



New Meaning for the Fast of Esther

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March 18, 2023

Drawing on collective Jewish wisdom and the personal experiences of Hartman's network of North American and Israeli research fellows, faculty, rabbis, and Jewish communal professionals, our new blog [Notes for the Field](#) offers guidance, inspiration, and support for navigating the challenges facing the Jewish people today.



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Commemorating the Fast of Esther feels different than other years.

Despite the intended drama, most years, fasting on Ta'anit Esther is a retrospective. We know the end of the story, and we merely act out its suspense before Purim's celebration of salvation for the Jews of Persia. But not this year. This year, sadly, we have our own deep sense of not knowing the end of the story. We do not know how or when this conflict will end or more brave young people will have to make the ultimate sacrifice. We do not know if or when hostages will be returned, and what condition they will be in; we do not know what the "day after" will look like in Israel, Gaza or in the Middle East generally, and we do not know how Jewish life across the globe will be transformed.

This year, Esther's existential fear from millennia ago is front and center.

There are different types of fasts in Jewish tradition. We may be most familiar with the body-transcending fasting of Yom Kippur or the mournful fasting of Tish'a B'Av. But there are other dimensions and types of fasting as well. Julia Watts Belser, for instance, suggests that sometimes fasting—as in the case of rabbinic fasting in response to drought—models what will happen to us if, God forbid, tragedy continues unabated. We will go hungry. We will decline and fade away. Understood this way, fasting is a morbid exhibition.

But this year, no exhibition is necessary because hunger and decline are our reality. I fast not only because of what the future might look like, but because of what the present looks like. One hundred thirty-four hostages remain in Gaza, willfully ignored by humanitarian organizations, malnourished, brutalized, traumatized and even murdered. Families of Israeli soldiers cannot eat or sleep out of their sense of deep worry and dread. They shuffle through their days hoping for no news. And, as a God-fearing Jew, even as someone who supports the war to defeat Hamas, I dare not ignore the hunger of children in Gaza, considered expendable by their "leadership" and caught in the crossfire. All these people will be in my prayers and my hunger pains as I fast.

And lastly, the confluence of this year's calendar offers an opportunity: Ta'anit Esther falls during the month of Ramadan. This week will witness Jews and Muslims, people of faith, fasting for one overlapping day. I have worried from the beginning about the possible escalation of Oct. 7 and its aftermath into a global conflict between Muslims and Jews. Traces of that possibility have been reflected in delegitimizing Israel's right to exist, praising terror and other forms of antisemitism and violence in the streets. On a more personal level, I have been deeply saddened by interfaith friendships that I have lost as we find ourselves on different sides of a war, with different understandings, different assertions of blame and different mourning at the center. May this overlapping moment of Ta'anit Esther and Ramadan be a clarion call to all Jews and Muslims who refuse to be enemies, despite their differing loyalties; who can be character witnesses for one another. I truly admire Muslims and Jews who are doing their best to maintain

a form of coexistence within a crucible, and I will have them and their efforts in mind as well, even while being strong in my convictions and my responsibility to my people. My understanding of what it means to be a religious Jew demands it.

These are my added layers of meaning for this year's Ta'anit Esther.

I invite you to join me in adding them to your own as well.

And God willing, may we one day return to the retrospective version of this day, a preparation for telling and celebrating a tale of transformation, מִיָּגוֹן לְשִׂמְחָה וּמֵאֲבֵל לְיוֹם טוֹב from grief and mourning to festive joy.