

A well known anecdote captures the complexity of the Rosh Hashanah prayer experience. Four Jews are discussing why they go to shul. Robert says, "I go to listen to the chanting of the cantor - his Unetane Tokef sends chills up my spine." Sam says, "I go to listen to the rabbi's sermons - they always give me something to think about." Larry says, "I go to talk to God about my sins of the past year." Jeff says, "I go to shul to talk to Rob and Sam and Larry."

If the proverbial Martian were to visit Ahavas Israel in order to learn what Jews do in shul, he would see a number of different styles of behavior. Some Jews sit with an open book and stare off into space until they are told to turn to a different page. Other Jews follow along very closely with every word that is chanted. Still others read, at various levels of audibility, every word on every page. Some read in English, some in Hebrew. Some read, letting the words skip over the surface of their minds like a stone skipping over the water of a small pond, landing somewhere on the other side. Others read with apparent intense concentration and comprehension and depth. We can only guess at what might be happening inside any of these people.

The person who is staring off into space, occasionally turning pages, might be engaged in intense meditation on the themes of the day.

The person who is following along with every word might be trying to absorb the Hebrew and internalize the message of the Mahzor.

The person who is mumbling every word might be searching the text for phrases or sentences that relate particularly well to her current life situation.

The person who throws words across his consciousness might be waiting for a single word to fall short of the other side, to sink in, and that single word might be the message from God he has been waiting for.

I struggle with how to teach people how to have a religious experience through prayer. I teach about prayer to adults and to children in our religious school, but I struggle with the question of how do I teach a transcendent experience. I can teach how to read words, to sing communally, and I can talk about how the structure of the Siddur attempts to create an atmosphere in which a person can stand in the presence of the Blessed Holy One, but I can't teach you how to feel like you're standing and speaking in God's sacred presence.

My friend Rabbi Aryeh Ben David wrote:

I learned how to pray with the prayer book. I prayed three times a day. I could say the words correctly, in Hebrew, at the right pace. I actually thought that by saying the words I was praying.

But I had lost my own voice. I was so busy "getting it right" that I had lost the voice of my own soul.

I wish someone had told me, "You know Aryeh, for truly deep authentic prayer, you have to use your own words. So find your own words and say them honestly and authentically. Don't try to do it 'right,' don't try to fit in. Go inside, open up your heart."

If someone had said that to me — wow — it would have changed a lot.

I would still have prayed three times a day with a minyan; it's important to be involved in community.

But I also would have engaged my own voice. Or better yet, my own heart. I was so busy trying to fit into the community way of doing things that I couldn't let go of being self-conscious and my fear of embarrassment.

And letting go is the beginning of real prayer. Listening deeply to the voice of our soul that is always talking to us is the beginning of prayer.

To add to my friend Reb Aryeh's words, I propose that we can define a religious experience through prayer as what happens when we connect our mind with a consciousness larger than ourselves. Common across all of the styles of prayer behavior is the idea that one who is praying is trying to connect with and understand a consciousness larger than him or herself. Beliefs about how this Divine consciousness manifests vary among us, but I think we have in common the idea that there is a transcendent wisdom in the Divine.

I propose that a goal of a religious experience is to make us wiser human beings, not in the sense of gaining knowledge, as is the goal of study, but of gaining wisdom and insight, somewhat the same way that going to therapy helps us gain wisdom and insight.

The result of approaching the goal of attaining a measure of wisdom is to better understand and/or change ourselves and/or the world around us. The result also may be to connect us with the community around us - Jeff's desire to come to shul to have a place to talk with Rob, Sam, and Larry is in line with the concept of a minyan and the preference for communal, rather than individual, prayer.

Yesterday morning's Haftarah featured prayer as a central theme. I think we can learn several things about prayer from considering that story.

First of all, Hannah didn't have a Siddur. What she had was a pain in her heart. She had a need. She desperately wanted a child, so she picked herself up and took herself to a place where she felt God's presence, and laid out her pain and desire before God. We have a Siddur, an arrangement of prayers that have been compiled and edited and refined over centuries of Jewish history, but it is only a template. It suggests themes of prayer that represent core values of Judaism, but it is by no means a script that each individual is required to follow. Pick up the Mahzor and consult the template, but don't make the book into a prison in which you are trapped.

After Hannah, whom Eli the priest thought was drunk, explained that she was simply an unhappy woman pouring her heart out to God, Eli responds, "Then go in peace." וַאֲלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל יִתֵּן [1Samuel 1:17] The second part of his sentence can be translated in one of two ways. Either he was telling Hannah, "The God of Israel will grant you what you have asked" or perhaps, "and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked."

Rabbi Yosef Kara, a contemporary of the 10th century sage Rashi, argued that Eli must have been telling her that God would grant her what she asked for. He suggests that we know that prayer does not always get us what we want, and since Hannah left the encounter with Eli happy, she must have been told that she would get what she wanted.

The New Jewish Publication Society translation choose the subjunctive translation, "May the God of Israel grant you what you have asked for," believing that it best represents p'shat, what the Biblical story intended. My colleague Rabbi Robbie Harris, professor of Bible at the Jewish Theological Seminary, suggests that even though Hannah was not told that she would definitely receive what she wanted, she still felt better because the connection between Eli and Hannah through his prayer alone comforted her. When we go into a hospital room and visit and leave the patient with a prayer for a speedy recovery, the patient does not know that the recovery will necessary be smooth and quick. Nonetheless, the visit and the prayer usually result in the patient

feeling better, simply because of the person-to-person connection forged by the prayer experience.

What we learn here is that prayer is as much about making connections as getting answers. I am telling you what Aryeh wanted to hear. Use your own words. Make a connection with the words. Make them mean something to you. Worry more about making a connection to God and less about being on the 'right' page.

I invite you to choose words from the Maḥzor or bring words from your heart that enable you to feel the power or gain the insight of a religious experience. Use the words of the Maḥzor, argue with the words of the Maḥzor, reject the words of the Maḥzor, replace the words of the Maḥzor. May your prayers this Rosh Hashanah, this Yom Kippur, this Holiday season, and at any time when you are so moved, pour forth from your heart and like Hannah, may the prayer lift your soul.