
Rosh Hashana: Transforming Our Simple Words to the Purest of Prayer

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There is an interesting teaching in the important Chasidic work, *Sefat Emet* (Language of Truth), written by **Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh Leib Alter**, *zt'l*, the Gerrer Rebbe. The Rebbe wrote:

“The essence of Rosh Hashana is prayer. There are four mitzvot which form our daily routine; the recitation of the Shema, the wearing of tefilin (phylacteries), the donning of tzitzit (fringes), and tefila (prayer). It is written in many holy works that these four mitzvot correspond to the four letter Divine name. Also, the various holidays each parallel one of these four mitzvot. Pesach is representative of the tefilin which we bind to our arm, recalling the “outstretched arm” that redeemed us from Egypt; Shavuot is linked to the recitation of the Shema, which includes the passage: ‘I have instructed you on this day’ (recalling the giving of the Torah at Sinai); Sukkot recalls the mitzva of tzitzit, as the Sukka, much like the tzitzit garment, represents being enveloped by Divine protection. The days of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are in essence all about prayer...”

Let us take a closer look at this piece. The *Sefat Emet* suggests that there are four common daily rituals that are each symbolically paralleled by the essence and nature of one of our four Biblical Holiday periods. One might infer that the Rebbe is suggesting that the extra spiritual fervor, inspiration and joy that are often easier for us to experience during each of our festivals, should somehow inspire us and help us to experience its parallel daily ritual, and really all of our daily conduct, in a more meaningful, and spiritually conscious way. Given that we are on the eve of Rosh Hashana, let us explore further the parallel daily mitzva of *tefila* (prayer), which the *Sefat Emet* viewed as the essence of the entire ten day period between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

One of the interesting phenomena of the High Holidays is that so many people are moved to attend synagogue services. Our synagogues that are often

quite empty throughout much of the year are suddenly filled to capacity. What is it about the various benedictions and readings we recite together on Rosh Hashana that is supposed to carry over into our entire year, and inspire us to seek a deeper connection, to reach a heightened spiritual consciousness? Why, if the essence of Rosh Hashana is prayer, as the *Sefat Emet* suggests, is there such a disconnect for so many people who find their way to the synagogues on these three important dates, only to return to their year long anonymity until the following Rosh Hashana?

In order to attempt to answer these challenging questions, I believe first we must clarify just how much transformative potential exists within the experience of prayer in its purest form.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaKohein Kook, *zt'l* spoke the following words in a public discourse on prayer (As cited in the work *Mishnat HaRav*, pg 72...):

“ The difference between an individual who prays and one who does not pray, is not that one sets aside time each day to pray and the second does not set aside time for this purpose. Rather, there is a profound fundamental difference. The quality of life of each of these two is completely different! That time set aside for prayer, makes a profound impact on the entire day.”

According to Rav Kook, *tefila*, is much more than taking time out of our day to recite some Hebrew words as quickly as we possibly can, and *tefila* is much more than an opportunity to make requests, or plead our case before G-d, as so many people envision as the prime objective of our high holiday prayer, and prayer in general. Rav Kook is suggesting that the experience of *tefila* somehow has the capacity to transform our entire outlook, our entire daily routine, our entire quality of life.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik *zt'l* wrote that many perceive prayer as a conversation, a dialogue with

the Divine. Rabbi Soloveitchik suggests that *tefila* is much more than a conversation, or a dialogue between acquaintances. *Tefila*, said Rabbi Soloveitchik should be experienced as though we have come so close to the Divine within each of us that we feel the collision, of colliding with G-d's presence. *Tefila* is not a random discussion between two distant acquaintances, rather the most intimate of conversations between man and Hashem.

How are we to understand the words of Rav Kook and Rav Soloveitchik within the context of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur? If the goal of *tefila* is not to petition or make any requests, rather to enter into a pure, loving, intimate discourse with G-d; and as the *Sefat Emet* suggests the very essence of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur is *tefila*, how are we to make sense of the many liturgical references to forgiveness, mercy, compassion, and judgment? It seems quite clearly from much of the traditional liturgy, that indeed we have gathered to make many, many pleas, both personal and communal, unto G-d...

There is a well known verse from Psalm 118 (verse 5), that is recited as part of the *Hallel* which we recite on *Rosh Chodesh* (beginning of each month) and Festivals, which is also one of the many verses recited immediately before the *Shofar* is sounded on *Rosh Hashana*.

The verse: "*Min Hameitzar Karati Ya, Ananani bamerchav Ya...*"

"From the depths I called out to God, with Divine relief he answered me..."

Rabbi Kalonimos Kalman Shapira zt'l, the Rebbe of Piasczne, in his incredibly moving work on the Torah and Holidays- *Aish Kodesh* wrote the following words regarding this verse:

"For people like us, especially in such terrible, bitter anguish, it is impossible not to cry out and pray to G-d, even on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, about our pain and suffering. This in itself is a source of distress, and our soul cries out bitterly that even during such holy days as these we are reduced to praying 'Give us life! Give us food!' instead of loftier, altruistic prayers for the needs and sake of heaven..."

...This is the meaning of the verse 'From the depths I called out to G-d, with Divine relief he answered me.' At present, I am calling from the depths of my

pain, but please G-d, respond with divine relief, so that I am able to pray from comfort and plenitude, so that I can pray properly, unselfishly, for the sake of G-d."

The Rebbe, from the depths of the Warsaw Ghetto, where he ministered to so many amidst the devastation of the ghetto, is teaching us a very profound idea regarding the experience of prayer. Prayer, as it is most often experienced by man in our human frailty, is often very self centered-either out of a sense of obligation, or as an outgrowth and response to a personal need or challenging circumstance. But *tefila*, prayer in its purest form, says the Rebbe, and echoed by the words of Rabbi Soloveitchik, is the experience of calling out to G-d, not from the depths of despair and pain, but rather from a space of comfort, heightened spiritual consciousness and love.

Perhaps, now we can better understand the words of the *Sefat Emet*, "*the days of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are in essence all about prayer...*"

If, as we discussed earlier, the heightened sense of awareness, enthusiasm, and joy we feel during each of the holidays is supposed to inspire within us similar fervor and emotions for it's symbolic parallel *mitzva*, then perhaps the opportunity that Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur present us with is the ability to move up the ladder, to be inspired to leave behind our mundane, even commonly self-centered prayer, and begin to view *tefila*, as a regular opportunity to speak with, feel, and embrace G-d's presence in our daily lives.

Rabbi Moshe Weinberger, in a recent public discourse, explained that throughout the year we may be very particular about the minutiae of many of the rituals, we might even spend much time analyzing complicated Rabbinic texts. But, as Rav Weinberger so honestly acknowledges, sometimes in all our efforts we lose sight of the very reason we are actually taking the time to do the particular ritual act. Often, Rav Weinberger points out, we are "circling around" the various *mitzvot*, and missing the very purpose that is behind each of the *mitzvot*. On Rosh Hashana, we take a step back, and remember that in all our "circling around," in all the many concepts and rituals associated with Torah, that each of these *mitzvot* are opportunities for us to strengthen our connection with Hashem, to converse, embrace and "collide" with Hashem, in the purest of ways. Our prayers on Rosh Hashana allow us to transition from the many requests that

emanate out of this confusion of circling around the mitzvot, and enter into prayer in its purest form, of a sincere, intimate conversation with G-d. Our *tefilot* on Rosh Hashana, therefore serve as the ideal paradigm through which every mitzva should be viewed, as opportunities to once again feel, rejoice with, and embrace G-d's presence in each of our lives.

So, in reality, our prayer throughout the entire High Holiday period is an amazing opportunity for growth, for a deeper awareness, and heightened consciousness of G-d's presence in our lives. It is this very idea that lies at the foundation not solely of prayer, but of each and every mitzva; which becomes evident when we stop "circling around" focusing solely on the specific details, and begin to simply open our minds and hearts.