



A GUIDE FOR INDIVIDUALS STRUGGLING WITH EATING DISORDERS OR DISORDERED EATING ON YOM KIPPUR

At Noa we know that Yom Kippur can be an exceptionally fraught and complex time for anyone struggling with an eating disorder or in recovery.

Yom Kippur is the holiest day in the Jewish calendar. It culminates an intense 10-day period beginning with Rosh Hashana, the celebration of the New Year and is a time where significant focus is placed on new year's resolutions, making amends and introspection. From a very young age, huge emphasis is placed on the importance of YK and of observing it stringently.

Finding a way to honour the sacred nature of Yom Kippur when fasting is not possible or advisable can be challenging and bring up difficult emotions. Often, this struggle is invisible or misunderstood by others, compounding the pain.

If you struggle with an eating disorder, or are in recovery, you may be advised by your medical team and Rabbinic leaders not to fast. This is because the health and safety concerns override the requirement to fast. Fasting has life-threatening implications for those suffering from severe eating disorders, and also presents numerous barriers to recovery for those struggling with all types of eating disorders. You may find you need to advocate for yourself to explain how fasting will impact your recovery. **If you are told NOT to fast, this means your overriding religious obligation is to eat, drink and to keep yourself healthy and well.**

However, we recognise that Yom Kippur, as the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, holds tremendous **emotional power**. Fasting is considered the primary way to observe YK. It is often presented as a way of connecting to G-d through transcending physical limitations, as a method to atone, and as an example of a level of self-control needed in areas of spiritual challenge. Being told not to fast may require a significant mindset adjustment and going against what you have been brought up to believe. This can be exceptionally difficult, leading to overwhelming feelings of anxiety, shame, stress and guilt. As YK is a communal day and experience, not fasting can trigger a deep sense of **isolation**. If you are receiving care in-house, being distanced from synagogue, fasting and the rhythms of Jewish life can compound that isolation.

Noa has produced booklets for medical professionals (who may be involved in your care) and community leaders, with the goal of raising awareness of the key challenges and triggers you may be facing. We hope this results in a more accepting and understanding environment.

IDEAS TO CONSIDER

Fasting is often prohibited for someone with an ED or in recovery because of pikuach nefesh – it can be life-threatening. A negative cycle is triggered every time someone with an ED consciously restricts food. Fasting also derails structured meal plans which aim to establish new healthy eating patterns for someone in recovery. It is easy to get catapulted back into unsafe habits. If you are excited about fasting, this may be a sign that you should not be fasting.

You may be advised to do ‘shiuirum’ (ie. a modified fast where you are told to eat and drink certain foods, in specific quantities, at staggered intervals). The rigidity of these leniencies mirrors the rigid thinking that epitomises many eating disorders. This can be damaging. You may need support making this leniency work (and adjusting your meal plan accordingly). In some cases, shiuirum is too unwise a concept to implement.

Consuming large meals before and after a 25 hr fast can be physically very uncomfortable trigger destructive emotional consequences. The vast quantity of food surrounding the fast, juxtaposed with the fast day’s restrictions can be overwhelming if you are following careful, balanced meal plans. Meals may be held with family and friends; putting a front on for other people can cause additional stress which may itself trigger restricting or purging as a coping mechanism.

HELPFUL TIPS

PRE-PLANNING:

It is recommended to begin this process at least a month in advance of YK. Seeking guidance from your therapists, medical professionals and family member's care teams ensures you can implement helpful strategies and receive the correct, appropriate halachic response.

- This timeframe also allows for sufficient time for dieticians/ nutritionists to help create a meal plan that is suitable for the day.
- If you are in an in-patient facility but healthy enough to go home for a brief period, this ensures time to enable this transition safely.

PRE-AND POST-FAST MEALS:

- These meals can be challenging, particularly as discussions such as how to eat sufficient quantities in preparation of a fast, concerns about how the fast will go, and afterwards, people relaying how they 'survived' the fast can all be incredibly triggering. Discussing with your family or friends how to sensitively manage (or prevent!) these discussions can go a long way to creating a more conducive environment.
- Can you discuss with your parents/ hosts what the menu will be, whether you can pre-plate food, skip parts of the meal, where you will be sitting etc? This can significantly reduce tensions.

DURING THE FAST:

- If you are not fasting, ensure your food is available and easily accessible. Try to find a private place where you can eat comfortably and/ or create a supportive space so you don't need to choose between being isolated or triggered.
- Being surrounded by people discussing their hunger pangs can be difficult. Consider who you will be spending time with, whether you feel comfortable explaining that the topic is uncomfortable for you.
- A long unstructured day can be challenging, especially when it revolves around food – eating, not eating, or eating at specific time intervals. It can be even more difficult if you usually use your phone and electronic devices as coping mechanisms. You may choose to stay home to avoid eating in public. Thinking ahead about creating a routine and brainstorming ways to distract yourself (eg. going on a walk, having extra reading material available, pre-arranging visits with friends) can alleviate some of the anxieties surrounding the day and make the YK experience smoother.

REFRAMING TESHUVA

During Yom Kippur and the preceding weeks, there is a sustained focus placed on evaluating the previous year, accounting for misdeeds, showing remorse, seeking forgiveness and committing to do better. This can amplify anxiety and OCD tendencies. Taking inventory of one's failings can deplete your self-worth. Negative self-talk can feed the narrative and inner voice of your eating disorder.

Switching the focus of teshuva away from any of your (real or perceived) failures to exploring the positive things you have done and considering how to build on that by setting attainable goals for the upcoming year is more conducive to good mental health and recovery. Channelling positive messages such as "you can change, you can develop, you don't need to be held back by self-limiting beliefs" is healthier and safer.

Noa provides wraparound practical emotional and therapeutic support to adolescent individuals aged 12-24 from the London Jewish community. Our Eating Disorder programme delivers specialised clinically led support to individuals who struggle with eating disorders, providing them with the holistic and targeted support they need to achieve recovery.

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