

High Holiday Prayer Survival Guide
Erev Rosh HaShana, 5770

The holiday we are celebrating has five names:

Rosh HaShana: the beginning of the New Year. L'shana Tova- May you receive the blessing of the new year!

Yom Harat Olam: the birthday of the world and the anniversary of the creation of the human race on the sixth day of creation.

Yom Teruah: the day of Shofar blasts, raising consciousness and awakening the conscience- although this year, due to Shabbat, we'll have to wait until Sunday to fulfill this Mitzvah.

Yareach Eitanim: The Month of the Mighty, when the patriarchs of Israel, Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'acov were born.

Yom HaZikaron: the day of remembrance of things past and finally:

Yom HaDin: the Day of Judgment with its imagery of all humanity giving account before the one true judge before whom there are no rationalization or evasions.

Tomorrow, during the most powerful of all of the prayers of Rosh HaShana, we mention the three great themes of the holiday: Tefila, Teshuva and Tzedaka; prayer, repentance and acts of justice.

Of these three, the last two are easy to access- Teshuva means subjecting ourselves to rigorous self-examination and returning to our best selves. True change is difficult, but it is important.

Tzedaka- doing justly, giving back, speaks as clearly to us now as it did to our ancestors.

But Tefila is hard. Reaching beyond ourselves to God challenges the way that some of us think about the world. Do we believe in a personal God? Do we believe that God hears prayer? How do we understand the images and language of the liturgy? And besides...it's so long! No one would run a marathon without training, and the High Holy Day services are certainly a challenge.

I would like to recommend three survival strategies for the services ahead. When I say survival, I don't mean that in the sense of surviving six weeks in the Australian Outback or jumping off a bridge with a bungee cord tied to your ankle. Rosh HaShana services aren't an ordeal. What they are are invitations to an inner experience; survival in this sense means nurturance. It is my hope that these strategies can help you care for and kindle the spark of Israel that burns within you. L'chaim.

The first strategy is, if you read Hebrew, to focus on the words and read along as quickly and fluently as you can. This is precisely how our great grandparents davened. The Hebrew language has a cadence and flow that can be felt even if you

don't understand most of the content. While it might seem strange, davening is a spiritual practice, not an exercise in theology or even necessarily prayer in the accepted sense of the word. Just to read the words, enter into their rhythm and reflect that you are engaged in a ritual that anchored Jewish life for centuries can be meaningful on a very deep level.

A study done back in the 1980's compares the brainwaves of people engaged in meditation with those of Jews who were davening. They tested three sorts of daveners: those who read slowly, in Hebrew, with comprehension. A second group read the prayers in English while a third group davened as quickly as they could in Hebrew, mostly without comprehension. The results? It was the third group of daveners whose brain waves most closely approached those of the meditators. Like meditation, davening engages the consciousness, allowing the inner stressors of the mind to express and release. Unlike meditation though, davening engages the sacred. Using davening in this way can make for some powerful experiences. Someone close to me shared that she felt her late grandmother's loving presence very powerfully in a moment like this. Images, memories, moving and inspiring reflections can arise through this approach.

A second strategy is to read the prayers in English. This is risky: the imagery of the traditional liturgy with its focus on judgment, sin, reward and punishment can be alienating and off-putting. Asking a patriarchal God for forgiveness and blessing can be in sharp opposition to one's personal theology. As a Hebrew speaker, I can attest that much is lost in translation and much is imposed upon the English that is not in the original.

Despite this, reading the prayers in English with Kavvanah- intention and understanding- can be the gateway, not perhaps to the theological sensibility of the prayers' authors but certainly to their emotional and spiritual worlds. Think about reading Shakespeare. We can get through the thee's and thou's, the anachronisms and the sheer difficulty because at the emotional heart of the plays and sonnets lies truth and beauty.

In the same way, we can do a second translation when we read in English. Was the world of the liturgists so different than ours? They experienced wonder and awe in the world around them; despite our greater understanding of natural processes so do we. They, and we, see an underlying unity in nature. Their expressions of wonder come from the world of their imagery, a world that is different from ours, but the core experience is the same. They faced uncertainty and doubt in their age. Do we, in all of our post-modern sophistication experience any less? Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said that all inquiry and all faith begin with wonder. "Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech HaOlam" is the way that the ancient Rabbis expressed that wonder- how amazing, how incredible, incomprehensible, beautiful, frightening and awesome is the world, is existence.

Learning now to make that second layer of translation, the jump to the deeper level of the prayer is a leap that we must make in the imagination as well. To read the Psalms of David, we must be able to travel to ancient Israel, to the majestic wadis of the Negev and the mountains of Judeah. To daven the Amidah, we need to stand in awe in the Temple in Jerusalem in the presence of the entire nation. For the Kedushah and Musaph, we need to find the Rabbis of the Talmud in the rolling hills of the Gallilee and the river deltas of Babylonia- Iraq- in the fourth century. To understand the piyutim, the liturgical poems, we must visit medieval Spain or Tzfat, Safed, in the days of the Ottoman Empire. We must allow ourselves to feel the anxieties of at the hazards of daily life, so many of which we still feel- livelihood, travel, the uncertainties of living as a minority, illness, childbirth, failed crops, droughts or floods and the yearning in the human heart, the need to respond, to cry out, to express gratitude or supplications of hope for blessing in the year ahead. If we are daring and gentle with ourselves and the liturgy, we can find those places in ourselves and experience the sense of catharsis and transport through the liturgy that has nurtured our nation in their exile for two thousand years and make it our own.

Finally, when all else fails...sing along! Back in the day, people used to sing along with each other around the hearth or campfire, at family gatherings, during long car trips, while working- all the time. Now, thanks to I-pods and satellite radio, that culture of music is nearly extinct. It is time to reclaim the idea of sacred space. Music from our ancient liturgy can re-energize the service, can transform a group into a congregation and reading along into worship; but only if we join in. Some of the melodies are familiar, some not, but all of them are easy and many are transliterated.

So belt it out! Having a good voice or being able to carry a tune are totally beside the point. If you sing out, or hum or sing ah, others will too- davening is an experience, not a spectacle.

If we believe that Teshuvah and Tzedaka are important, believe that Tefila is as well, because Tefila creates the sense of holiness, the spiritual space and context Teshuva and Tefila need to operate. We go into shul on Rosh HaShana not necessarily to enjoy it but because it connects us to ourselves as we seek to reflect and improve ourselves. It connects us to a world not only that is but to a world that can be.

So bring yourself, your whole self, questions, experiences, knowledge, problems, struggles and all to shul this Rosh HaShana and beyond. By opening our hearts- and by joining in!- we can find meaning, wisdom and beauty in our tradition and its liturgy.

May you be blessed in the coming year. L'shana Tova!

