

The Torah commands us to afflict ourselves on the tenth day of the seventh month, תשרי, as it says (ויקרא טז:כט) תענו את נפשותיכם. We derive from this statement that one must observe physical afflictions and refrain from eating, drinking, wearing leather shoes, washing, bathing, anointing with creams or oils and marital relations, often referred to as the חמשת עינוים.

The word תענו is interesting as its root in this context connotes affliction or pain from an external source. For example, the Torah uses the word ויענה (בראשית לד:ב) when describing Shchem forcing himself on Deena, Jacob's daughter. The same word is used in regards to vows of self or personal affliction, לענות נפש (במדבר ל:יד).

The root ענה is used in other contexts as well where it means to answer or respond. This form of the word is used in conjunction with the obligation to testify. Some examples include וענו ואמרו, וענית ואמרת, ועניתי באחי, שקר ענה באחי, וענתה בי צדקתי. How is this form of the word connected to Yom Kippur?

Yom Kippur is referred to as the Day of Judgement, יום הדין. One who is on trial for his life is not interested in food and drink, or the other physical comforts and pleasures we are commanded to refrain from. The physical afflictions we accept on Yom Kippur are intended to indicate our remorse for past actions. Invariably, the sins we committed during the past year are associated in some way with these activities, One need only look at the collection of sins in the חטא repeated multiple times on Yom Kippur to see the connection between these activities and the sins we are atoning for. Afflicting ourselves through fasting causes weight loss and we ask Gd to accept that in lieu of the sacrifice we would have brought on the altar if the Temple were extant.

Yom Kippur is a day in which we take stock of our life, a חשבון הנפש, of the past year in particular and our life to date in general. We ask penetrating questions of ourselves, questions that are often difficult to answer. Besides reflecting on our relationship with Gd, we reflect on our relationships with others. We use the different forms of the word ענה, for this. We testify to and answer the questions of

how did we treat our parents? Our spouse? Our children? Our friends? Those not yet our friends? Did we act responsibly and appropriately in our business dealings?

תענו את נפשותיכם means answering the penetrating and difficult questions about our lives that we often close our eyes to and pretend are not there. These questions and answers can often be more of a psychological and cathartic affliction to a person than the 5 physical afflictions or actions to refrain from on Yom Kippur. They are just as necessary in order to attain atonement on this most unique and awesome day.

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