

Q&A - September 2011 - Why do we spend so much time in shul : "Jewish Life" magazine

Chief, I think what many people are secretly wondering about Rosh Hashanah is ? why so much time in Shul praying?

We need to get out of the rut of our day to day lives and find the space to rethink the direction that we are headed.

Why not just go for a quite weekend away?

We not talking about general contemplation here. We are looking to see where we are holding in terms of our mitzvas. Every Shabbos forces us to step outside our daily routine and reconnect with the most basic values of Hashem and His Torah, our families and communities. And Yom Tov does the same thing. Rabbi Shimshon Refael Hirsh says that the Hebrew word 'moed', 'festival', comes from the root of the word 'meeting'. Because the festivals are a time when we step out of our lives to meet with G-d. He explains that the Mishkan, the Temple, was called the 'ohel moed'- the tent of meeting. That is like a meeting with G-d in space, and the festivals are a meeting with G-d in time.

But why praying ? why not praising, or meditating?

People often have a simplistic understanding of prayer. They think that prayer is to ask for something, which comes from the English root from the Greek word to ask. But in Hebrew, the word for prayer is also 'avodah' ? which means service. It is the only mitzvah, the Maharal points out, which is simply called service. It demonstrates in the most powerful way that we are servants of Hashem, completely dependant on Him. There is a Mishna in Pirkei Avot, which says the world stands on three things- Torah, avodah, the service in the Temple but also prayer, and gemillus chassadim, kindness. It is one of the primary aspects of our relationship and interaction with Hashem.

How so?

Rabbi Shimshon Refael Hirsch says is that the root of the word 'tefilla' is the reflexive verb to judge oneself. We stand in the presence of G-d, we think about our lives, we look at ourselves, with all of our shortcomings and our good, and we focus on the one resounding theme of Rosh Hashanah ? that G-d is King. And then we start to think of all this in terms of repentance.

How do prayer and repentance relate?

To be in the presence of G-d and to be fully cognisant of that and to feel and experience it from an intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and even physical point of view is what the experience of prayer is all about. And so Rosh Hashana is about repentance but it is also about prayer, because repentance is about change. It is about the upliftment of a person, and to pray properly to G-d can be a very powerful catalyst to becoming a much greater person.

Does anyone actually get all of this from davening though?

Davening is a very multi-faceted experience, because it is made up of many parts. The physical ?we mouth the words. The spiritual ? we connect with G-d. The emotional ? ranging from joy and gratitude, desperation and shame. The intellectual ? we think about many issues while we pray. And a big part of Rosh Hashanah is spent not praying, but in the service of prayer ?what real davening is.

What IS real davening?

The halacha says that you need to pray in such a way that your lips and mouth articulate the words of the prayers in such a way that the words are only audible to you and to nobody else. We learn this way of praying from one of the great women of Jewish history ? Chana, who went to the Temple to pray for a child after many years of being unable to have children. We in fact read about Chana on the Haftorah for Rosh HaShana and she is described as praying with her lips but not being audible to an outside observer. So too do we pray in a whisper.

Why do you pray in a whisper ? one would think to shout it from the rooftops?

It is about the sheer intimacy of the experience of davening - how prayers are phrased in the second person - ?you?. We speak to G-d by addressing Him as ?you?. Blessed are You, Hashem our G-d, King of the Universe ?? It is direct. We talk directly to G-d, no intermediaries. We do not need to go through anybody to speak to G-d. We do not need to go through the rabbi or the chazan or the choir or anybody. It is one-to-one communication. A whisper is about intimacy. You whisper and talk to someone quietly when it is just a one-on-one conversation. And so too when we pray we are standing before G-d ? it is one-on-one between us and the King of all kings, Hashem Himself. A prayer is a privileged opportunity and it has the power to be a transformational experience.

But what is standing in our way?

We need to re-orientate our thinking. To pray is not a burden ? it is a privilege. In my position, one of the issues I have to deal with is how to achieve access to important politicians and government leaders ? how do you get through the gatekeepers, make an appointment, get to the top? And Hashem is the King of all Kings, eternal and all-knowing, infinitely more powerful than any mortal who is here today and gone tomorrow, and yet you do not even need to make an appointment! You just need to talk to Him and He is waiting to listen to you and that is an awesome privilege.

How can we use this to our advantage?

All the time in shul that you spend over this Yom Tov ? use it well. Understand what you are praying. Go through the words beforehand and, most importantly of all, every moment that you are standing in prayer, especially during the Amidah, stand as if you are standing before G-d Himself because you are. We all are, and that is the unique opportunity and privilege that is given to all of us.