure, and exact all your labours.

**Isa 58:4** Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness: ye shall not fast as ye *do this* day, to make your voice to be heard on high.

**Isa 58:5** Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict (anah) his soul? is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to Yahweh?

**Isa 58:6** Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?

**Isa 58:7** Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?

**Isa 58:8** Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of Yahweh shall be thy reward.

**Isa 58:9** Then shalt thou call, and Yahweh shall answer; thou shalt cry, and he shall say, Here I *am*. If thou take away from the midst of thee the yoke, the putting forth of the finger, and speaking vanity;

**Isa 58:10** And if thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted (anah) soul; then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness *be* as the noonday:

**Da 10:2** In those days I Daniel was mourning three full weeks.

**Da 10:3** I ate no pleasant bread, neither came flesh nor wine in my mouth, neither did I anoint myself at all, till three whole weeks were fulfilled.

**Da 10:12** Then said he unto me, Fear not, Daniel: for from the first day that thou didst set thine heart to understand, and to chasten (anah) thyself before thy Mighty One, thy words were heard, and I am come for thy words.

#### **4. Philo (Israelite historian | 20 B.C. - 30 A.D.) records that it was a day of fasting.**

##### **Special Laws 2.11.(41)**

Now there are ten festivals in number, as the law sets them down.

1. The first is that which any one will perhaps be astonished to hear called a festival. This festival is every day.
2. The second festival is the seventh day, which the Hebrews in their native language call the sabbath.
3. The third is that which comes after the conjunction, which happens on the day of the new moon in each month.

4. The fourth is that of the passover which is called the passover.
5. The fifth is the first fruits of the corn--the sacred sheaf.
6. The sixth is the feast of unleavened bread, after which that festival is celebrated, which is really
7. The seventh day of seventh days.
8. The eighth is the festival of the sacred moon, or the feast of trumpets.
9. **The ninth is the fast.**
10. The tenth is the feast of tabernacles, which is the last of all the annual festivals, ending so as to make the perfect number of ten. We must now begin with the first festival.

### **Special Laws 2.32(193-197)**

The next feast held after the Trumpets is **the Fast**. Perhaps some of the perversely minded who are not ashamed to censure things excellent will say, what sort of a feast is this in which there are no gatherings to eat and drink, no company of entertainers or entertained, no copious supply of strong drink nor tables sumptuously furnished, nor a generous display of all the accompaniments of a public banquet, nor again the merriment and revelry with frolic and drollery, nor dancing to the sound of flute and harp and timbrels and cymbals, and the other instruments of the debilitated and invertebrate kind of music which through the channel of the ears awaken the unruly lusts?

For it is in these and through these that men, in their ignorance of what true merriment is, consider that the merriment of a feast is to be found. This the clear seeing eyes of Moses the ever wise discerned and therefore he called **the fast** a feast, the greatest of the feasts, in his native tongue a Sabbath of Sabbaths, or as the Greeks would say, a seven of sevens, a holier than the holy. He gave it this name for many reasons.

First, **because of the self restraint which it entails**; always and everywhere indeed he exhorted them to shew this in all the affairs of life, **in controlling the tongue and the belly and the organs below the belly**, but on this occasion especially he bids them do honor to it by dedicating thereto a particular day. To one who has learnt to **disregard food and drink** which are absolutely necessary, are there any among the superfluities of life which he can fail to despise, things which exist to promote not so much preservation and permanence of life as pleasure with all its powers of mischief?

Secondly because **the holy day is entirely devoted to prayers and supplications**, and men from morn to eve imply their leisure in nothing else but offering petitions of humble entreaty in which they seek earnestly to propitiate Elohim and ask for remission of their sins, voluntary and involuntary, and entertain bright hopes looking not to their own merits but the gracious nature of Him **Who sets pardon before chastisement**.

Thirdly, because of the time at which the celebration of the fast occurs, namely, that when all the annual fruits of the earth have been gathered in. **To eat and drink of these without delay would he held shew gluttony, but to fast and refrain from taking them as food shews the perfect peity** which teaches the mind not to put trust in what stands ready prepared before us as though it were the source of health and life...

### Special Laws 1.35(186)

When the third season takes place in the seventh month at the autumnal equinox, at the beginning of the month, the feast which begins the sacred month named "the feast of trumpets" and which was discussed earlier is celebrated. **On the tenth day the fast takes place which they take seriously...**

## 5. New Testament Reference - by the NT times the Day of Atonement was known in shorthand as "the fast."

**Ac 27:9** Now when much time was spent, and when sailing was now dangerous, **because the fast was now already past**, Paul admonished *them*,

**Ac 27:10** And said unto them, Sirs, I perceive that this voyage will be with hurt and much damage, not only of the lading and ship, but also of our lives.

### Albert Barnes Notes on the NT

*Because the fast was now already past.* By "the fast," here is evidently intended the fast which occurred among the Jews on the great day of atonement. That was the tenth of the month *Tisri*, which answers to a part of September and part of October. It was therefore the time of the autumnal equinox, and when the navigation of the Mediterranean was esteemed to be particularly dangerous, from the storms which usually occurred about that time. The ancients regarded this as a dangerous time to navigate the Mediterranean. See the proofs in Kuin"el on this place.

### Adam Clarke's Commentary

Sailing was now dangerous, because the fast was now already past - **It is generally allowed that the fast mentioned here was that of the great day of atonement which was always celebrated on the tenth day of the seventh month**, which would answer to the latter end of our September; see Le 16:29; 23:27, etc. As this was about the time of the autumnal equinox, when the Mediterranean Sea was sufficiently tempestuous, we may suppose this feast alone to be intended. To sail after this feast was proverbially dangerous among the ancient Jews. See proofs in Schoettgen.

### Geneva Bible Footnote

**This refers to the Jews fast** which they kept in the feast of expiation, as we read in Le 23:17, which fell in the seventh month which we call October, and is not good for navigating or sailing.

### John Gill's Commentary

**and when sailing was now dangerous, because the fast was now already past;** the Syriac version reads, "the fast of the Jews"; **this was the day of atonement, which was the grand fast of the Jews, on which day they afflicted their souls,** Le 23:27 in memory of the worshipping of the golden calf; on that day they neither eat nor drink, nor do any work, neither do they wash, nor are they anointed, nor do they bind on their shoes, or make use of the marriage bed; nor do they read anything but sorrowful things, as the Lamentations of Jeremiah, until the setting of the sun, and the rising of the stars; and

hence this day is called by them צום יום, "the day of fasting", and הגדול צום, "the great fast, and the day of the fast of atonement, and the fast of the atonement"<sup>1</sup>: now this day was on the 10th of the month Tisri, which answers to the latter part of our September, and the former part of October; so that it was now Michaelmas time, when winter was coming on, and sailing began to be dangerous; about this time of the year the Pleiades set, which brings on tempestuous weather, and unfit for sailing:

#### Jamieson-Fausset-Brown Commentary

**was now dangerous, because the fast was now . . . past--that of the day of atonement, answering to the end of *September* and beginning of *October*, about which time the navigation is pronounced unsafe by writers of authority. Since all hope of completing the voyage during that season was abandoned, the question next was, whether they should winter at Fair Havens, or move to Port Phenice, a harbor about forty miles to the westward. Paul assisted at the consultation and strongly urged them to winter where they were.**

#### Matthew Poole's Commentary

**Ver. 9.** This *fast* was not any necessitated abstinence, but a religious fast, as the word here used does most commonly signify; and the article being put to it, it may well denote some eminent and known fast. We read, that amongst the Jews several fasts were observed; as the fast of the fourth month, of the fifth month, of the seventh, and of the tenth month, **Zec 8:19. But that of the seventh month did far exceed them all, it being the day in which the priest was to make an atonement for the people; and they were strictly commanded to afflict their souls in it, Le 16:29; 23:27.** (Thus when we look up to him whom by our sins we have pierced, we must mourn, **Zec 12:10.**) Now this fast was to be observed on the tenth day of Tisri, or their seventh month (which is made up of part of September and part of October); and then this day, which might well be called *the fast*, fell about the beginning of October; after which time, until March, they did not usually venture on the seas, especially their ships not being so able to bear a storm as ours are, and the art of navigation being not yet in any reasonable degree found out amongst them.

#### Robertson's Word Pictures

**Fast was now already gone by** (*dia to kai tên nêsteian êdê parelêluthenai*). Accusative (after *dia*) of the articular infinitive perfect active of *parerchomai*, to pass by, with the accusative of general reference (*nêsteian*, **the great day of atonement of the Jews, Le 16:29) occurring about the end of September.** The ancients considered navigation on the Mediterranean unsafe from early October till the middle of March. In A.D. 59 the Fast occurred on Oct. 5. There is nothing strange in Luke using this Jewish note of time as in **Ac 20:6** though a Gentile Christian. Paul did it also (**1Co 16:8**). It is no proof that Luke was a Jewish proselyte. We do not know precisely when the party left Caesarea (possibly in August), but in ample time to arrive in Rome before October if conditions had been more favourable. But the contrary winds had made the voyage very slow and difficult all the way (verse Ac 27:7) besides the long delay here in this harbour of Fair Havens.