

## **Rosh Hashana – Can My Prayers Succeed?**

This Rosh Hashana comes during a most difficult and trying period. Our preparations for the Days of Awe have gone from a study of mitzvos and character development to a study of current regulations and medical updates. Rather than preparing and planning for inspiring services and meals with family and friends, we are preparing and planning for minimal services and quiet meals alone.

As we approach this unusual Rosh Hashana I begin to imagine how our ancestors must have felt after the first Tisha B'Av. Weeks after the destruction of our Temple, the first Yom tov they approached without a Mussaf offering was Rosh Hashana. How devastated they must have been, how broken and fearful, approaching the Days of Awe without the Temple service. Their only hope for the Day of Judgement lay in the prayers. Many of us now approach the Day of Judgement wondering how we will even have prayer to help us. A quick service, minimal singing and minimal speeches – how meaningful can it be before G-d?

Yet, we know that G-d tells us that He always hears our prayers. We know that every minimal effort we make is of great significance to G-d. The basis for the Mussaf prayer on Rosh Hashana, the highlight of the service, expresses the strength of our prayers. The Gemara Rosh Hashana 16a tells us that Hashem instructed us on how we are to receive a good judgement on Rosh Hashana. We are to say verses declaring Hashem's monarchy, to declare Him as King over us. We are then to say verses highlighting G-d's remembering humankind for good, that our mention should be brought before Him in a good light. We then conclude with verses referencing the sound of the Shofar, indicating that the merit of the shofar should ensure our mention is brought before G-d in a good light. This simple prayer of listing verses highlighting these concepts is enough to ensure a good verdict for our lot in the coming year.

The Gemara on 16b continues to illustrate the power of our prayers. Rebi Yitzchak tells us that any year that begins impoverished will end wealthy. Rash"i explains that Rebi Yitzchak is not referring to actual poverty, but rather to our attitude, that we feel impoverished. Why does our feeling of poverty lead to a year of wealth? Rash"i explains that if we make ourselves feel impoverished on Rosh Hashana then we are able to properly pray to G-d. When we recognize how deeply we need G-d, we can sincerely supplicate before G-d. Once our prayers are sincere, then the year is guaranteed to end with wealth.

However, in context this Gemara does not appear to be so simple. The Gemara continues and states that one who is meticulous in his prayer and prays with great focus and effort brings severe and strict judgement upon himself. Similarly the Gemara in Berachos 54b tells us that one who davens a lengthy and meticulous prayer will bring himself to heartache, for his prayers will not be answered and his desires will not be met.

Reading these Gemaras together one would begin to think that the Talmud is telling us short and meaningless prayer is far better than a lengthy prayer and supplication before G-d. How are we to understand these Gemaras, and what message are we to apply to ourselves and our own approach to prayer?

Rash"i provides an insight into these Gemaras which can change our entire understanding of prayer and is particularly relevant for this year. Rash"i explains that the Gemaras which state that lengthy prayer is unwanted are referring to a specific form of lengthy prayer. There are two reasons why one would be meticulous and focused in prayer. One reason is because he deeply desires that which he is praying for, and therefore pleads with G-d to grant his request. The second reason is because he knows prayer works, and that G-d does answer our prayers. He therefore is meticulous in praying to ensure he does it properly so that his

prayers will be effective. The Gemaras are referring to an individual who, recognizing the power of prayer, approaches G-d with the conviction that his prayers will be answered. It is this attitude which causes his prayers to fail.

This answer is difficult to understand. After the Gemara has explained that G-d has told us that a simple formula of prayer guarantees a good verdict and that any year that we begin by feeling impoverished is a year when we will be blessed with wealth, why shouldn't we feel that our prayers will be answered?

Perhaps we can understand better through a parable. Imagine a king who is a just and kind-hearted monarch, who deeply loves his country and his people. He wishes that his subjects should truly understand and feel his love for them. He speaks with his ministers and decides that he will establish a time and a place where anyone can come to share their personal lives and their needs with the king. All who come to share their personal lives with the king at that time and place will be granted their wishes as an expression of the king's love. When the people hear of this decree, they rejoice and look forward to this opportunity to connect personally with their beloved king and to receive his beneficence. The day arrives and everyone comes to humbly and gratefully approach the king to share their simple stories and needs with this powerful and benevolent king. As the people take their turns, each one leaves the king's presence relieved of their burdens and buoyed by the warmth, love and concern of the king. One man later in line, watches everyone else leaving laden with gifts, and begins to realize that the king is truly giving whatever one asks for. He starts to think beyond his basic needs and imagine what his life could be if he were to truly take advantage of this opportunity. After all, the king has declared he will give whatever people ask of him. When this man's turn arrives, he proudly steps before the king and begins to express carefully and clearly to the king all the wealth and success he has ever dreamed of. As the king listens he recognizes that this man has no thought of nor recognition for the king's love, nor for a relationship with the king. He has come only to take advantage of the king's benevolence. Infuriated, the king throws the man out and sends him off without a single gift.

This parable is the message that Rash"i is telling us. The Gemara never intended to teach us that prayer is a tool with which we can receive what we want. Rather the Gemara was teaching us that G-d's love for us is so complete, that G-d deeply desires to grant our requests. It is not the power of prayer that we should rely upon, but rather the power of G-d's love and concern for each and every one of us.

This is reflected in the formula for the Rosh Hashana Mussaf. Before we ask that we be remembered in a good light, we must first recite verses declaring that G-d is our King. Only then can we ask that we be remembered in a good light, and only then can we discuss our mitzvah of Shofar. First, we must recognize G-d, and Who it is that we are speaking with. This is the message as well of Rebi Yitzchak. Any year that we come before G-d with true supplication and with an attitude as though we have nothing, truly and genuinely asking G-d for help out of pure reliance on Him, and on Him alone, any such year is guaranteed that G-d will respond and shower His love upon us. The key to prayer is in truly recognizing our relationship with G-d and that He loves each of us as His child.

As we find our prayers minimized this year, perhaps that itself is the greatest gift. We can approach G-d this Rosh Hashana knowing that we are not seeking that He answer us based on our merits, or the sincerity of our prayers, nor any other reason. We are approaching G-d this Rosh Hashana feeling somewhat alone even when we're together, concerned for ourselves and others, with no clarity of what is to come. We approach G-d this year with a sense that we truly need Him. We turn to G-d from that perspective knowing also that He cares and wants us to share our burdens with Him, knowing that He wishes us to feel His love and lovingly cherishes our prayers and our wishes. May G-d shine His love upon all of us in this coming year, and may we all be blessed with a year of health, security, wealth, prosperity, peace and all good things.