



One Thing Do I Ask of Adonai

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5770

By Rabbi Mark B Greenspan

In the spirit of this season I have an admission to make. I have a strange habit. I like looking at people's refrigerators. Not in their refrigerators, mind you; at their refrigerators.

Refrigerators are a great place for learning about life. You can learn about people, their families, their lives, interests and activities. In many households there are pictures, lists, and announcements on the refrigerator door, held there by cute little magnets that someone brought back from vacation. By studying the data on the refrigerator you can learn a lot about your host or hostess.

When Marilyn and I visited my sister and brother-in-law in California this summer, I was interested to see what they had on their refrigerator. There were grocery and to do lists; my sister is a very organized. And there was a cartoon that caught my eye and to which I kept returning. If a picture is worth a thousand words, this one spoke volumes. It was a picture of a man kneeling at his bedside, hands clasped, reciting a prayer. He says: *"I asked You, in the nicest possible way, to make me a better person, but apparently You couldn't be bothered."*

When I saw this cartoon, I chuckled. Of course, you can't ask God to make you a better person – everyone knows that! Then I thought about it a little more and chuckled again. What would I hear if I listened in on people's private prayers in synagogue? And then I stopped chuckling because it occurred to me that maybe our expectations of prayer aren't so realistic either.

During the next ten day we're going to spend a lot of time engaged in prayer. We will sit in synagogue with a *Machzor* in hand, pouring out our hearts to God. If one adds up the time spent in prayer on Rosh

Hashanah and Yom Kippur (I won't even include weekday and Shabbat services), we will have spent close to twenty-four hours in synagogue.

That's a lot of praying! Of course, some people will come late, leave early, and day dream most of the time they're here. Some may talk to God while others will be busy talking to their neighbor. The *Yamim Noraim*, the Days of Awe, are the spiritual equivalent of a triathlon: long distance davening, endurance confessionals, and sermon cycling.

I thought of the unhappy man in my sisters' cartoon. What is it we want from God? And what is it we can realistically expect? In psalm 27, the penitential psalm which we recite throughout this season, we say, *Ahat sha'alti mei-eit Adonai, otah avakesh*, "One thing do I ask of Adonai, for this do I yearn." Like the man in the cartoon we have good intentions but unrealistic expectations. No one can make you a decent human being. That is up to you! So what should we pray for? If I could ask only one thing, if I could make a single request of God, what would it be?

What would you ask for? Would you ask for health, long life, peace of mind or nachas fun der kinder? Or maybe your requests would be more universal: peace on earth, good will towards man, an end to world hunger, a cure for cancer, or the eradication of racism? But those are things that we should be able to accomplish on our own, if we put our minds to it. In fact most things that we want, we can accomplish or we can accomplish with 'a little help from our friends.' We don't need to ask God for them. And the things we don't have control over like the weather; frankly, neither does God, because they are dependent on the laws of nature.

On Rosh Hashanah we do pray, *zochreinu l'hayim*, "Remember us for life." We don't have control over our length of days so maybe that's why we ask God for life so many times. Then, again, *zochreinu l'hayim* may not mean length of days at all – when we ask for life we are asking for a life of depth, meaning and purpose. After all, is it fair to ask God to break the rules just to give us a few extra years?

The whole question of prayer as petition is problematic. Too often we come to with unrealistic expectations and demands. For me, personally, prayer is all about learning to live with what we have rather than demanding what cannot be. In the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel, "*Prayer may not save us. But prayer may make us worthy of being saved.*"

We expect so much from God. It's interesting, but not surprising, that the psalmist, having said that there's only 'one thing' that he asks of God, continues by mentioning by three things: "(1) to dwell in the House of Adonai all the days of my life; (2) to behold God's beauty and (3) to frequent God's sanctuary."

These three things are closely related to one another. But what they mean is not so clear. What does it mean to 'dwell in the House of Adonai?' Nobody dwells in the Gods' house, not even the priests. And if this psalm was penned by King David (which is unlikely), then it was written before the House of God was built! And how about the final phrase: "to frequent God's sanctuary;" this petition seems to contradict the first petition. Does the psalmist wish to dwell in God's house or merely visit it with from time to time?

The psalmist's three requests are really the same. All he asks is that God allow him to live a life of holiness, constantly aware of God's presence so that wherever he is, he is standing before God. He is prepared to take of the rest on his own.

As we begin the High Holy Days I'd ask you to be more mindful of your own prayers. Prayer should be more than petition; it is how we stand in the presence of God. It is gratitude and growth. It is not enough to go through the words of the Machzor if the words of the Machzor don't go through us. And each of us must ask ourselves – what is the one thing we would ask of God? Have we done everything possible to accomplish this petition on our own? I believe that God is listening to us but we must do the same. When we take away all the things we can accomplish on our own what is it we really want from God?

As we begin this sacred season, then, let us all pray: May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to You, our Rock and Redeemer.