

What Is Prayer?

Kol Nidre

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A woman goes to see her rabbi. She has a problem. She says, “Rabbi, I need your help. I have two female parrots. They can talk just fine, but all day long they say only one thing.”

“What do they say?”

“Hello, you handsome boys. Wanna have some fun?”

The rabbi has a solution immediately. He tells her, “I can help you. I also own two parrots. These are male parrots named Moishe and Haime. I’ve been teaching them to pray. They each wear a tiny kippah and tiny tallis and tefillin and they daven all day. Bring your two female parrots over to my house. We’ll put them in the cage with my parrots. They can teach your parrots to pray and they’ll stop saying it.”

So the woman brings her female parrots to the rabbi’s house. As he ushers the woman in, she sees that his two male parrots, Moishe and Haime, are inside their cage, davening away and shuckling and wearing kippot and tallis and tefillin, just as the rabbi had said.

Very impressed, the woman walks over and places her female parrots inside the cage with the two davening male parrots. Right away, sure enough, the two female parrots cry out in unison: “Hello, you handsome boys. Wanna have some fun?”

One male parrot, Haime, immediately calls out to the other male parrot, “Moishel! Take off the tallis and tefillin! Our prayers have been answered!”

During these High Holy Days, these Days of Awe, we do an awful lot of praying. We are here for both days of Rosh Hashanah plus Kol Nidre and Yom Kippur. Many of us are here for more than twenty hours praying.

So tonight I want to talk about what we are doing.

First of all, are we really all praying during all these hours?

I can say this much: during the times we are paying attention, not sleeping, not talking to the person in the next seat, at a minimum we are hearing a lot of prayers. If

we are looking at our prayer books, we are reading a lot of prayers. But are we praying?

To answer that question, we need to understand what we mean by the word “prayer.” What is prayer?

The Hebrew verb that means “to pray” is “l’hit’pallel.” L’hit’pallel means “to judge or clarify yourself.”

When we pray, in the sense that is meant by the word “l’hit’pallel,” we examine our lives and judge ourselves, hoping to improve ourselves and find greater clarity about our lives and purposes.

I referred to this understanding of prayer on the second day of Rosh Hashanah. I discussed then the idea that we enjoy in these Days of Awe a privilege of self-examination. That is the essence of prayer in this mode: self-examination.

But there are other modes of prayer as well.

For example, some of us may sometimes pray individually and spontaneously. No prayer book. No congregation. Just us, praying.

When we do this, we are trying to reach beyond ourselves to some thing or some force, even if we don’t understand it fully. Anne Lamott explains this concept of our spontaneous prayers in her excellent book Help Thanks Wow: The Three Essential Prayers. Here is an excerpt:

There are three basic forms of prayer, each just one word:

Help.

Thanks.

Wow.

Prayer is communication from the heart to that which surpasses understanding. Prayer is communication from one’s heart to God or, if that is not a concept helpful to you, then we could say it is communication from one’s heart to the Good, the force that is beyond comprehension. Another way to say this is that prayer is communication from our hearts to the animating energy of love in which we are sometimes bold enough to believe.

When we pray we are trying to make contact with something unseen and much bigger than we could ever imagine. Prayer is a human activity of reaching out to something having to do with the eternal.

Here’s an example of praying that is a combination of thanks and wow, a spontaneous praying.

Many years ago my son, Sam, and I flew to Las Vegas and drove from there to the Grand Canyon. The trip was what I called a “victory trip.” Sam had just recovered from another bout of his depression and was ready to try again to resume his life.

We stopped at a gas station. When we got back in the car, Sam popped a tape that he just bought into the tape player.

The sun was nearing the horizon. We were speeding along the highway under the endless Western sky. The heavens were turning every imaginable color of a stunning sunset.

Sam started the tape. It was Handel’s “Hallelujah Chorus.”

[Hallelujah. Hallelujah. Hallelujah, Hallelujah. Hallei-i-lujah.]

We barreled along under that unforgettable sky with booming voices of the chorus praising and thanking God.

That word, hallelujah, by the way, is a Hebrew word used in the psalms and elsewhere, though it is also often used by Christians, as Handel did. Hallelu is a call to praise. Yah is a Hebrew name of God. Hallelujah means, “C’mon, everybody: praise God!”

Spontaneous prayer like the kind that happened in that victory trip can happen any time and can be solitary or with others.

But I’ve noticed that sometimes in our High Holy Day services there is a barrier to prayer of that kind. Ironically that barrier is our prayer book. One of the most difficult aspects for many of us during the High Holy Days is all these words in this prayer book. All these words in our prayers.

There are so many words in our service. Hour after hour, words after words. What are we supposed to do with all these words?

I distinguish between the words in Hebrew and the words in English.

Many of us do not understand all of the Hebrew words that we hear or we repeat. Some some of us, maybe a lot of us, do not understand many or perhaps even any of those Hebrew words. So what are we doing when we hear these words? Is that praying?

I think so. Listening to the Hebrew that is chanted during our services can be meaningful prayer on two levels.

When we understand what the Hebrew means, we can agree or disagree, but at least we know what the words mean. These prayers typically fall into one of Anne Lamott’s categories: help, or thanks, or wow.

For the words in Hebrew that we don't understand, our praying has a meditative and emotional quality. We respond at the level of feeling. This also provides a spiritual and sometimes uplifting experience.

At these times, we recall other services we have experienced here or elsewhere. We know that we are part of this congregation. By our presence here, we affirm our identity as Jews. We place ourselves in the great chain of tradition that reaches back thousands of years. We know that these words are being said or chanted in an ancient and sacred tongue. We know that, in cities and towns and villages all around the world, other Jews are doing today just what we are doing. That feeling of being connected to other Jews in both time and space is self-affirming and encouraging.

Whatever we may believe about God, when we are here for services we know we are not alone because we are davening with other Jews, here and everywhere.

When we read the English words in our prayer book, however, we encounter a different dimension of prayer. The words in our prayer book are intended to help us to pray. But for some of us in some times those words present the following challenge: do we believe what we are reading? If not, if what we read is not what we believe, then how can we still find the experience meaningful?

Let's take one important example: the Unetaneh Tokef prayer. It's on page 240 in Hebrew and page 241 in English. Please look at that with me now.

Please take a moment to read that prayer silently, in English. Page 241.

SILENCE

Consider the claims that are made in this prayer:

This day, Lord, Your dominion is deeply felt.

You bring everything that lives before You for review. You determine the life and decree the destiny of every creature.

On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed: How many shall leave the world and how many shall be born into it, etc.

This prayer can be troubling for some of us if we think of statements like these as being factual claims.

But suppose we don't regard these as factual claims? That change of perspective can help a lot.

In order to experience Unetaneh Tokef - without objecting that we don't believe what it claims - we need to understand that it is not a prayer at all. It is a poem.

This is poetry. Poetry does not make factual claims. Poetry makes emotional claims. The poet yearns to express feelings, yearns to put into words ideas that are

beyond the realm of truth and falsehood, ideas that are beyond his full grasp, and our own

So let's look again at this poem.

The opening words are Unetaneh tokef k'dushat hayom.

This means, "Let us learn the great power of the holiness of this day." We read this poem on all the days of awe, so "this day" refers both to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. These are days when we stop what we normally do the rest of the year. We come together here. We sit. We think. We examine how we are living. We recognize that at this moment we have a chance to change what should be changed in our lives. That is the great power of the holiness of this day.

The poem also acknowledges that we are not in charge of the length of our days. We are not in charge of the time or manner of our passing away.

But then we say, at the end of this poem, at the top of page 243, "Teshuvah, tefillah and tzedakah annul the severity of the decree.

What does the poet mean by "the decree"? I think he means the decree that each of us will surely die and we do not know the time or circumstances of our inevitable death.

These High Holy Days are called, in Hebrew, Yamim Nora'im. Days of Awe.

Nora'im is a form of a Hebrew word that can be translated as either awe or fear.

So these could be the Days of Awe. Or they could be the Days of Fear.

When we contemplate our own deaths, and recognize our limited power to control its time or manner, we feel both awe and fear. The greatest fear about death is the fear that we will die before we have done all that we want to do or should have done.

To annul the severity of that decree, we want to control the quality of our lives, even though we have no control over the length of our days.

So the comforting conclusion of Unetaneh Tokef points the way to reducing that fear. Teshuvah. Tefillah. Tzedakah.

Start with Teshuvah. That means repentance.

If we, God forbid, were to die tomorrow, what relationships that were broken would remain broken? What slight or hurt that I caused would still be felt by the person I injured? What wrong that I have done in the world would remain wrong because I never fixed it?

That's the role of teshuvah, repentance, in annulling the severity of the decree. Perform acts of teshuvah now. Apologize. Make amends. Repair the breach. Do it urgently. Right away. Don't wait. No telling how much time we have.

In addition to Teshuvah, Tefillah also annuls the severity of the decree. Tefillah means prayer. Prayer helps us cultivate a habit of gratitude. That habit of gratitude gives us the perspective we need to worry less about dying prematurely because we live our lives in gratitude.

We can begin every meal with a blessing. We can thank God for the food we are about to eat and remind ourselves how fortunate we are to have food. We did not make the food we eat. Even if we grew it in our garden, who provided the earth and the rain and the sunshine and the seeds?

And finally, Tzedakah annuls the severity of the decree. Tzedakah can mean charity but really it has more to do with justice, tzedek. It means to do what is right by helping those who need our help.

When we perform acts of tzedakah, feeding the hungry or providing shelter to refugees, we improve not only the lives of those we help but our own. We put our fears in perspective and reduce our fear of dying prematurely. Tzedakah therefore also annuls the severity of the decree.

By vowing to make amends, by recognizing the Source of all our blessings, and by helping others, we can assure that these will not be Days of Fear.

Rather, these will be Days of Awe.

And let us say, "Amen."