

Pray With a Community
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Once there was a very learned Hasidic rabbi who attracted a large following. There was a Litvak (a studious, serious, Lithuanian Jew) who wanted to be a disciple of this saintly rabbi. So he came to the community and lived there for a while, just to be sure that the rabbi's level of scholarship would be adequate for him. When he became convinced that it was, he approached the rabbi and asked if he could be his disciple.

"Tell me," the rabbi asked, "Where do you daven, where do you go to shul?" "I've been going right here in your shul," said the man. "I've been here for several months."

"So tell me," said the rabbi, "What can you tell me about the people with whom you have been davening?"

"Not much," said the man. "I usually come here and daven and then immediately return to my studies."

"So you can't tell me anything, say, about Hayim, the man who davens to your left," asked the rabbi, "whose brother has been sick for years?" "No," said the man.

"And you can't tell me how Yosel, who is just down the row to your right, you can't tell me how Yosel is doing? You know, he's been *af tsouris*, he's been in terrible shape, ever since his factory burned down last year."

"No," said the man.



"Well," said the rabbi, "I don't think you are ready to be my disciple. At least not yet. You first have to learn how to daven b'tsibur, how to pray with a congregation. In order to do that, you have to come to know the tsouris of the people around you. Otherwise, you're praying only for yourself, and your prayers will not be answered."

Chastened, the man returned to his quarters. At first, he didn't understand what the rabbi was saying, but eventually he did. Within a few months, he came to know and to understand the tsouris of those around him, and finally he was able to pray properly. And he became one of the great disciples of that rabbi, and raised many disciples himself.

This story teaches us that when we pray with a congregation, we can't be totally absorbed with ourselves. If we are, then we are missing something.

Of course, we can get carried away. There's the old joke about the man who, though not religious, was often seen in synagogue. A friend of his asked him why he went. "Goldberg, who is religious," his friend said, "I can understand why Goldberg goes to shul. But why do *you* go to shul?"

"Look," the man said. "Goldberg goes to shul to talk to God. I go to shul to talk to Goldberg."

Somehow, we're trying to reach a happy medium, between talking to Goldberg and talking to God.

On Rosh Ha-Shanah eve, many of us are here for the first time in a long while. We see faces we haven't seen, in some cases for almost a year. We see words on the prayer book that we also haven't, in some cases, seen for almost a year. It takes effort to keep up with our friends and acquaintances and it takes effort to keep up with the prayer book.

But they are related, for though we can have powerful spiritual experiences alone, we can't be completely religiously fulfilled. Similarly, we can have close relationships with people, but unless they are informed by the kind of values we live by, the kind of values that are uppermost in our minds at this season of the year, those relationships cannot be very strong.

It can be quite intimidating to approach someone you haven't seen for a while. Similarly, it can be intimidating to approach our mahzor, so let me offer some words of advice and encouragement.

There is an important principle of davening (Jewish worship) which can be particularly helpful to us: Sometimes, *less* can be *more*. Let me explain.

Anyone who has ever attended a service has probably experienced, at least once, a sense of hopelessness. Seeing before us a mass of literary material culled from three thousand years of Jewish creativity, we can be at a loss what to do. This is all the more true on the High Holidays. Not fully comprehending the elevated language, the images, the insights, ... we can feel stupid and wonder why we are there. If we try to comprehend everything all at once, the circuits in our brain become overloaded and shut down. Boredom -- the enemy of the mind and of the heart -- sets in. In short, we fail in the very purpose of prayer: to become engaged.

It is a paradox: the page before us may be filled with a dozen beautiful poetic images, and references to several profound theological ideas. One would think we could not but be inspired! Yet we are not. And the service -- as measured by its public recitation -- may move swiftly through the page as if it were a list of names in a telephone book.

What are we to do?

The answer is to try to bask in the prayers as they are recited. We shouldn't assume that our purpose must be to read, understand and empathize with every sentiment on every page of the mahzor. Rather, we should try to get a feel for the current of the liturgy, and to move with its flow. If we let the prayers wash over us like waves, usually a word or a phrase will -- if we allow it to -- respond to something that we have been thinking about or been troubled by. Such a moment is precious. When it occurs, we should open ourselves up to the prayer and allow it to address our needs, to speak to us, to comfort us, to challenge us.

By the time we do this with the prayer on page "x", of course, the congregation may already be reciting prayers on page "x + 5"! No matter. Communal davening is an exquisite blend of the public and private. If one is anxious about omitting prayers, there are ways of catching up, but frankly, anxiety is not conducive to

worship. In any event, anxiety should not prevent us from doing what we don't usually allow ourselves to do in life: to pause, to reflect, to ponder, to linger.

Our religion demands that we reach out to those around us, but it also implores us, at times, to sit in solitary contemplation and seek God's help and guidance. Each of these activities has its place.

On these two days of Rosh HaShanah that we have just ushered in, let us resolve to take the time to reflect on how we have lived our lives in the past year and how we would like to live them in the year to come, should we be granted the gift of life.

Let me wish everyone a year of renewal: a year of renewed relationships with friends and family and a year of renewed appreciation of who we are as Jews and of what we stand for.

Amen.