

Praying to G-d Each and Every Day

When I read the questionnaire put out by the Rabbinic Search Committee at the Jericho Jewish Center, one item that struck me was the answer to “What Are You Most Proud Of?” The first out of three answers was having two daily minyanim. This is indeed something to be proud of: synagogues which are much larger in size than JJC cannot claim the feat of both morning and evening minyanim to pray together as a community and for mourners to say Kaddish. In addition, people from all over come to the Jericho Jewish Center for daily minyan, most recently an Orthodox Sephardi man on Labor Day Weekend.

One of the challenges with any minyan is it can become easy to pray by rote. Traditionally the same people, those who are in a year of mourning, are the ones who daven, as they have a *hiyuv* (religious obligation). Over the years I’ve seen that each one has his¹ unique style. At the same time, he is saying the same words morning after morning and night after night. How can one continue to have inspiration to pray to G-d, the Ruler of Rulers, in a way which is spiritually moving and

¹ I say his because women are not allowed to lead services at the Jericho Jewish Center minyan.

filled with *kavana* (proper intention) when the service is the same? This is a question we must also ask now, at the beginning of New Year 5779, when we are about to have two days in a row with the same, elongated *Musaf Amidah*, as well as on *Yom Kippur*, when we say the *Ashamnu* 10 times and the *Al Chet* 8 times, continuing to enumerate the same list of sins.

One attempt at an answer can be derived from a story told by Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski, a rabbi from the Bover Hasidic line who, like me, had his roots in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In his book *Living Each Day*, one of his series of books in which he tries to instill each day with deeper spirituality and meaning, Rabbi Twerski writes the following: “At the Western Wall in Jerusalem I saw a blind man being led to the wall. He felt the stones with his fingertips, applied a gentle kiss to the sacred stones, and began speaking to G-d. Although he spoke very rapidly, I could catch some of the words. He was relating to G-d various things that had happened to him, and some of his requests.

At one point he stopped abruptly. ‘Oh, I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I already told You that yesterday.’

The sincerity of the man’s prayer was electrifying. He had no doubt whatever that what we said yesterday had been heard.”²

This story might strike us as surprising: why would this man not say the same thing to G-d day after day? After all, that’s what we do in daily minyan, save personal additions that we can add to the Silent Amidah. Rabbi Twerski, however is getting at a deeper truth-prayer is a conversation we are having with G-d. Just as in a conversation with a person we do not want to belabor or repeat points *ad nauseum*, so too must we avoid doing so with *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*, G-d almighty. The conversation must have new elements each and every day; otherwise it loses its import.

This brings us to a conundrum: we live in an age with a standardized *Siddur*, or prayerbook, with a list of prayers we are required to say. How can we turn these prayers from being a ‘laundry

² Abraham Twerski, *Living Each Day* (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications, 1992), p. 70 (9 Kislev).

list' to becoming something which inspires and touches the soul? In order to begin this process, it would be wise to follow Sherwin's example, to 'understand what we are reading.' If we do not know Hebrew, now would be a good time to start taking a class on Tuesday evenings at the Jericho Jewish Center or to take me up on my offer-which still stands-of learning 1-on-1 until a point is reached when you can become an Adult Bar/Bat Mitzvah. With that being said, how does that help us now when we are already in High Holidays 5779? For that I would argue that in order to have meaningful High Holy Days (days which are instilled in holiness)-we should view our prayers, whether they are on or off the page-as part of a conversation with G-d. These services are opportunities to communicate with a Higher Power, not only to make pleas and requests but also to converse as one would with a longtime friend or as the old man did in the vignette Rabbi Twerski shared. While this might be a more prescient time to do connect with G-d, our tradition teaches that we must do so each and every day. Like in sports, we need to practice before we reach the game: we must be continually mindful of where our relationship with G-d is at. If we do

not, if we do not strive to engage with G-d between Yom Kippur and the following Rosh Hashanah, than it should be no surprise to us if we are unable to obtain the deep, meaningful connection for which we strive.

Therein lies the importance of our daily minyan-the Jericho Jewish Center provides twice daily opportunity to have a conversation with G-d. Sometimes the conversation might be praying by rote in English or Hebrew and might not be spiritually inspiring. However, by making the effort, we will get closer to achieving that connection for which we strive. It's why I believe Rabbi Richardson's z"l innovation of personal prayer before the Ark at Neilah became so powerful here: it's the moment when it's just you and G-d conversing with one another. That "spiritual high" does not need to be reserved for once a year: there's the opportunity to aspire for it each and every day at minyan at the Jericho Jewish Center. I've seen people elongate their prayer and come before the ark after the service formally concludes to speak to G-d. That is something that each of us has the opportunity to do, regardless of our knowledge of Hebrew or of the fixed liturgy.

As we officially enter New Year 5779, let us each strive to be like the old man who had the conversation with G-d in front of the Kotel. When we feel lost in the service, unsure of what to do during a long Hebrew recitative by our Hazzan or a choral piece by the choir, may we take a deep breath, close our eyes and enter into a conversation with our Creator. In so doing, many we find that this years' service has an even greater level of spiritual integrity than those in the past as we strive to reach לעלא לעלא, a higher and higher relationship with G-d. May that spirit also transcend the High Holy Days into the coming year as we strive to converse with G-d at daily minyanim and at Shabbat services.

We continue with a responsive reading on Page 20 in the Mahzor, "How to Number Our Days."