

## Avoiding Hypocrisy

Shemini Atzeret / Yizkor 5779

---

### I.

ON THE SECOND DAY of Sukkot I explained how the third paragraph of Hallel, *Lo Lanu* (Ps. 115:1–11), tempers our sense of religious superiority: at the very moment we mock idols and those who worship them, we remind ourselves of our own duties to God, and the reality in which we rarely follow them as we should. It wasn't the first time I had made this point. I claimed that the first paragraph of Kabbalat Shabbat, *Lekhu Neranena* (Ps. 95), has the same effect when we explored Kabbalat Shabbat during Friday night davening. But the best example of this we do three times a day in *Aleinu*. While I spoke about the theme of *Aleinu* on Rosh Hashana's second day, I didn't address its most famous feature, our bowing during it as we say וְאֶנְחֵנוּ בְּרַעִים. Have you ever wondered why we do it? It doesn't make a lot of sense. Yes, we bow during our Amidah and at *Barekhu* but, outside of that, we don't ever bow. Yet we do during *Aleinu*. Why?

The reason, claims Rabbi Avraham Gombiner – the 17th-century Polish rabbi and halakhist whose commentary on the *Shulchan Arukh*, called *Magen Avraham*, is one of the most influential – is due to the line we say before it:

שָׁהֵם מְשַׁתְּחוּיִם לְהֶבֶל וְרִיק וּמִתְפַּלְלִים אֶל אֵל לֹא יוֹשִׁיעַ

For they – i.e., non-Jews – bow to vanity and emptiness and pray to God but He will not answer them.

Now not everyone says this line, and you'll see in the *Artscroll Siddur* that it is in parentheses, with other siddurim omitting it entirely. Part of this, as Newton's own Ruth Langer has pointed out, is due to Christian censorship – forcing the *siddurim* to omit phrases that they found offensive – but part of it is due to Jewish self-censorship in fear of Christian anger. But you could also see how, nowadays, we might be less-inclined to say it. This is, after all, one of the more offensive statements we as Jews could claim about those of other faiths. It is the quintessential expression of Jewish superiority.

And this is why the *Magen Avraham* believes we must bow just afterwards. If we are going to claim that, וְאֶנְחֵנוּ בְּרַעִים, despite other people bowing to vanity, we bow towards God, then we have to follow that up with a bow (O.C. 132, 2). We can't celebrate our own unique, special relationship with God without actually honoring it. To do otherwise would be hypocritical, it wouldn't make sense. If we're going to claim that we alone bow to God, then we have to bow to God. If we're going to claim that we have a special connection to *Hakadosh Barukh Hu*, then we must show it.

## II.

I think this idea also explains one of *Yizkor's* fascinating customs. Why do those who do not have to say *Yizkor* leave? I used to think it was for superstitious reasons – we fear that, by staying, those who must say *Yizkor* will curse us so that we must say it, too, and, indeed, there are those who make such an argument – but a far more compelling explanation is offered by Rabbi Moshe Mordechai Epstein, the Rosh Yeshiva of the famed Slobodka Yeshiva during the 20th century and author of the talmudic commentary *Levush Mordekhai*. As he explains, each of us has an obligation of *simcha*, joy, on Yom Tov (cf. Deut. 16:14, Rambam, Mitzvot Aseh, 54). But we also have the custom of reciting *Yizkor*. Thus, were the people who do not need to say *Yizkor* to remain in the room, it would be depressing for them – and so they leave so as not to dampen their *simchat Yom Tov*. However, for those who do have to say *Yizkor*:

עונג הוא לו להזכיר נשמת אבותיו ונעים לו הצער הזה.

A sense a joy comes to one who recalls their loved ones, and calm to one who reflects on their loss (Introduction to *B.K.*).

Saying *Yizkor* does not detract from our joy, it heightens it. Recalling our loved ones on Yom Tov gives us an opportunity to reflect on all they gave us, on the joy they brought us, and our appreciation towards them: the fact that, without them, we would not be who we are. Such thoughts don't dull our happiness on Yom Tov, they increase it.

But those who do not say *Yizkor* must leave. In the same way in which not bowing while declaring our uniqueness as Jews because we bow would not compute, those who cannot get joy from *Yizkor* cannot stay. It wouldn't work. To claim that we who cannot, thank God, comprehend *Yizkor* can gain from it would be a lie, it would be hypocrisy.

## III.

And there is one other practice that presents this idea as a challenge to us: Simchat Torah. Every morning one of our first actions is *Birkat ha-Torah*, where we thank God,

אֲשֶׁר בָּחַר בָּנוּ מִכָּל הָעַמִּים וְנָתַן לָנוּ אֶת תּוֹרָתוֹ

Who has chosen us from all the other nations to give to us His Torah.

But how often can we honestly claim that we appreciate this? That we delight in His Torah? Despite claiming every day that it is כְּגִנְיַד בְּלֵם, equal in value to every other thing we do, do we really believe it, do we really take it to heart? And this issue is exacerbated on Simchat Torah! We, who not even a couple of weeks ago were beating our chests for having transgressed the Torah, are suddenly dancing with it, reveling in its completion! The irony! They hypocrisy! I sometimes wonder on Simchat Torah what God must think seeing all these Jews, including myself, suddenly enthused

by Torah despite a year of disinterest. I'll admit that I failed this year in my obligation of *shnayim mikra ve-echad targum*, reviewing the *parashah* twice together with its translation, but suddenly I profess great enthusiasm for the Torah so much so that I dance and sing – despite having ignored it at points throughout the year!

This is our challenge. Tonight and tomorrow we will sing and dance with *sefer torah* in hand as we should, celebrating its completion. But it must reverberate throughout our year. Just as we can't claim to bow to God without doing so, nor claim to find meaning in *Yizkor* if we don't need to say it, we can't dance and sing tonight if we won't find joy in learning Torah and observing its laws throughout the year.

In a few moments, those who cannot find *simchah* in *Yizkor* will leave the room. But all of us must find *simchah* in Torah not just tonight and tomorrow, but for the entire year.