

Rosh Hashanah Kavanot for 5770

By Rabbi Mark B Greenspan

Ha-Melekh: Levi Yitzchak's Prayer

When we think of prayer,
We think of praise, thanksgiving, and petition.
We think of affirming our faith
And submitting ourselves to the will of God.
We think of words hallowed by tradition
And printed in a prayer book.
We imagine that God is up there
And we are down here;
We speak time honored words and God listens, passively.
But prayer is so much more – it is an invitation to stand
In the presence of the Holy One, and express
Our hopes and complaints.

Rabbi Levi Yizchak of Berdichev, understood that
we are not the only ones being judged on this day of judgment.
Reb Levi was on a personal basis with God.
When he stood in synagogue
He thought nothing of interrupting the congregation
to let God know what he thought.
Once on Rosh Hashanah Reb Levi
Interrupted to the cantor just before
the recitation of *Ha-Melekh* and
offered the following prayer:

*Good morning, Ribbono shel Olam!
I, Levi Yitzchak, son of Sarah, from Berdichev
approach You with a grievance on behalf of Israel.*

*What do you have against Israel?
Why have you imposed Yourself upon them?
In every matter it is, "Command the people of Israel.
Speak to the people of Israel."*

*Merciful Parent, there are so many nations:
Persians, Babylonians, Romans...
What do the Russians say? Their ruler is the Czar.
What do the Germans say? Their Ruler is the Kaiser.
What do the English say? Their kingdom is the kingdom!*

*But I, Levi Yizchak, son of Sarah from Berdichev, say,
Ha-Melekh Yoshev al Kisei ram v'nisa
You are the Sovereign enthroned on high!
And I will not leave this place
Until there is an end to the Exile!
Yitgadal v'yitgadash shemei rabbah*

Magnified and sanctified be God's great name...

And so the service continued,
Reb Levi Yitzchak, having called God to judgment.

This morning as we pray and praise and give thanks
I would ask you:
Do you have words, complaints, and worries?
What thoughts do you wish to share with God?
What is it that weighs on your heart and soul?

The words of the Machzor are only a beginning.
Let us use them as an invitation to God's presence!

Atiti L'hananakh: Teach Me What to Say!

There are six words which appear before the Amida
both on Holy Days and weekdays,

They are not part of the *Amida*
but they set the tone for this holy prayer:
Adonai s'fatai tiftah u'fi yagid tehilatekha
"God, open my mouth
And let my tongue speak your praise."

We not only come to God to pray and praise
But we ask God to give us the words
with which to express ourselves.
We cannot open our mouths on our own.
We need the strength, the spirit, the faith
That God and others give us.
Our words not only go to God
They come from God, as well!

This is the sentiment in the *Reshut*,
the liturgical poem which the cantor now recites.

The word, *Reshut*, means 'permission' or 'indulgence.'
The cantor asks for God's permission
To represent us in prayer.
The Cantor knows that
the words not only come from his heart and mind
They are inspired beyond him.
And so the cantor begins by saying:
"Open my mouth, Adonai; teach me what to say."

So here is yet another way of thinking about prayer.
Prayer is not just the words we formulate
But the words God puts in our hearts.
Our prayers are not petitions;
They are a gift.

The cantor concludes by saying:
May we find favor and strength in You.
For all Your words are true;
That is, Your Words, God, are now my words
May their truth sing in our lives!

Yareiti B'fitzoti: ***What it means to lead a community***

Just as the High priest first
had to seek atonement for himself and his family
before he could intercede for others,
the Shaliach Tzibbur,
The one who leads prayer
Seeks mercy and enlightenment for himself
Before he can represent his community.

This is the nature of leadership
Before I can teach others
I must learn;
Before I can lead,
I must apply the lessons to my life.
Before I can inspire others
I must open my heart to the message.

In *Yareiti* the *Shaliach tibur*
Offers a personal prayer in which
He expresses fear and trepidation
In God's presence.

He cannot pray until he trembles
He cannot teach others to tremble
Until he has done so himself.
Each line in *Yareiti*
Concludes with the letters, *hil*,
the Hebrew word for tremble.

The prayer leader cannot bring others
Into the presence of God
Until he or she is prepared
to stand there him/her self.

Adirei A'yuma

Poets and preachers,
Sages and Saints,
Angels and agnostics,

All offer praise
In their own unique language.

Rabbis and rebels,
Singers and seraphim,
The carefree and the concerned
Call out to You
In their hour of need.

Kings and clowns
Elders and infants,
The rich and the ragged
All turn to you
When they are confounded and confused.

Cowards and courageous
Teachers and tyrants
The simple and the subtle
Together lift their voice
All sing to you
In the language of metaphor and mystery.

U-v'khen: For whom Should we pray

The three passages beginning with *U-v'khen*
Contain vision of our place in the world.

The first u'vekhen speaks of humankind –
May all beings sense the greatness of God
And pledge allegiance to God.

The second u-v'khen speaks of the Jewish people -
May we live with honor and dignity in our own land.

And the third u-v'khen speaks of the individual –
the role we each play in the triumph of righteous
And the destruction of evil --
May they live securely without fear or oppression.

These are our priorities and our place in the world:
First to be fully human –
To strive to create a world of goodness and godliness.
Second to be faithful Jew -
Part of a nation of priests and a holy people.
And third to be one of the righteous people in the world –
Simply to strive to be one of the good people
living our lives fully and wholly each day.

These three prayers are meant to be a challenge –
they can be put in the form of three questions:

1. Have I been truly human, living by a moral code that promotes justice in the world?
2. Have I my membership in the people of Israel, striving to be a light unto the nations?
3. What have I done today -- to bring goodness into the world and to diminish sorrow and pain?

If we can answer these three questions,
If we can accomplish these tasks then
we won't have to wait for the Messiah any longer...
She'll already be here!

U-n'taneh Tokef, Redux

U-n'taneh Tokef is a powerful prayer but it was written centuries ago in a world radically different from ours. As we recite this prayer I wonder what it would sound like transformed by modern sensibilities and yet holding on to its message. This prayer is a product of a story (or is it the story a product of this prayer); how Rabbi Amnon, in his last martyred hours, shared his deepest thoughts, having come close to apostasy....in that light I offer, "Unetaneh Tokef – Redux," for a different age.

My rabbi said it was a day of deep sanctity
but I was tired and bored.
The words I heard in synagogue seemed hollow
– Compassion, faith and truth –
But I came anyway, unsure if I believed
in this mysterious God to whom we offer praise
but drawn by forces and feelings I couldn't grasp.

I entered the sanctuary along with the others, stylishly late
And dreading the drone of sermons and prayers...
I checked my watch, counting the minutes until lunch.

But something changed.
What was it – a melody, a word?
Was it the open ark or the quiet during the silent prayer?
Were there memories that haunted me and drew me in?

Suddenly, I felt terribly alone,
But I knew I was not alone.
Though I attended this synagogue all my life
I was in a place I had never been before.
I felt a Holy Presence, for the first time, Your presence,
Aware of everything – the wonder and the horror
The sorrow and the celebration,
Everything that makes up life
and I knew that there was more
than I had ever notice or could measure count;
Aware of all my flaws and my failings,
Aware of my humanity

Aware of You

“Innocent or Guilty,” asked the judged,
And before I answered, the judge said:
“Don’t say another word;
I already know what you’re thinking,
Your excuses, your evasions, your rationalizations.
You can close your eyes but you can’t block Me out.
And it won’t be my hand
that will seal you in this book of life –
That’s up to you;
You will decide on the quality and quantity of your life.”

With a shudder and a smile,
I told him I knew this prayer
“Who shall live and who shall die?”
I had sung along with the cantor so many times,
Not certain of its certainty
Or its terrifying finality...

Nothing has changed, I told the Judge
– nothing more and nothing less -

But the judge turned to me
and I saw my face in His,
kind and cruel, caring and quizzical
sad and hopeful,
And I knew for the first time
that judgment begins with me
That the length of my years is measured
By the fullness of my days.
That it is not sword or earthquake,
fire or hunger that will be the measure of my life
But the small, the imperceptible decisions
I make every day.
Nothing I could do would allow me to evade this truth.

I sighed for the moments gone by
that I had lost
And for the uncertainty of the moments
yet to come -
Are they few or many?

Unetaneh Tokef Kedushat Hayom
This is a moment of pure sanctity and awesome power....
For every moment holds within it
The seeds of eternity
And the wonder of now!

V'khol Ma'aminim: Trust or Belief?

V'khol Ma'aminim is usually translated “and all believe.”
But what does that mean?
What does it mean ‘to believe in God’
and how is ‘believing’ different from ‘trusting.’

To believe is to embrace the truth of an idea or a thought.
Eminah is trust
We are not asked to belief in God
But to trust in God.

True ‘faith’ is expressed in our willingness
to put our trust in someone or something,
And to live with that trust.
Even in our darkest moments
We must live our lives trusting.

After all, what is a world without trust?
Family, society, and every human relation
are built on trust.
A world without trust is a world in which
Nothing can be counted on or relied on.

It’s been said that
We live in an age when ‘God is dead.’
God is not dead.
But trust in God is.
I believe that many people believe in God
But few are prepared to put their trust in God.

It is not God alone who has lost our trust.
We lose our trust in leaders and politician
when they are more concerned
with advancing their interest than serving others.
We lose our faith in religion
When clergy act selfishly and abuse authority.
We lose our trust in family when we are disappointed
and hurt by those we love.

So have we lost our trust in God?
There might be some people here
who feel that God has failed them.
Others, like my teacher Rabbi Moshe Zucker,
Are *broygez* with God, angry at God
Because God was silent during the Shoah.
We are fragile creatures – so easily wounded,
So easily hurt...

And so we sing: *V'khol Ma'aminim*
We must rediscover “our trust”

In the words of the psalmist:
“Though my father and my mother leave me (I trust)

God will care for me...
I have faith that I shall surely see *Adonai's* goodness
Hope in the Adonai,
be strong and take courage.
Hope in Adonai.”

As we recite *V'khol Maaminim*,
Let us ask ourselves if we have the strength to trust...

Words to Live By: **An Introduction to *Malkhuyot, Zikhronot, Shofarot***

We enter the heart of the Rosh Hashanah service.
We recite three sections, *Malchuyot, Zichronot, Shofarot*,
Each made up of a collection of biblical verses.
These verses articulate the central themes of Judaism.

They point to the domains of life
In which we encounter God.
They remind us how to live “in the presence of God.”

“Religion is not ‘What we do in our solitariness.’
Religion is what we do in the presence of God.
The spirit is present whenever we are willing to accept it.
True, the face of God may be hidden in our time
but God is hiding because we are evading Him.”

The first section speaks of *Malkhuyot*, Sovereignty.
We encounter God in the awesome order and harmony of nature;
We are but a small part of a greater whole.
We reject human authority and affirm Gods’ authority
Through biblical verses we affirm
Adonai Malakh, God reigns!

The second section is *Zikhronot*, remembrance.
We celebrate the God
Who remembers our fathers and mothers,
The cry of our ancestors in Egypt,
And recall our presence at Sinai;
God has never forgotten us.
Through biblical verses we affirm
Adonai Zocher, God remembers!

And in the final section, *Shofarot*
We recite verses celebrating the sound of the Shofar.
The shofar sound was heard at Sinai
And it will announce the Messianic era.
We who live between these two moments must
Bring about the redemption.
Through biblical verses we affirm

Adonai takah shofar gadol, God sounds the great shofar
And calls us to action!

What do these verses teach us?
We learn that we are constantly in the Presence of God
We meet God in the power of nature;
In the cycles of day and night
In the harmony and disharmony of the natural world
In the life giving laws by which we strive to live.

We learn that God remembers and cares.
That conscience begins with memory.
That we can only face the future by knowing the past.

And in the symbol and sound of the shofar
We learn that we are the instruments of redemption.
We are God's partners.
The sound of the Shofar reminds us
That we are on a journey from Mount Sinai to Jerusalem
From slavery to salvation, from fear to freedom.

Malkhuyot, Zikhronot, Shofarot
Remind us that we are not alone
We live in the presence of God
In creating a new world each day
in words and deeds and faith
let us affirm God's sovereignty, God's concern,
And God's hope...and our own