

The Most Important Prayer – Kol Nidrei 2017/ 5778  
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Last month in Moment magazine, rabbis from every major Jewish denomination were asked to respond to the following question, “what is the most important High Holy Day prayer?” Their responses were insightful, if somewhat predictable. Rabbi Laura Novak Winer, a Reform rabbi, suggested there isn’t one that is clearly most important. She wrote, “Is the most important prayer the one that is most evocative of the holiday, such as Kol Nidrei ... or is it the prayer most often repeated, such as Avinu Malkeinu? Or is the most important prayer the one most tied to our process of teshuvah, repentance, [the Vidui, or confessional]?”

Rabbi Winer’s orthodox colleague suggested that our prayers are not complete until the final lines of Neilah are uttered, tomorrow evening, and so those must be the most important lines. A Sephardic rabbi shared that our consideration of the Torah’s tale of the Binding of Isaac is most important, while a Reconstructionist rabbi suggested Unetaneh Tokef, “who shall live and who shall die,” is most iconic.

Which prayer would you choose? Is there a moment of prayer, a song or melody that speaks to you, that brings you more fully present into the spirit of these days?

I am most stirred by the response of Rabbi Yitz Greenbeg, a modern orthodox rabbi, who answered the question of the most important High Holy Day prayer this way. “Sadly,” he wrote, “most of the prayers we will say on the High Holy Days will be verbal exercises. They will have no effect on our heart... The most important prayer, the prayer that brings a moment of ignition of the heart, is unpredictable in advance. From year to year, different prayers have touched me. A lot depends on your readiness to be inspired.” (Moment, Sept/Oct 2017. p. 29)

Tonight we enter our Yom Hakippurim, the Day of Atonement, and every moment depends on our readiness to be inspired. As you sit here now, have you really entered this sanctuary? Has your heart been ignited by a prayer, an experience, a moment of connection, a realization, a reflection? Have you allowed the words, the music, the gravity of the Holy Days to penetrate the deepest recesses of your soul and mind? Or are you going through the motions? How quickly do the melodies and images of these services leave you once you’re in the parking lot? How soon does conversation of the new prayerbook or rabbi’s sermon turn to your to-do list, news on the television, or the score of the game? Some of you have been searching, but are still waiting for something: the right prayer, the moment that will ignite your heart. Some of you are here, and truly cannot answer the question of why. What brings me here? What am I searching for? What do I need to hear, this year, this day, this moment? What will awaken me and shake me from the slumber that perpetuates the hurt, the

brokenness, the many ways my life falls short? What do I need to make this year different from the last?

You are here for a reason. You are called to this place from your neshama, your Jewish soul. You are connected, through invisible yet unbreakable bonds to generations of Jewish communities who have wrestled with these same questions, and many who heard the same prayers in the same melodies. Your parents were here, and if you didn't have Jewish parents who attended High Holy Days with you, your Jewish neshama calls to you just as strongly through a teacher, a rabbi, or a friend who brought you to this place.

Rabbi Art Green writes about this same calling, "Life bears within it the possibility of inner transcendence; the moments when we glimpse it are so rare and powerful that they call upon us to transform the rest of our lives in their wake. These moments can come without warning, though they may be evoked by great beauty, by joy, by terror, or by anything else that causes us to stop and interrupt our ordinary all-encompassing and yet essentially superficial perception of reality. When that *mask of ordinariness* falls away, our consciousness is left with a moment of nakedness, a confrontation with a reality that we do not know how to put into language... But then we feel lucky and blessed if we have enough ties to a tradition that gives us language, that enables us to say, "The whole earth is filled with God's glory!" (Radical Judaism, p.4-5)

This is the place our machzor pushes us to go. The feeling in this room, the sounds of the shofar, even the break-the-fast foods, and apples and honey, are all designed to move our souls and spirits to do the work of Teshuvah. But we have to be awake to do the work. We must find resolve. We must dig deep. Horseradish on the tongue during Passover brings real tears to our eyes, yet remains meaningless if we do not dedicate ourselves to eradicating slavery. Similarly, during the High Holy Days, the prophet Isaiah calls to us, "is this the fast I desire, a day to abstain from food and drink? You are missing the mark if you do not also go out and break the chains of the oppressed, feed the hungry and clothe the naked, and commit not to neglect your fellow human being.

That kind of action stems from our ability to see one another with new eyes on this day; to hear each other with better listening ears. To heal sorrow and hurt, we must first be willing to see it.

It takes an act of will to change. Sometimes the effort can feel impossible. If the words and music wash over us but do not inspire that act of will, then these days have lost their power. The pages of the machzor are filled with voices from the past and present sharing their attempts to allow the Days of Awe their power, and to move us to change our ways.

The most important prayer you encounter during the High Holy Days will be the one that inspires you to change; to think about your life differently, and to approach your personal relationships with new life, with empathy and with courage. Yet we know that these ancient words, repeated year after year are too often their own obstacle. We don't understand them, or don't follow the Hebrew, or we are not open enough to let the words sink in and pierce our hearts.

Even today, on the holiest of our holy days, we hold ourselves back, thinking: I should know more, I should do more, I should be more. We imagine everyone around us knows more than we do, or can follow this prayerbook better than we can, or belongs here more than we do. And this prevents us from hearing the words in a deep way, and taking the steps our neshamas needs us to take.

We began the service reading, "With one voice, assembled Sages past and present declare: all may pray as one on this night of repentance; let none be excluded from our community of prayer." (p. 16 – Mishkan Hanefesh) And the note reminds us, "Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg, a 13<sup>th</sup> century sage, inserted these lines in the liturgy, basing himself of the Talmudic statement (K'ritot 6b) that 'a public fast that does not include the sinners of Israel is no fast.' All of us are sinners, none of us unworthy to join with others in prayer."

You are here for a reason; you belong right here, right now. This is your prayerbook, this is your community. And everyone in this room, and listening at home, questions and doubts whether or not they belong. The same journey of self-discovery and inner transcendence awaits us all.

The Rebbe of Slonim, a great spiritual master of the last century, explained the work of the High Holy Days in this way. "Every person's task may be compared to the building of a beautiful house. As long as we do not wish to invest money and effort into digging deep and building strong foundations, cracks will constantly appear on the walls and we will need to fix them again and again. We need to take courage, destroy the house completely, prepare new deep and strong foundations and build our house anew atop them..." (Netivot Shalom)

Any of you who own a home will recall once or twice when, upon examination it became clear that the issue presenting itself signified something had shifted in the foundation of your home: simple nail pops or cracked plaster or broken pipes - shifting bricks. There is, in each of these cases, a critical decision to make. Are we going to paint over the problem, and pretend it is not there? Do we ignore that gnawing feeling in our gut telling us that underneath the finished exterior are flaws that will only grow larger, and cause more problems later on? Do we simply wait, hoping that the Band-Aid will hold, the quick fix will last, and the underlying problem will vanish on its own?

So often we repair and replace, plaster over and tighten and repaint and pour a little concrete. But it is rarely practical to come home and say, “well, it’s time for us to tear the whole thing down and start again.” Yet that is exactly the opportunity presented to us on Yom Kippur. Not to destroy our homes, but to invest the effort into digging deep and building our own strong foundations, the foundations of ourselves; to strip away the ego and the pretense and our careers and our marriages and friends and everyone around us – and to locate our foundations and make them stronger.

If we miss that chance, today of all days, if the Hebrew stops us, or we hear the readings and the melodies and the shofar but do not truly let them in, then all the repair we attempt with our relationships and within ourselves will not last. The cracks will reappear and we will need to fix them again and again. The High Holy Day liturgy is the spark that might light the flame, rousing us to self-examination and real motivation to change. When we read, “Remember us for life, sovereign God who treasures life,” we might learn to hear the Torah’s words, “I have set before you this day, life and blessing and death and curses, choose life that you and your children may live.” And we might realize that every day and in every action, we are either moving towards life, and growth, and uncertainty, and challenge, and integrity, and love, and respect; or we are moving towards the opposite – we shrink, we hide, we cut ourselves off, we remain safe, but never become who we were meant to be. “Remember us for life, sovereign God who treasures life.” (p. 48 – Avot insert)

During the Vidui we read, “O God, we are arrogant and stubborn, claiming to be blameless and free of sin. In truth, we have stumbled and strayed. We have done wrong.” (p. 82 – Vidui). When you read these words, let them in and read, “the cracks of my well-kept home are showing once again. I desperately want to become more whole, a person who faces the world with confidence and strength, humility and determination. I know I cannot paper over my faults one more time. *I cannot paper over my faults one more time.* If I let them grow, my heart will harden, my relationships will stagnate, my spirit will diminish. My very neshamah will be at risk and I won’t be able to fulfill my obligation to choose life, to repair the world, to be my best self with those I love.

Tonight we seek guidance from our liturgy, to help us dig, to provide us courage to explore our deep contours and hidden layers. We hope and pray that the melodies can roll away the heavy stone that covers our hearts like a well, so that our deepest longings might pour forth.

In this state we are most fully human: flawed, vulnerable, imperfect, and yet more sure that we are created in the image of God, and in perfect partnership with the Divine. It is our longing, our striving; our stretching ourselves to improve that connects us to God, who asks us to choose life, to care for ourselves and others, and the planet. God does not need us to be

more than we are; only to continue to grow and learn and improve. On this High Holy Day of Yom Kippur and every day, we embrace our own imperfections, our faults and flaws, and our many mistakes, through our willingness to look at them, the ignition of our hearts to work on them.

Find your own prayer, write your own sermon. Do not let this be a hollow experience. Choose not to sit here and go through the prayers without opening yourself to their power. Allow these words into your heart and promise yourself not to take them for granted. Promise yourself that this year you will feel more deeply, engage more completely, and hear your neshama when it calls you to grow. For this is the ongoing process of teshuvah, of turning. And today, with so many beautiful melodies, ancient and modern texts, as well as an entire community of people to guide us, we have our best chance of feeling that inspiration, and dedicating this day to real and lasting change. Kein Yihi Ratzon, may this be God's will for us, and may it match our own.