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SOURCES & RESOURCES

HALAKHA AS PROCESS: HAZAL’S APPROACH TO FASTING IN MASEKHET TA’ANIT

Masekhet Ta’anit details an arduous fasting process: a drawn-out series of prayer, self-abnegation, and repentance. Ta’anit further augments these halakhot with tales of different characters and their approaches to fasting. Perhaps the most famous of those characters is Honi ha-Me’agel, whose insistent prayers—in place of fasting—bring abundant rainfall:

An incident occurred in which the people said to Honi ha-Me’agel: “Pray that rain should fall . . .” He prayed, and no rain fell at all. What did he do? He drew a circle on the ground and stood inside it and said before God: “Master of the Universe, Your children have turned their faces toward me, as I am like a member of Your household. Therefore, I take an oath by Your great name that I will not move from here until You have mercy upon Your children and answer their prayers for rain.” Rain began to trickle down, but only in small droplets. He said: “I did not ask for this, but for rain to fill the cisterns, ditches, and caves with enough water to last the entire year.” Rain began to fall furiously. He said: “I did not ask for this damaging rain either, but for rain of benevolence, blessing, and generosity.” Subsequently, the rains fell in their standard manner but continued unabated, filling the city with water until all of the Jews exited the residential areas of Jerusalem and went to the Temple Mount due to the rain. They came and said to him: “Just as you prayed over the rains that they should fall, so too, pray that they should stop . . .” Shimon ben Shetah, the president of the Sanhedrin at the time, relayed to Honi ha-Me’agel: “Were you not Honi, I would have decreed that you be ostracized, but

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what can I do to you? You nag God and He does your bidding, like a son who nags his father and his father does his bidding without reprimand. After all, rain fell as you requested.” (Ta’anit 19b)

Intuitively, it seems that Honi should be a hero, as he successfully brings rainfall. What, then, prompts Shimon ben Shetah to criticize Honi? Shimon ben Shetah believes that drought stems from divine dissatisfaction with the moral state of humanity, and fasting serves as a solution by creating space for introspection and repentance. In other words, rainfall should signify divine satisfaction and the acceptance of the people’s fasts. However, Honi’s merit acts as a loophole by providing rainfall without fasting. To Shimon ben Shetah, Honi’s actions reinforce the mistaken notion that achieving the desired rainfall is of sole importance and therefore, skipping fasting is not only acceptable, but preferable.

In Ta’anit, fasting is a process that brings about the reward of rainfall. “Process” denotes a series of tasks, often performed in order to achieve “reward,” which connotes benefit in either physical or psychological form and often results from process. Shimon ben Shetah’s criticism fits into a larger argument that pervades Ta’anit about the relative merits of the dichotomous but intertwined concepts of process and reward. Emphasis should be placed upon process rather than reward, as process is intrinsically important. Instead of a mere obstacle to reward, process enables adherents to connect with important values. For example, one who fasts encounters the values of introspection and repentance. Similarly, through different halakhot and aggadot in Ta’anit, hazal convey how—through a specific process—adherents tap into the values of connecting to an intergenerational story, partaking in the community, and overcoming adversity.

1 In Rav Kook’s reading of the story (Ein Ayā to Berakhot 19a, vol. 1, 98–99), Honi’s insouciance and stubbornness towards God is a calculated tactic. He is willing to undermine respect for heaven (kevod shamayim) in order to increase respect for righteous individuals (kevod tzadikim), which will lead to a moral improvement in Israel. Despite his good intentions, Honi’s approach is mistaken, as respect of the righteous comes and goes in each generation while only respect and awe of heaven can consistently influence Israel in the long-run. A second approach is that of Aharon Agus who sees Honi as a heroic, loud martyr accustomed to complete and immediate salvation. Thus, Honi’s adventures highlight this characteristic by placing him into a situation that involves waiting and only partial closure; see Aharon Agus, Binding of Isaac and Messiah, The: Law, Martyrdom, and Deliverance in Early Rabbinic Religiosity (SUNY Press, 1988), 69–88. While these readings slightly differ from mine, they all revolve around the same idea: Honi represents a shortsighted personality who is educated to expand his horizons and acquire a more wholesome and nuanced view of reality.
Process and Intergenerational Stories

Process facilitates a connection to intergenerational stories. Hazal discuss this relationship through Honi’s conversation with an anonymous man:

Rabbi Yohanan said: All the days of the life of that righteous man, Honi, he was distressed over the meaning of this verse: “A song of Ascents: When the Lord brought back those who returned to Zion, we were like those who dream” (Psalms 126:1). He said to himself: Is there really a person who can sleep and dream for seventy years? One day, he was walking along the road when he saw a certain man planting a carob tree. Honi said to him: “This tree, after how many years will it bear fruit?” The man said to him: “It will not produce fruit until seventy years have passed.” Honi said to him: “Is it obvious to you that you will live seventy years, that you expect to benefit from this tree?” He said to him: “That man himself found a world full of carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted for me, I too am planting for my descendants.” (Ta’anit 23b)

The Talmud sets up a stark contrast between these two characters. Honi—representing an extreme reward-focused approach—cannot comprehend the anonymous man’s actions. If reward serves as the sole assessment criteria, then planting a tree—whose fruits will be eaten only by future generations—is a terrible investment. In contrast, the unnamed man values both process and reward. He appreciates how his ancestors’ agricultural investment led him to enjoy the fruits of their labor. This appreciation inspires the anonymous man to continue the process by planting trees whose fruit will be eaten by future generations. He plants to perpetuate a multi-generational narrative of mutual respect and obligation. Each generation benefits from the fruits of the previous generations’ labor and toils to invest for the benefit of their posterity. The unnamed man’s anonymity conveys that his identity and purpose is merely one chapter in a greater narrative. Unlike Honi, whose approach leaves him limited and self-focused, the anonymous man partakes in a meaningful intergenerational narrative through a holistic appreciation for both process and reward.

Hazal strengthen their point in the second half of the story:

Honi sat and ate bread. Sleep overcame him and he slept. A cliff formed around him, and he disappeared from sight and slept for seventy years. When he awoke, he saw a certain man gathering carobs from that tree. Honi said to him: “Are you the one who planted this tree?” The man said to him: “I am his son’s son.” Honi said to him: “I can learn from this that I have slept for seventy years,” and indeed he saw that his donkey had
sired several herds during those many years. Honi went home and said to the members of the household: “Is the son of Honi the Circle Drawer alive?” They said to him: “His son is no longer with us, but his son’s son is alive.” He said to them: “I am Honi the Circle Drawer.” They did not believe him. He went to the study hall, where he heard the Sages say about one scholar: “His halakhot are as enlightening and as clear as in the years of Honi the Circle Drawer, for when Honi the Circle Drawer would enter the study hall he would resolve for the Sages any difficulty they had.” Honi said to them: “I am he,” but they did not believe him and did not pay him proper respect. Honi became very upset, prayed for mercy, and died. Rava said: This explains the folk saying that people say: Either friendship or death, as one who has no friends is better off dead. (ibid.)

This story highlights the practical difference between results achieved with and without process. Like the opening story, Honi miraculously bypasses the process. Here, however, his “time travel” leaves him estranged from the future landscape, a famous relic of the past. Honi’s failure to partake in process cuts him off from the intergenerational story of the Israelites. Exasperated and lonely, Honi asks for a merciful death. Ironically, the anonymous man—who lives a mortal life and simply plants a tree for the future—has a greater lot in the future world than the famous Honi, as the tree he planted provides fruit for his grandson. The anonymous man understands that, based on human finitude, process is the correct means to interact with the future. In the long run, his modest acts of investment leave a larger impact than Honi’s flashy actions.²

**Process and Community**

Process provides individuals with the opportunity to contribute to the community. Hazal discuss this idea through halakhot of communal fasts:

In a *baraita* the Sages taught likewise: When the Jewish people are immersed in distress, and one of them separates himself from the community and does not share their suffering, the two ministering angels who accompany a person come and place their hands on his head and say: "This man, so-and-so, who has separated himself from the community,

² Devora Steinmetz astutely points out that one of the main themes of the *aggadot* in *Ta’anit* is the idea of surprise. Characters are constantly surprised by who succeeds in bringing rainfall. Sometimes, lowly and minor figures merit rainfall through small acts of kindness, while the prayer of the confident and revered go unanswered; see Devora Steinmetz “Perception, Compassion, and Surprise: Literary Coherence in the Third Chapter of Bavli Ta’anit,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 82 (2012), 61–117.
let him not see the consolation of the community." Another similar idea is taught in a baraita: When the community is immersed in suffering, a person may not say: "I will go to my home and I will eat and drink, and peace be upon you, my soul." And if he does so, the verse says about him: "And behold joy and gladness, slaying oxen and killing sheep, eating flesh and drinking wine; let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we shall die" (Isaiah 22:13). And the prophecy continues with what is written afterward, in the following verse: "And the Lord of hosts revealed Himself in my ears: Surely this iniquity shall not be expiated by you until you die" (Isaiah 22:14). (Ta’anit 11a)

Extreme reward orientation does not lend itself to communal commitment. If reward is the goal, then individuals will participate in the community when it provides benefits, but not when it requires sacrifice for the communal good. Community is partially built upon the self-sacrifice and transcendence of individuals for communal goals. Community, as an amalgamation of individuals, must possess joint goals that deviate—unless the populace is completely uniform—from some individuals’ goals. Without self-sacrifice and transcendence, the community dissolves into a collection of self-interested individuals. Therefore, community must be built upon process. Just as process enables the anonymous tree planter to participate in the larger story of history, so too it allows individuals to participate in the broader context of the community. Process creates the opportunity for individuals to step outside themselves and appreciate the grandiose creations of joint commitment, whether that creation be friendship, marriage, or community.

Process and Adversity

Process helps individuals deal with and overcome adversity. Over the duration of process, individuals naturally experience both failures and successes. They may enjoy certain tasks and dislike others. Inevitably, a process will oscillate between these two experiences. However, this oscillation is more than a statistical reality, as explained by the following aggada:

What is the meaning of the expression: “They who sow in tears shall reap with songs of joy. Though he goes on his way weeping, who bears the measure of seed, he shall come home with joy, bearing his sheaves (Psalms 126:6)? Rabbi Yehuda said: An ox, when it plowed at that time, it went on its way weeping and lamenting its labor; and yet upon its return, through the same furrow, it was able to eat the young shoots of crops that had already sprouted from the furrow. And this is the meaning of the phrase: “He shall come home with songs of joy” (ibid. 126). (Ta’anit 5a)
An ox weeps while plowing crops but subsequently rejoices upon eating them. For that ox, the strenuous act of plowing enables the joyful act of eating. One experience cannot exist without the other, as the crops result directly from the adversity and hard work involved in plowing. A reward-oriented approach fails to grant individuals the ability to appreciate the relationship of adversity and reward. While reward may motivate individuals to overcome adversity, it conceptualizes struggle as an obstacle to the reward. However, valuing the process allows the individual to realize that the hard work required to overcome adversity sires the subsequent reward.

**Process and Halakha**

The idea that individuals engage with a variety of different values through process can be applied to halakha, whose practice connects contemporary adherents with an intergenerational story of religious tradition and commitment. Additionally, a large portion of halakhic practice occurs in the communal realm. Finally, its fastidious nature and rigorous demands can create adversity for its adherents.

Due to its technical and rigid nature, halakha can easily become burdensome and repetitive, where each day is viewed as a checklist of items necessary to be a “good Jew.” For these reasons, constructing halakha as a process moves it from a set of discrete demands into a series of continuous opportunities to connect with an important set of values.

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3 The idea that hardship and failure are required for success can be found throughout rabbinic literature both explicitly and implicitly; see *Avot* 5:23, “According to the sorrow is the reward.” This is likely the meaning of the idea that “In the place where penitents stand, even the full-fledged righteous do not stand.” (*Berakhot* 34b). *Shabbat* (55b) lists four people who never sinned: “Benjamin, son of Jacob; Amram, father of Moses; Yishai, father of David; and Kilab, son of David.” These four are peripheral characters in biblical literature. The Talmud may be implying that, by contrast, these minor characters’ more illustrious relatives did sin—and the struggle to overcome sin contributed to their greatness (I am grateful to R. Yitzchak Blau for this insight).