

Getting to the heart of spiritual fasting

• LIANE GRUNBERG WAKABAYASHI

With 25 hours of Yom Kippur fasting ahead of us, there's almost nobody under the sun better versed in healthy fasting protocol than Gabriel Cousens, MD. Recognized as the fasting guru by *The New York Times* long before it became a respected healing modality, he makes a very interesting point.

"People are more likely to complete a fast when done as a group," he told *The Magazine* as we sat down in his peaceful hilltop home in Zichron Ya'acov. The beautiful home, with its pale pink interior hues, vibrant potted plants, and tall windows overlooking a forested view down to the Mediterranean, offers a striking contrast to the southern Arizona desert life he left with his wife and fasting co-leader, Shanti Golds Cousens, where he founded and directed the Tree of Life Rejuvenation Center.

"There is a significant difference between fasting and spiritual fasting," Cousens pointed out. Although people lose weight, cleanse, and purify, spiritual fasting begins with a spiritual intention and ends with a deeper experience of the truth of who we are," he explained.

Cousens founded the rejuvenation center in 1993 to offer nutritional and raw-food education, yoga classes, and

retreats to uplift and unplug from the frenzy of daily life. In the process, many of the participants have turned to a more God-focused life, as the more we clear out the multitude of toxins accumulated in daily living from the food we eat and the state of our environment, the more our bodies become, in his words, "a superconductor for the divine."

"Now, at 80 years around the sun, I am grateful to have lived beyond the 57-year mark of my father and grandfather; and many of the men on my mother's side who died of heart attacks before the age of 50, including her father and brother. This early death pattern on both sides of my family played an essential role in my diet study to find an optimally healthy lifestyle to prevent heart attacks. This approach included a vegan, organic, live-food diet which became the basis of my spiritual nutrition teachings," he wrote in his most recent book, a memoir titled *Into the Nothing*.

"We all are exposed, no matter how pure our lifestyle, to tremendous amounts of toxins, radiation, pesticides, herbicides, heavy metals, and more, and periodically removing them through fasting is for the sake of our well-being," Cousens said.

He has found that seven-day fasts are optimal, helping to heal many chronic conditions, eliminate addictions, increase longevity, rebuild the immune

system, and protect against Alzheimer's, heart disease, diabetes, and cancer.

According to Cousens, this is how it works in a nutshell: "Fasting stimulates neuron stem cells – new growth of brain cells – enhancing brain energy and brain function and clarity. It also lowers WBC, white blood cell count, which turns on the regenerative switch, leading to enhancing the immune system by destroying old immune cells and regenerating new ones."

Contrary to losing energy, fasting increases a feeling of well-being and energy. He illustrated the point with a story that is hard to fathom.

"When I was 60, on the sixth day of a seven-day fast, I did 600 push-ups. Now, at age 80, I do 2,000 push-ups. What I'm saying is there's a principle here. You have the potential to get stronger, more flexible, and wiser with age."

Cousens' nutritional expertise was groundbreaking when he introduced it in his book *Spiritual Nutrition and the Rainbow Diet*, published in 1986, which raises and answers the intriguing question: Can a diet impact spirituality? In this book, he examines concepts that have become mainstream in the growing vegan population, such as the merits of raw versus cooked food, high versus low protein, and alkaline and acid balance for optimal health.

His progression toward advocating an

ever-greener raw diet is based on a solid ground of scientific research and helping thousands of people reverse their diabetes. Cousens established the Tree of Life Foundation, the philanthropic arm of his global mission to serve disadvantaged communities struggling with poor diets, which led to a massive reversal of diabetes on Native American reservations in Arizona, where diabetes among the population runs as high as 90%.

Visiting and counseling Igbo and other communities in West Africa, where diabetes is notably high, led to a dramatic decrease as members of these communities followed his three-week plan, based on a 100% organic, nutrient-dense, vegan diet.

Since 2008, Cousens has developed 15 diabetes prevention and organic vegan farming programs, supported with micro-business loans in 10 countries, including five West African countries. He established the West African Rural Empowerment Society with leaders from these countries.

Cousens has a long history of living and working in Israel, having lived off and on for many years at Moshav Mevo Modi'im.

Certified by the State of Arizona Board of Homeopathic and Integrated Medicine Examiner, Cousens did his medical studies at the prestigious



GABRIEL COUSENS – the father of two children in their fifties, and grandfather of three teenage children – pictured at age 78, teaching at 'The Tree.'

LEADING A spiritual fast with wife, Shanti Golds Cousens.

saying that he needed to return to his roots. Soon after, in the early 1980s, he began praying three times a day from the Jewish prayer book and wearing a *kippah* and *tzitzit*, the four cornered fringed ritual garment.

Rabbinical studies followed, culminating in ordination by non-denominational Rabbi Gershon Winkler, and the integration of what he refers to as "The Great Torah Way" into his teachings at the Tree of Life Rejuvenation Center.

One of his reasons, he explained, was to "speak to members of the newer generations who may consider themselves spiritual but are not able to relate to the previous generations' understanding and way of life. His Torah studies and Kabbalistic experiences resulted in the book *Torah as a Guide to Enlightenment*, which came from his weekly *parsha* teachings after his rabbinic ordination in 2008. The book is the integration of many religious influences that reveal themselves in engrossing insights into the Torah by delving into the mindset and actions of the patriarchs and Moses himself.

Cousens' spiritual background since 1975 includes living on and off in India with his first wife and two young children, meditating six hours a day for seven years under Swami Muktananda Paramahansa, and 11 years with another well-known swami, Prakashananda Sarasvati. These swamis acknowledged Cousens as having become a "fully liberated" human being, a status of human awakening, and egolessness, which he describes as "an awareness that there is

Returning to his Jewish roots

It's been a long and winding road. After spending seven years on and off in India, Cousens returned to the US and underwent a 40-day fast to help him clarify what he should do next. This led to a still, small voice from God



Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons. But the focus of Cousens' life story, which he writes about in *Into the Nothing*, pivoted him in his 30s toward an ambition that no hallowed halls of academia could teach him – merging with the oneness of God, or "liberation," as he calls it.

Fasting with Cousens

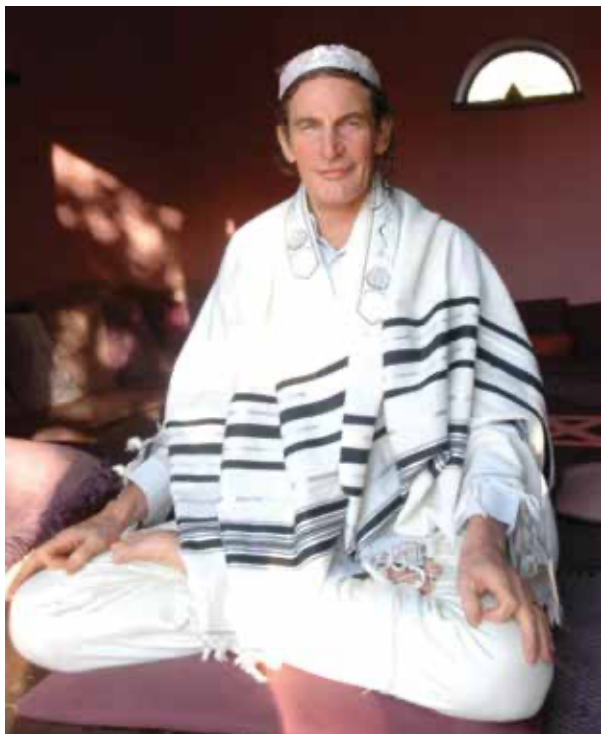
In their home in Zichron Ya'acov, where Cousens practices yoga and meditation daily, he and Shanti lead a quiet life, awakening people the world over to the benefits of fasting. Holding seven-day fasts via Zoom, they recently concluded one of their bi-annual Spiritual Fasting Retreats, scheduled every year before the High Holy Days and Passover. They sit together comfortably to deliver five hours of physical exercise, teaching, and group sharing each fasting day. Shanti answers questions about the practicalities of doing the once-a-day obligatory enemas and leads a daily yoga class, a gentle yet dynamic flow routine to unite the body, breath, and mind. Shanti was Cousens' Kali Ray TriYoga teacher long before they tied the knot in 2001.

"The use of social support, with co-fasters supporting each other, has been part of our seven-day spiritual fasting retreats since the first fast in 1988," Cousens said.

"Often, when fasters think they are having some unique and potentially negative experience, they are relieved to see that others are having the same experience," Cousens explained.

"A group-sharing process helps to greatly diminish the natural beginners' fear and anxiety in the first few days of fasting. People feel much more support with the group processes, so fasting is an easier experience in general."

SUNSET MEDITATION at Tree of Life Rejuvenation Center, in Patagonia, Arizona.
(Photos: Gabriel Cousens)



no self, only divine will, to get in touch with through prayer and meditation, and act upon in serving humanity.

Cousens now pays it forward to the people and communities seeking to reach what sounds like enlightenment. And who knows? He says that this is a natural state for humans to be in, and we will all be there in messianic times.

But oh, what a road to get there! *Into the Nothing* tells about a life of extreme physical, mental, career, and spiritual challenges. Published in 2020, it's an adventure-packed memoir about a super-achiever, a star athlete, a science prodigy, and sadly, the 16-year-old high school kid who lost his big brother, Richard, whom he adored.

Richard died in a car accident at the age of 22. Not long after, Cousens writes, "being captain of an undefeated varsity football team at Amherst College" taught him about "spirituality and community building in the most challenging and warrior-like settings."

The threads that weave throughout his extraordinary life are meditation and fasting. Forty days without food in San Francisco; four days in Arizona without food or water inside a circle with Lakota Indians; and three days in a cave in the Negev without food or water, only partially sheltered from the blazing sun. As the old adage goes, where there's a will, there's a way.

Dr. Cousens' tips for the Yom Kippur Fast

- The most important thing to do before the 25-hour fast is to prepare mentally and spiritually with a positive attitude. It represents a sacred sacrifice of food cravings for a craving for Hashem.
- "During the fast, people often reconnect to their willpower and become empowered to reenter the world and maintain their balance, with renewed energy and hope, and with spiritual, emotional, mental, and

physical strength."

- The main issue is food cravings, which are more psychological than physiological in a one-day fast. In going into the fast, the most important thing is to be well hydrated. So before sunset, drink a lot of water with a pinch of salt added.

- It is good to eat a light meal before the fast with fruits, vegetables, or a salad. The less digestive stress there is on the body, the easier it is to fast.

- During the fast, it is good to walk a little between prayer sets, as it helps circulate the blood and the lymph to help clear toxins.

- If one feels weak during the fast, it is good to lie down until one feels stronger; and then, when you stand up, do so slowly.

- In coming off the Yom Kippur fast, one should hydrate with two to four glasses of water containing a pinch of salt. Then, to prevent digestive stress, have some warm vegetable soup because

digestive power at night is at its lowest

- After the fast, try hard not to overeat, as that strains the body. The least stress is provided by lighter foods such as salads, a light broth, and lots of liquids, which can be very filling and are easier to digest. Slowly progress to heavier foods over the next day.

A personal seven-day-fast experience

Recently I took part in a seven-day green juice fast with Cousens.

"Fasting for spiritual purposes usually involves some degree of removal of oneself from worldly responsibilities," he said. He encourages all fasters "to stay close to home, to engage in 70% of usual activities and exercises, with plenty of time in nature if possible."

It sounds easy, but in truth, I had to adopt the mindset that I was truly going on a staycation and cancel much-anticipated activities, such as attending an Ishai Ribco concert. Ordering a slew of detoxing supplements and other supplies

IN YOGA lotus pose inside the temple at the Tree of Life. He hasn't missed a 'Shacharit,' 'Mincha' or 'Maariv' service, or honoring Shabbat, since 1986

THE COUSENSES dressed for Shabbat at the center. Since its establishment, 'The Tree' has been certified kosher, with Shabbat observance on the schedule.

(Below) IN WEST Africa for a five-nation meeting of leaders in Cameroon.

for fasting support, and then clearing the decks of all outward responsibilities, I was ready to begin.

Cousens told us in an introductory session that our appetites usually fade, and the attachment to food diminishes after the first few days of a fast.

"This frees the mind to put more energy on the awareness of our divine being rather than our appetites," he said.

Surprisingly, he was right. Spiritual fasting with Cousens wasn't that difficult. Hunger pangs were relieved by a tasty and filling cucumber-lettuce-celery and apple juice recipe, sipped thrice daily. Each day ended with a strained, lightly salted, vegetable broth and five hours of online community teaching and sharing, led by the Cousenses.

On Shabbat, I watched friends and family dig into a feast and felt no cravings. It was as if I were watching a movie.

What was more difficult, especially on the first day of fasting when the body was adjusting to a protocol of water, herbal teas, and juice only, along with advised detox supplements, was a headache, which lifted by the next morning. Sleep was better than ever, and going to bed early was a pleasant change from the regular work-till-you-drop routine.

The days passed quickly enough, with skin brushing and tongue scraping. Yoga, breathing exercises, and dancing became part of the routine to get carbonic acid out of the system. There was even enough energy on days four and five to knock out much of this story for *The Jerusalem Post*.

Hey, it's not 2,000 push-ups, but in Cousens' warrior spirit, on day six I figured I'd power up 22 staircases on Haifa's Mount Carmel in the blazing heat and see if I lived to tell the tale.

However, the best part was breaking the fast with a humble bowl of organic fruit salad and a tossed vegetable salad. The melding of flavors and textures never tasted so divine.

To find out more about Gabriel Cousens' fasting retreats or book a one- to 2 ½-hour online mind-body-spirit evaluation, go to drcousens.com. ■

The writer is author of The Wagamama Bride: A Jewish Family Saga Made in Japan and founder of Genesis Art Workshops. For upcoming activities and events: genesiscards.com.



JUST A THOUGHT AHARON E. WEXLER

(Clemens van Lay/Unsplash)



The most fascinating part of 'teshuva' is the very possibility of it

On 'teshuva'

The 10 days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are a special time on the Jewish calendar, known as the *Aseret Yemei Teshuva*, "The 10 Days of 'Teshuva.'" Usually translated as "repentance," the word *teshuva* really means "return."

Through the act of teshuva, we return to who we really are and to who we are meant to be. Through teshuva, we return to God and self-actualize by "reverting back" to the divine image in which we were created.

Teshuva does that by wiping the slate clean. When one does teshuva, it quite literally means that the sin no longer exists. It did not happen.

How does one 'do' teshuva?

Teshuva is defined by the sages as a three-step process. The first is to regret the sin, the second is to confess the sin, and the third is to promise to not do the sin again. Let's take a minute to unpack that.

You do not have to regret the sin itself. Some sins are perfectly normal human behavior, even if they are in fact against the special covenant we have with God. What is required is to regret the violation of that covenant. I do not think there is anything objectively wrong with a cheeseburger and I am sure they taste wonderful, even if they are forbidden by the laws of *kashrut*. Therefore, one who has consumed a cheeseburger, a staple of the Western diet, does not need to regret the cheeseburger itself. Cheeseburgers are good; the "sinner" needs to regret the transgression of the strict separation between meat and dairy that keeping the laws of *kashrut* demands.

As for confession, one does not confess to a rabbi. Rabbis are not Catholic priests with the power of ab-

solution. One needs to confess to God Himself. People could and should feel comfortable to speak with a rabbi about any sin they are grappling with. But they can also speak with a friend, mentor, or therapist as well. And after talking it out, they should then turn to God to confess their sin.

The next step is to take it upon oneself to leave the sin behind. This is, of course, easier said than done.

But what is important at this point in the teshuva process is the "saying." If your intention is real, then teshuva is effected. And if just a few months, weeks, or even hours later you sin again, you now have just that one sin on your "record" and not the previous ones that were committed beforehand.

If what I wrote sounds simple, it's because it is.

The hard part is getting to the mindset of wanting to do teshuva. The regret needs to be real, and the road to the realization that you need to do teshuva can be long. Adding to that is the real acceptance upon yourself that not to return to the sin is hard. But if the mindset is there, the necessary actions that follow are simple.

The most fascinating part of teshuva, though, is the very possibility of it.

Where else in the world can you find something that you can do that has an effect on the past? Almost everything we do has repercussions for the future. The very laws of modern physics are built on that assumption. But teshuva breaks that paradigm and insists that you have the power to rectify the past.

The sages themselves were wowed by the possibility and power of teshuva to such an extent that when discussing the different things that were created even before the creation of the world, they included teshuva. They did so because it doesn't belong in this

world. It is not "how the world works." If you were to sin against me personally, I may forgive you wholeheartedly, but I doubt that I would forget. The scar does not need to be physical to remain after an injury.

God's forgiveness, though, makes it so that the sin never happened. Gone! A complete rewrite of the past! So strong is the power of teshuva and so simple is its effect that if a man betroths a woman on the condition that he is perfectly righteous, she is considered married to him because we fear that at the same second of betrothal, he really did have in mind to do teshuva, in which case he was in fact perfectly righteous.

But while people should in fact do teshuva for all their sins, they should not be paralyzed by the enormity of the work that needs to be done.

It is okay to concentrate on the teshuva for one particular sin while leaving the other sins aside for a later time. Teshuva need not be a package deal. In other words, people are not hypocrites for doing teshuva about *kashrut* if they still do not yet keep Shabbat. Think of the *mitzvot* as different channels or tools with which to create a relationship with God. The more the merrier, but the few have great value as well.

All this, of course, concerns sins against God. When it comes to sins against our fellow human beings, we need to approach the people we hurt and ask for their forgiveness personally. In these cases, only the injured party has the power to forgive. It is our hope that just as God forgives us even if we are undeserving of it, those we hurt will take a lesson from God and forgive us as well. ■

The writer holds a doctorate in Jewish philosophy and teaches in post-high school yeshivot and midrashot in Jerusalem.