

# Bringing Ourselves to Prayer

In the exchange that follows, rabbis Tirzah Firestone and Saul J. Berman explore their personal relationships to the prayers of Rosh Hashanah and how, as spiritual leaders, they guide others through the holidays. Rabbi Tirzah Firestone is the author of a spiritual autobiography, *With Roots in Heaven*, and *The Receiving: Reclaiming Jewish Women's Wisdom*. She is the spiritual leader of Nevei Kodesh in Boulder, Colorado, a Jewish Renewal congregation. Rabbi Saul J. Berman is Director of Edah, Associate Professor of Jewish Studies at Stern College, and Adjunct Professor at Columbia University School of Law, where he teaches seminars in Jewish Law. He has served as rabbi of Congregation Beth Israel of Berkeley (1963-1969), the Young Israel of Brookline (1969-1971), and Lincoln Square Synagogue in New York (1984-1990).

## SHALOM RABBI BERMAN,

Here are some questions I grapple with every year: How do we honor the tear-stained prayers of our *bubbes* and *zaydes* while also honoring the fact that these prayers may have lost real meaning for many of our congregants and perhaps even for us? For those of us who are committed to Yiddishkeit as a living spiritual practice and who try to breathe life into our venerable yet seemingly antiquated High Holiday liturgy each year, isn't integrity paramount? As a spiritual leader, how can I ask congregants to check their personal ideologies at the door? I feel we must render the High Holyday themes in ways that will include people where they are, to accommodate, not hinder, the deep inner work of *cheshbon hanefesh* — the deeply personal work that is supposed to be happening during services.

The prayers must speak *to* us if they are going to speak *for* us. Depending upon who we are and how the year has unfolded for us, the liturgical images may require translation or even modification: for congregants who cannot accept the idea of a "Book of Life" and for those whose God-image or gender politics will not allow them to pray to an *Avinu Malkeynu*; for those to whom the traditional *Vidui* misses the mark; and for those whose personal ideologies no longer allows them to relate to God from the place of worm or sheep. Rabbi Berman, how do you, as a leader of a traditional community, keep these prayers alive and meaningful for your congregants?

*Tirzah*

## DEAR RABBI FIRESTONE,

A central goal of the liturgy of the *Yamim Nora'im* is to enhance personal meditative communication between the individual and self and the individual and God. This, as Maimonides understands it, is the fulfillment

of the biblical commandment of *avodah she'balev*, worship of the heart. Yet, even this most personal and subjective of *mitzvot* has objective elements that serve as boundaries of the performance. Personal prayer requires three forms of content. First is expression of *shevach* (praise), in which the mercy, power, and holiness of the covenantal Deity are affirmed. Second is *bakasha* (petition), in which we recognize our frailties, needs, and aspirations, and affirm that it is only in partnership with God that those issues in our lives can be addressed. Third is indication of *hoda'ah*, gratitude for who we are and what we do have in our lives. The texts of the *sidur* and *machzor* are attempts to concretize these objective elements in words, while inviting passionate engagement and interpretive interaction.

I know not a single person who does not struggle with theological and/or experiential conflicts with the Jewish worldview propounded by these boundaries. People should not enter into prayer mindlessly, nor emptied of their own hard-earned questions or convictions. They need rather to enter the synagogue precisely in order to confront the divergence between their personal convictions and behavior patterns, and those of the Jewish religious tradition. The existence of objective boundaries and standards against which to measure one's self is an essential precondition for real *cheshbon hanefesh*. The goal of the synagogue is not to make people feel comfortable but to help them grow spiritually and morally.

Prayer, like all other ritual *mitzvot*, comes to life when its philosophical and moral purposes are made accessible. And when people are encouraged to engage humbly and honestly with the same texts with which their ancestors struggled and emerged spiritually enriched.

*Saul*

SAUL,

I understand that the Jewish framework and boundaries might serve as a ballast for self inquiry. But what about the growing number of Jews for whom the divergence (between their personal convictions and the Jewish worldview) is too great? Surely you are aware of the large number of Jews who would rather spend Yom Kippur in nature speaking to God in “their own way.” Or prefer to get together with friends over Rosh Hashanah dinner... *sans machzor*? The “same texts with which our ancestors struggled” may no longer hold compelling ingredients for these people. They will not emerge spiritually enriched; they will be left untouched.

Without permuting the tradition beyond recognition, doesn't the Jewish leader bear some responsibility to help bridge the gap? Much of what I do is the work of translator — that is, translating the paradigmatic Jewish language of our ancestors into relevant, accessible, and open-ended terms.

For example, where elements of our modern lives, such as our physical bodies, sexuality, and the material world, have been pushed to the margins of awareness (or scorned as distractions or worse), I attempt to bring them back into our prayers and introspections. Living in our society, these and other aspects of our lives are constantly in our purview. I say: Let's integrate them *as part of* our journey to holiness rather than, as our forebears would have us do, ignore or scorn them. This is not an attempt to bring the tradition “down” to the people but rather to help open a passageway so that people can come with their entire contemporary selves into the holiday experience in a more authentic way.

How do you address the divergence that you speak about when you are praying?

Warmly,  
Tirzah

DEAR TIRZAH,

While it is essential for Jewish religious leaders to open gateways for Jews who are alienated from the community and a meaningful spiritual life, doing so requires a subtle balance between creative novelty and rich stability. Excess stability walls the tradition off from open inquiry and from its own need to develop in response to ever changing human reality. Excess novelty leaves the searcher wallowing in his or her own self, deprived of

the richness of the cumulative wisdom of Torah and the Jewish people.

It is equally obvious that a beginner along the journey cannot instantly be fully integrated into the same worship service or mitzvah performance that others have been reciting, doing, and meditating on for decades. The traditional prayer service and symbolic mitzvot need to be made as accessible as possible. But the early seeker is likely to need separate experiences, special explanations, and distinctive settings in order to bring his or her spiritual awareness into synchronization with the Jewish religious language and spirit.

Conducting a deeply meaningful service for those who fast and pray from a *machzor* on Yom Kippur, does not preclude helping Jews discover Jewish meaning in more spontaneous conversation with God in the midst of a forest. Indeed, the fullest religious expression is achieved in the mutually enriching experiences of fixed communal worship *and* spontaneous individual prayer. We can work on strengthening both parts for all Jews rather than placing them in opposition. Our forbears did not scorn the human body and its drives or the material goods that give us pleasure; they urged us to elevate that material reality — by way of mitzvot.

For me, personally, High Holiday prayer is a recurring challenge of balancing mind and heart, a deep awareness of the needs of, my love of, and my struggles with, the community, my family, my self, and God.

Shana Tova,  
Saul



## Cheshvan is Jewish Social Action Month

Next month, *Sh'ma*, along with several JFL publications and organizations throughout the Jewish world, will be exploring *tzedek* as a Jewish path. We will include essays by Daniel Sokatch, Yonatan Glaser, Mike Rappeport, Sid Schwartz, Toba Spitzer, and others as well as a Round Table Forum with Ruth Messinger, Simon Greer, Yossi Prager, and David Woznica.