

## RH2 5766 The Meaning of Our Prayers

*Shanah tovah.*

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev told the following story:

“Once I was lodging in an inn where many Jews had come for the market day. I rose early to join in them for davening. I was shocked to observe how these Jews rushed through their prayers, mispronouncing half the words and swallowing the other half.

At the conclusion of the service, I began to speak to these merchants: “Ba--me--be--.”

They naturally stared at me in astonishment, undoubtedly wondering if I’d lost my mind. I explained it to them: “The manner in which I have just spoken to you was very similar to the way you just spoke to God. I could not understand a word.”

One of the businessmen replied: “A baby in his cradle utters syllables that are completely meaningless, even to sages, yet the mother and father know their infant and understand his every utterance. Even if you, rabbi, did not comprehend our prayers, I have every confidence that the Almighty knows our thoughts and intentions.”

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak concluded that the merchant was right and that the merchant evinced more faith in God than he did. Because of this, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak taught that on this sacred day of Rosh Hashanah even the prayers of those who are unable to speak will be answered.

Another story comes from the famous Yiddish author, Sholem Asch. There was a boy dressed in torn clothes with a shepherd’s staff in his hand who was whistling in the back of a shul on Rosh Hashanah. The congregants hushed him up for fear that they would disturb the other worshippers or perhaps annoy the rabbi. But he kept whistling. There was some tumult in the back of the synagogue as people gathered around the whistling boy.

The rabbi heard the commotion and went to investigate. He heard the boy whistling – a young boy who did not yet know how to pray. He turned to the crowd and said, “This boy’s tefillah, his prayer, is the truest because it comes right from the heart.”

I share with you these two vignettes to emphasize both the difficulty and the power of prayer. Opening our souls up to God can reveal deep parts of our spirit and our feelings that are yearning to be voiced and to be heard. To me, prayer is deep soul-searching, introspection, time for reflection and helping me become a better person.

But in practice, our services are difficult. To many, they are inaccessible. Sometimes they just sound like the mumbling half-words in Rabbi Levi Yitzhak’s story.

Our Siddur is a treasure-chest: replete with jewels; unfortunately, it is locked. This morning, I want to share with you some keys to unlocking the experience of Jewish prayer so we can enjoy the beauty inside. This morning, I ask you to be my partner in learning how to bring our Siddur and our prayers to life.

Together we will study a tefillah, a prayer from the beginning of the Siddur, to appreciate its significance and how it can add meaning to our prayer lives and ultimately, to our lives as a whole. It is my hope that by unlocking one prayer we be inspired to take the time to study more of our prayers and unpack more and more of the Siddur, our liturgy, and our liturgical tradition, that we will grow spiritually.

Let’s jump in right now. Please open up to the middle of page 86 in your Mahzor and let us study together the prayer entitled in English, “*In Truth and Humility – Ribbon HaOlamim.*”

*“One should always revere God, in private and in public, acknowledge the truth, and speak the truth which is in one’s heart. On arising one should declare:”*

In many prayer books we find these two Hebrew lines in a smaller typeface, as an introduction or an instruction about how to recite the following prayer – what is called a *kavannah*, a short introduction that sets the mood for prayer.

How did this prayer find its way into our printed text? What probably occurred was that someone hundreds of years ago wrote this into his or her Siddur as a reminder of the frame of mind needed to recite this prayer. An editor or copyist placed it in the text of the Siddur in smaller font and it has been recited ever since.

Beyond its probable history, this warm-up to the prayers reminds us about how to behave not only while reciting the tefillah, but throughout the day. It’s like a warning we might find on a package of food: do not think that by merely saying these words you are covered; you are not. Make certain that you are consistently good in your thoughts and actions whether we are in private or public.

The structure of these two lines conveys this idea as well. There are four elements which appear in chiasmic order (a, b, b, a); the bookend elements emphasize the importance of our being honest with ourselves. It may be a bit counter-intuitive, but it is much easier to appear to be God-revering in public and to acknowledge the truth in public than to do to ourselves.

The prayer then begins: *“Ribbon Kol HaOlamim ...*

*Master of all worlds! “Not upon our righteous deeds do we rely when we bring our prayerful supplications before You, but upon Your abundant compassion.*

*What are we? What is the value of our lives? What substance is there to our kindness, our righteousness, our helpfulness, our strength, our courage? What can we say before You, Adonai our God and God of our ancestors?*

*Before You, the mighty are as nothing, the famous as if they had never been; the wise are without wisdom, the clever without reason. For most of their deeds are worthless, and their days are like a breath.*

*Measured against Your perfection, our preeminence over the beast is negligible, for we all are so trivial.*

So, what is the point of this prayer?

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This opening paragraph is a deep exercise in humility, about knocking ourselves down a little bit.

Usually we start our days focused on ourselves. When I hear the alarm go off, I usually look at it and say, “Oh, it can’t actually be six o’clock already, can it?” Or sometimes I hear my 15-month old screaming, and I think, “This can’t really be happening; I just fell asleep.” I am very focused on my own needs, my tiredness, my physical needs, my hunger, my wanting to take a shower.

We always begin our days thinking about ourselves. I’m hungry. I’m tired. I’m cranky. I’m anxious about the day. I’m stressed. I’m late. This opening paragraph shocks us out of that approach to life.

It radically reminds us that we are not that important, that we should not be thinking only about ourselves. Given the 6.3 billion other human beings on this planet and the trillions of other creatures: are we really that important? What are we, compared to God?

This fundamental juxtaposition hopefully inspires a deep sense of humility and leaves behind some of the self-centeredness that we all bring into the world each day and into our own lives each morning.

The first section of this prayer is taken from the tractate of the Talmud that deals with Yom Hakippurim; it is a compendium of confessional prayers written by Rabbi Yohanan and Shmuel some 1800 years ago for *Neilah*, the concluding service of Yom Kippur. We can see they are pouring out their souls to God, crying out to the Almighty for compassion and love as they reveal their own shortcomings.

We come before God on these High Holy Days to confess our sins, but we also want to know if we matter. This section ends with the words “*ki hakol havel* – everything is emptiness, is nothing, echoing the words of *Kohelet* – Ecclesiastes (3:19). During these days of introspection, of self-examination, we want to know if we matter, if anything we do makes a difference.

At this point in the prayer, that question is not even voiced. In the effort to remove hubris from us, we are left totally deflated, without the ability to make an impact on the world.

Fortunately, we know that is not the whole picture. Let me share with you a story about two men who are walking along a beach covered with starfish that have washed ashore. One turns to the other and says, “Let’s throw the starfish back into the water so that they can live.” The other says: “Why bother? It’s futile: there are thousands of starfish and just two of us. We could never make a difference here.”

Picking up a starfish and tossing it back into the water, the other man replies: “Well, for that one starfish, I just made all the difference in the world.”

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Let’s turn the page. Here, the prayer then dramatically shifts.

*“But we are Your people, children of Your covenant, descendants of Your beloved Abraham, to whom You made a promise on Mount Moriah. We are the seed of Isaac, his son, who was bound on the altar. We are Your first-born, the congregation of Jacob, whom You named “Israel” and “Jeshurun” because of Your love for him and Your delight in him.”*

What is the meaning of this paragraph?

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Now, the prayer seems to start anew. While we may have been left with a degree of radical humility, seemingly swimming in a sea of meaninglessness from the first section of the prayer, now we know that we need to find our anchor. We need our roots, our history, and we, as Jews, are blessed to have that.

Just as we do in the Amidah, the standing silent prayer that lies in every service, we begin by recalling our ancient narrative, our story, and that begins with our ancestors, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob, Rachel and Leah. We have a covenant with God, as Jews - a covenant that began with Abraham and Sarah and that has been passed down through the generations to us. Whether we are born as Jews or are Jews by choice, we are all linked by that covenant and our covenantal ancestors. We are the heirs of that 4000-year-old promise.

The examples of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are also important. Abraham cemented the covenant on Mount Moriah at the binding of Isaac, which, of course, is our Torah reading today. We read of that most difficult moment when Abraham was asked to

do the unthinkable and God, in the end, tells him not to. After that moment, the foundation of the covenant is set. Isaac is hardly mentioned. He, in our tradition, is one who was wounded, a passive figure – one who was almost sacrificed and one who was tricked by his son Jacob into giving his special blessing to him and not Esau.

The most important part of this section of the prayer is the example of Jacob. Jacob is the paradigm of the personal transformation. Jacob is the one who tricks his brother at the birthright, who deceives his father out of his special blessing and is then himself deceived by his father-in-law, Laban, who switches one of his daughters for the other at Jacob's wedding.

The deceiver becomes the deceived. But the true moment of transformation occurs after he leaves his father-in-law and returns to the land of his father to reconcile with his brother Esau.

Perhaps the most powerful moment in the entire Torah occurs at the Yabbok River, when Jacob wrestles an unknown, mysterious assailant, perhaps an angel, or perhaps, his own conscience. Jacob wrestles with himself that night and comes out of the experience physically, emotionally, and spiritually wounded. But, he is also given a new name. His name is Israel, meaning: a person who has struggled with God, with human beings, and with himself – a person who has transformed himself. Jacob's new name, Israel, is our name. We are Israel. We are people who struggle with God, who challenge God, who try our best to determine what God's will is and then to implement it. We are also people who struggle with ourselves, who believe in self-transformation, and we are the people who struggle with others, spreading a moral and ethical light, a light of holiness.

But there is a second name that the prayer mentions, *Yeshurun*. This name is connected to the word, *yashar* - straight. Jacob is the one who is crooked, who manages to straighten himself out. That is why this is such a powerful paragraph in this incredible prayer. We do have a history; we are not worthless. We have also a paradigm of personal transformation to inspire us and after whom we model our own lives.

Thus, we need to live in the balance between the two poles of our tradition. If we wake up feeling full of ourselves, maybe we need to be knocked down a little bit. If we wake up feeling empty, we need to be boosted up, remembering that we can make a difference. We have a history, and we have a model about changing ourselves and the world.

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From here, the prayer moves to a synthesis. Now that we are living in the balance between these two polarities, we can connect to God and therefore it is our duty to praise God, to understand and appreciate the sanctity of God, to appreciate how fortunate we are.

*“Therefore it is our duty to thank, to praise, to glorify, and to sanctify You.*

*How fortunate are we!*

*How good is our portion!*

*How pleasant our lot!*

*How beautiful our heritage!*

*How fortunate are we that twice each day, morning and evening, we can declare:*

*“HEAR, O ISRAEL: ADONAI IS OUR GOD, ADONAI IS ONE.”*

*Praised be God's glorious sovereignty for ever and ever.*

*O eternal God before creation and since creation, God of this world and the world to come, reveal Your holiness through those who sanctify You. Reveal Your holiness throughout the world. Uplift us and exalt us through Your deliverance. Praised are You, Adonai, who reveals Your holiness before all.”*

What do we do? How do we live in this tenuous place between humility and self worth, understanding that we can transform ourselves and others? We take that understanding and utilize as a springboard from which we can connect to other people. The prayer ends most powerfully by answering the question: how do we affirm God’s holiness, God’s *kedushah*? With other people.

This is a prayer that teaches us what the act of prayer is all about. The words inspire us to move beyond ourselves. Prayer is all about realizing that it’s not all about me. There is an entire world beyond me filled with people who need my love and compassion. Prayer teaches us about humility and then gives us the paradigm for action. At first this prayer appears to be confused compilation of Talmudic confessions mixed with a prayer from the Midrashic work *Tanna Debe Eliyahu* some 1600 years ago. But, taking it apart reveals much more.

While some of it was first written as a confession for Yom Kippur, it was seen as such a powerful text that it was inserted into the daily service of early prayer books because of the value of instilling humility within us every day, right at the start of the day, right as we recite our earliest blessings immediately upon awakening.

To me, this is what Jewish prayer is all about. It is about starting each and every day with a spiritual practice, setting a time for deep meditation, for a conversation with God, and using our traditional texts to inspire us and to help us live a balanced life and a life of action.

May this day begin a year filled with spiritual depth, a year in which we see ourselves in both the lens of our weaknesses and the lens of our strengths, allowing us binocular vision; a year in which our yearning for God inspires us to help God repairing the world to help others.

*Shanah Tovah Tikateivu* – may we all be written for a good year. Amen.