

## Rosh Hashanah 2006 – 1<sup>st</sup> Day

It's a bit intimidating to be the first person to speak on these holidays. On the other hand, it's far better than having to follow the rest of the lineup, so for that I am grateful. You should know that I wasn't the first pick to give today's d'var torah. I am telling you this not because **I** am upset about it, but rather so that **you** don't get too upset with the gabbaim if you're not satisfied.

The Haftorah that we read today tells the story of Hannah, the mother of the Prophet Samuel. Although Hannah seems to have a pretty satisfying marriage, she is miserable because she is childless. One year, Hannah takes matters into her own hands and goes to pray at the temple, while Eli, the Kohen Gadol, is watching her.

When Hannah prayed, "...only her lips moved and her voice was not heard." Watching her, Eli thinks she is drunk. He scolds her, telling her to basically sober up. Hannah explains that she is most certainly sober, but her anxiety and distress have caused her to pray in this way.

It's rather shocking that this short passage describing Hannah's mumbling to herself has developed into the model that we now emulate when we pray. (As an aside, it is strange – although I must say gratifying – that a woman's mode of praying has become the model of prayer to which we now all aspire, given women's historic role in Orthodox synagogues.)

I would like to look at why Hannah's quiet incoherent mummings have become the model for the way we pray.

Rav Hamnuna, in Talmud Bavli Berakhot says that from the verses about Hannah, we learn that one who prays must direct his or her heart. Other Rabbis agree. Rabbi Menah Lonzano (in his Derekh Hayyim) says “If it were possible to worship without words, if the heart could be offered alone: this would be sufficient to fulfill the commandment [of prayer].” Avraham ibn Ezra says the language of the heart is central, whereas the spoken word serves merely as an interpreter between the heart and the listener.

The Rabbis conclude that Hannah prays from her heart because ordinarily our speech keeps us conscious of the world around us. Hannah’s voice was not heard because she had gone within herself - into the deep recesses of her heart. She lost contact with the outside world and only her consciousness of God's presence was real to her. Even though she was standing in front of Eli, she was not embarrassed. She was praying in a way that no one had ever prayed before. Hannah was throwing off the constraints of her ego and letting her soul express itself without inhibition, to such an extent that she appeared drunk.

Hannah broke the rules of convention and revolutionized the way we pray to God. This is her legacy for all generations.

As a result of Hannah’s prayer, we now are required to move our lips, but to remain silent. The Rabbis believed that if we imitated this behavior, we too could have the opportunity to express ourselves without inhibition and we would speak from the deep recesses of our heart. But as with anything that

becomes routine, the act of imitating Hannah does not necessarily translate into meaningful tefilla. It becomes just one more empty ritual.

It is human nature to reduce things to comfortable repetition. Our jobs, our homes, our relationships – they are all easier if they don't change or challenge us. But we need to be shaken up. That is one of the values of the Jewish high holidays. They force us, in case we are not typically reflective, to question where we are, what we have done, and what we have become. The holidays require us to review our past, and to look objectively at our shortcomings. They demand introspection.

Carrying this introspection into the act of prayer is extraordinarily difficult. That is particularly true for prayers that we engage in every day, every Shabbat. How can we engage in a process that is so routine, and imbue it with meaning?

We need to learn to pray from the heart, but what does that mean? At its most fundamental, it means that we properly focus ourselves. At its peak, it means that our songs of prayer can transcend concrete verbal articulations and express the inexpressible yearnings of our hearts.

One of the unifying goals of our tefilla community is our desire to create meaning in our prayers, and to increase all of our opportunities to pray from the heart. There are several ways we do this.

First, we are intense. We are thoughtful and serious about what we do. Here's an example: Just 2 weeks ago many of us gathered together to learn

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur melodies just so that we could enhance our tefillah experience today. A second example: our gabbaim -- Jane Shapiro, Steve Steinberg, and Steve Lupovitch – worked very hard to create a tefillah that was meaningful, complete, and beautiful – yet as short as possible. For some of us, tefillah must have harmonious uplifting singing that can transcend our human limitations in order to be meaningful. And for some of us, tefillah cannot drag on or last too long, because then our limited attention spans will make it impossible to daven with meaning and feeling. Both these competing needs represent our human limitations, and our gabbaim spent countless hours thoughtfully creating this service recognizing these needs. One of my extended family members told me that he didn't object to our halachic stance, but he didn't like joining us on Friday nights because we took tefillah "too seriously." How true. That is precisely what we do. That is one factor that sets us apart.

Of course there is more to it than just our earnestness. We are inclusive. Inclusiveness serves as a means to meaningful prayer, and not as an end in itself. Active involvement on both sides of the mechitzah enhances the experience of tefillah. When we create an atmosphere of inclusiveness, we have readied ourselves for prayer.

And then there is our focus on singing. We add meaning, challenge ourselves, and prepare ourselves for prayer from the heart by lifting our voices in thoughtful and enthusiastic singing. Shira refers not only to mere singing, but also to a unique type of mystical experience. Through singing, we manifest feelings into vocalized words, and we are able to spiritually connect. Since the medieval period in Judaism, music has been essential to

elevating the soul. And -- this is appropriate to the High Holidays -- the kabbalists at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century emphasized that music could protect against the negative influences of the sefirah orf gevurah or stern judgment: music and song may be employed to neutralize the power of evil.

Almost every time I pray with our community, I am focused, prepared, and intent. And it is inspiring to daven in a community of like-minded souls. When we daven in a community, our mindfulness of God rises to a higher awareness, and this mindfulness deemphasizes our individual selves and puts our personal gratifications, pains and desires on the back burner. Our individual needs are transcended, and we become social selves whose needs must be related to others, and from there hopefully we gain a profound humility.

Taking tefillah seriously is a scary thing. It means we are thinking about the words we are saying. It means that we are trying to create a meaningful experience of something that for many has become comfortably routine. It is much easier to frequent a synagogue to see old friends, socialize, gossip, read the newspaper, and open your prayer book and participate on occasion. It is quite a different thing to decide that you actually want to engage with God when praying, that the act of engagement is the reason you are participating. It is scary, and it is even scary to those who don't participate and watch us from afar. After all, we might appear to be drunk.

Hannah's prayer was an uninhibited expression of her soul; it went beyond words and reached G-d's essence. Tefillah is about transcendence – moving outside of ourselves and connecting to God. Praying in a community is a prerequisite to transcendence. Joining our voices with others enables us to

think beyond ourselves, helping direct our voices to the One beyond ourselves. The word for prayer in Hebrew ‘ l’hitpallel’ - is reflexive. Prayer gives us the opportunity to turn inward, to focus on our lives and our relationships. We are about to hear the Hineni, a moving prayer in which the hazzan asks that he be worthy to lead the congregation. In it, he prays: “v’lo y’hi shum michshol beetfillati” - and let there be no stumbling block before my prayers. It is my hope that this coming year we can all find a way to pray without stumbling, so that we can pray “blev maleh simcha” – with hearts full of gladness.

Shanah Tovah U-metukah.