

YK 5773 KN Study & Why Pray!

Gmar hatimah tovah. May we all be sealed for a good year.

Let me start by sharing my original message for tonight: please sign up for Temple Emunah's incredible adult educational offerings! The only way our tradition will stay alive is by studying it. It is a dynamic, sophisticated intellectual tradition – created by adults for adults – in order to bring meaning and values into our lives. And if we don't deeply delve into it, it will shrivel away and die.

Not only that – but if we want our kids or grandchildren or any future generation of Jews to engage in any part of Judaism, they need to see us all learning, not saying: "I don't need to study this, but you do!"

In order to make this possible, your dedicated adult education committee has created literally DOZENS of classes.

We have numerous levels of Hebrew in Ivrit Lakol (make this the year you *finally* learn Hebrew!), Talmud classes, Men's study group on Maimonides, Adult Bar-Mitzvah, *Perek Yomi*, a new spirituality group I am starting, Shabbat *Minhah*, A magic class with Rabbi Fel, a class about mourning that I am offering and the Hartman Institute's Israel Engage just to name a few.

This year Rabbi Fel and I are even starting to meet in local coffee shops to study – we will go anywhere to study and talk Torah with you!

But, then I realized that while I want to convince you to make some time this year to study Torah thereby enriching your life in countless ways, it might be better just to teach some Torah.

So, here goes.

Let's start with a question: show of hands, how many of you came tonight because you love to pray?

Well, that was more than I thought!

How many of you came tonight for other reasons?

That's what I was expecting.

Why did you come tonight?

For community; because of a sense of obligation; because I always come on *Kol Nidrei*; to hear Srebbby; to hear Leon's viola; I would never miss it.

Most of the time that we are here together – last week on Rosh Hashanah or this evening or all day tomorrow – is spent engaged in prayer.

We do seem to be doing a fair amount of praying here at Emunah.

And what is it all about?

It would all make sense if when we walked into shul this evening, we felt that the words in our *mahzor* would help us in a concrete way, that we would be written into the book of life for the coming year.

But, I am going to go out on a limb tonight and guess that some of us do not literally believe that our prayers will change our fate, that we will be written into the book of life.

Or let me just speak for myself – I don't believe that by simply reciting the words in the *mahzor* my fate in the coming year will necessarily be changed.

If you do believe that, then prayer is easy, *davening* is easy.

God is listening to our prayers, and God may change our individual destinies. If that is our theology, then it's easy to come to shul and daven. Prayer is rewarded!

According to this understanding, prayer is theurgic; the words we recite can move God to act.

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But what if we don't believe that?

Maybe our parents did, or maybe our grandparents or great-grandparents did.

But, what if we don't? Can prayer survive without a belief in that basic theology?

In order to begin to provide an answer this evening, I want to share some insights that I learned from Micah Goodman, a teacher of mine at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem.

Let's start by looking at this day of Yom Kippur. Tomorrow's Torah reading will teach us about the *seh l'azazel* – the goat that was sent off into the wilderness. It achieved *kapparah*, atonement, for the people of Israel.

By the time of the Mishnah, our rabbis codified another – perhaps more vital – aspect to Yom Kippur: to attain atonement, we need to practice *teshuvah* – repentance.

How do we define *teshuvah*? It is not merely watching a ritual, but we need to change ourselves – looking within and asking others for forgiveness.

But *teshuvah* did not totally supplant the traces of the original Yom Kippur rituals. Maimonides in "The Guide to the Perplexed," reflects on this strange ceremony of sending the goat into the wilderness. It was supposed to go over a cliff and

But try to imagine the ceremony in reality. The *Kohein Gadol* stood next to the goat and placing his hands on the goat's head recited: "*Ana Hashem, Avu* – we sinned." He recited a confession on behalf of all the people that we will recite in the *Avodah* service later today.

What would happen to someone watching the ceremony of the *Kohein Gadol* loading up the goat? They would understand that it's a metaphor, but it's not poetic, verbal metaphor. They are acting out the metaphor.

We can think of Yom Kippur as a part of a show, a demonstration. Just as a good play leads to some catharsis, as Aristotle teaches, so should a ritual change us. Being a good Aristotelian, Maimonides believed that the ritual energized you to do *teshuvah* by acting out this drama with the *Kohein Gadol* and the goat. We would see our sins being "carried away," seeing ourselves relieved of their burden, which might lead us to change.

Think about it. When we lie, we immediately see ourselves as liars. We identify with our actions, and we might even then be more inclined to repeat them. This is why when we start on a bad path, it can often get accelerated, as we become more and more inclined to continue down that road.

Alternatively, if we believe that our sins can be removed, maybe we are not stuck as sinners; not liars, not people who always make mistakes, but as people who can start over.

This ritual is not a replacement for *teshuvah*, but it can trigger *teshuvah*. That is the first answer to why we pray.

As Maimonides teaches, prayer and ritual are meaningful if they can lead to self-transformation – *teshuvah*. *Teshuvah* is really an extension of *tefillah*, of prayer. If we believe that we can change God without changing ourselves, then we are mistaken.

Maimonides teaches us that ritual is meaningful only if it changes the person who participates in it, and that's what prayer should be. This should change us.

By beating our chests and recite a litany of sins communally, we are participating in a ritual that sets up a new paradigm and as Maimonides explains, it allows us to begin to see a new model of how we can be – that we can change ourselves.

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But there are many other ideas about prayer. Rav Kook, one of the great theologians and mystics of the 20th century who lived in Jerusalem and died in 1935, wrote a beautiful commentary on the prayer book. In it, he offers a magnificent understanding of *tefillah*, of prayer. He says that the most important force in the world is the power of will. The more we will something, the more likely it is to occur.

Think of the great Theodor Herzl, who in 1897 said, “if you will it, it is not a fiction – it is reality – *im tirtzu ein zo aggadah*.” And, of course, 50 years later, it did happen – Israel came into existence. It sounds so simple. While intelligence is important, will is even more important.

This makes sense. Think about sports psychologists who work with athletes to help them see something in their minds. If they envision it, if they see it in their minds, it is more likely to happen.

The last century or so has demonstrated the power of resolve. As the world decolonized, it was the colonial powers that often became less powerful. There are many instances where the smaller countries, the less powerful countries, won.

Despite the downsides of the Arab spring, it proves the power of determination. Think of Libya – people who did not have that much by way of training or arms, but they had determination. And their conviction helped the overthrow Gaddafi.

Herzl teaches us that will is the most important power, and the State of Israel proved him correct.

Rav Kook teaches that the more you want something, the more likely it will happen. And that is what *tefillah* is all about. Prayers do have an impact on reality because they are expressing our passion. The more we articulate a vision for a better world, a world in which we are better people, the closer they become to reality.

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But, another major question remains? You might say to me: “Rabbi, that's all well and good that prayer is about creating new paradigms for ourselves and

expressing our will to change ourselves and the world, but the words in the *siddur* are not mine!

Why should I say those words?"

It's a good question.

To answer that, let's turn to our own Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who writes in his masterpiece, *Man's Quest for God - Essays on Prayer*, all about the experience of prayer. What does it mean to sit in *shul* and open up the *mahzor*?

He acknowledges this problem: we're not simply expressing our will, because it's not necessarily our will.

The words are not even ours. When we open the prayer book, we are using someone else's words.

You tell me: is it better for me to tell my wife I love her by reciting Shakespeare's sonnets or by speaking from the heart?

But Heschel reminds us that the *siddur* was not written by one person. It is organic. It is something that has grown and grown over centuries and generations of Jews. It is the collective will of the spirit of the Jewish people. We are expressing the trans-generational experience of the Jewish people when we open up a *mahzor* on Yom Kippur.

It's not just about expressing, it is also about listening to the words of the Jewish people. When we identify with those words then we are experiencing ourselves as a part of the Jewish people – something larger, something that transcends time and space, and we are connecting to values that are much deeper.

There is also room for our personal, spontaneous prayers, utilizing our own words and focusing on our breath. We move back and forth between joining the collective, reciting the words of the *Mahzor* and sharing our deepest thoughts with God, admitting truths to ourselves.

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So a post-modern Jewish skeptic can pray.

Maimonides teaches us that ritual can provoke *teshuvah*, and change us.

Rav Kook teaches us about the power of will and prayer.

And Heschel teaches us that prayer helps us listen to the will of our nation.

Three great thinkers and three approaches to prayer.

I hope you will use these ideas to inspire you this evening as we pray and tomorrow as we pray some more.

Hopefully it will inspire you more and more often to open the *siddur*, the greatest repository of Jewish values – at home or in the shul.

And if you want to spend more time with Maimonides, Rav Kook and Heschel – come and learn!

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