

***Aleinu*: Deflation and Inspiration**

Rosh Hashanah II 5779

I.

ALMOST EVERY SINGLE *TEFILLAH*, prayer service in Judaism, ends the same way – the recitation of *Aleinu le-Shabe'ach*. So much so that, in many synagogues throughout the Orthodox world, there's an al-most Pavlovian response to its beginning: the moment the prayer begins people will head to the exit waiting for its final words so that they can escape and head home. It's a prayer that's rushed through at breakneck speed, very often recited off by heart, with very little time given to ponder its themes and meaning — people have places to go and their *kavanah*, concentration, is already spent at this point. *Aleinu* is the cue that the service is about to end – and today will be no different: right at the end of the service, minutes before we can all head home, we will say *Aleinu*.

Except that, in truth, today will be very different. Because, in just a short while, during our silent prayer of *Mussaf*, we will turn to page 450 and there, right in the middle will be *Aleinu* staring back at us. The prayer we say every single day – the prayer we practically ignore every single day – sits pride of place as one of the core prayers on one of the holiest days of the year. And during the *chazzan's* repetition, it goes one stage further. As our *ba'al Mussaf*, our cantor, reaches *Aleinu* in his repetition, we will open the *Aron Kodesh*, and during it, we will bow and kneel before God, an act that is otherwise forbidden! Something we only do because *Aleinu* is the holiest point in our service. And all of this makes *Aleinu* in *Mussaf* on Rosh Hashanah striking. Because the prayer that we are usually so quick to dismiss – the endnote to every other service – is the holiest prayer of today.

And so, this morning, I want to ask and answer two questions: first, why is a prayer that we rush through during the rest of the year, almost as an afterthought, such a fundamental one on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur? And second, on the flip side, why do we, throughout the year, three times a day, recite one of the focal prayers of the *Yamim Noraim*, the High Holidays, and the end of every service?

II.

Now, the truth is that there is a simple, factual answer to this. *Aleinu* was originally composed during the 3rd century by the great Talmudic sage Rav for the *Yamim Noraim*, but during the Medieval period, it was incorporated into the daily prayer service for reasons debated by historians. But I would like to suggest, *al derekh derush*, homiletically, an answer that cuts to why we are here on Rosh Hashanah: to begin the process of *teshuva*, of repentance.

There isn't a single one of us – there isn't a single person in the world – who has not transgressed the will of God this past year. And, more broadly, we have all had days, weeks, months, or even the entire year, where we have not been the people we wish to be. We have failed not only in our service of *Hakadosh Barukh Hu*, but we have failed ourselves just as much. And so, we are here today to pledge to be better. It's a new year, it's a fresh start, a chance to better ourselves and become the Jews – the people – we wish to be.

And it's this determination to be better that drives our ambition about what we will be – making today, Rosh Hashanah, the time when we are most ambitious about what we can achieve. But there's a problem with our ambitions. During the spiritual highs of today, far removed from our regular routine, we can think it's easy to change. That the people we were even yesterday don't need to be the people we are tomorrow. And herein lies the danger: because if we are unrealistic with our own expectations of what we can achieve, then it can all too easily derail our spiritual and personal progress throughout the year.

Think about the following example from our other New Year. It's December 31st and you want to be better than before. And so, you make a New Year's resolution to exercise more. And, you tell yourself, you know you can do it, it's not so difficult. And you come up with this grand plan: waking up at 6:00 AM every day to go for a brisk walk or a light jog before hitting the gym for an intense workout. Of course, you sign up for a gym membership when it's on sale for New Year's, you know you're going to use it every day – it's great value! And then, of course, the alarm goes off the next morning at 6 and you hit snooze. Does it sound familiar?

But here's the thing: the problem isn't you *per se*, it's your inability to plan correctly. The problem is that you set goals that were unrealistic and far too ambitious, of course you were going to fail. But, because of that, the entire exercise project is abandoned and the next year, you are no fitter than the last. It's what cognitive psychologists call the planning fallacy: we always think we will be better people the next day than we are today.

And what we really need is a counter to our planning fallacy: as we're setting our ambitious and unrealistic resolutions at the end of December, we need to remember what we're really like. As we're planning all the time we'll spend in our day doing healthy things, we need a jarring and unpleasant reminder of the person we really are. As we're scheduling our new exercise-packed routine we really need to be doing so while staring at a photo of ourselves sat in pajamas on the couch with a tub of ice cream on our laps while watching Netflix. (Obviously, that incredibly detailed description was just one random example I thought of and not an actual photo Ruthy once took of me.) But we need to remember who we really are when we aren't filled with enthusiasm to be better.

And when we know what we are actually like, when we know our pitfalls and temptations, we can plan a better and slower path to improvement. We can skip the jog and the gym for now and just work on eating less ice cream – and let the improvements accrue over time.

And today, on Rosh Hashanah, at our spiritual height we can so easily be too ambitious in our religious goals. But all that is setting us up for is the abandonment of those goals in just a few days' time. I want to be clear: everyone here should think of something concrete that they can do to be a better Jew than this past year – and I'm happy to talk with anyone about it – but we all have to be realistic about what we can achieve and improve. If you've not really learned Torah before, don't expect to complete the Talmud within the year. If Shabbat-observance is difficult, you have to realize that it will take time a long time to adjust your life. And if you are often guilty of *lashon ha-ra*, peddling gossip, a vow of silence is an unrealistic solution.

And this is why we say *Aleinu* during our Mussaf today. As we're making our lofty religious goals at the spiritual height of the service, staring up from the page is a reminder of who we really are. We are the people who head to the door before the service is fully over. We are the people who rush through one of Judaism's most sacred prayers, without even knowing what it's about. It's a jarring,

embarrassing, and unpleasant realization — but one that keeps us in check: just enough to keep us realistic in our spiritual goals for the coming year.

III.

But there's the flip side, too. We say *Aleinu* every day three times a day to serve as a constant reminder of the spiritual heights we achieved today. When our regular routine restarts and we find ourselves slipping back into the people we have always been, we have a constant reminder of what we wanted to be today. Every morning, at the end of Shacharit, the morning prayer, just as we are about to start our day, we get a little inspiration — and then again in the evening. Because as much as we need the embarrassing photo of ourselves when we plan our goals, we also need a daily reminder of the person we want to be and know we can be to fuel us through the year.

Aleinu is our deflation today but our inspiration throughout the year. When we need to stay realistic, today when we are so ambitious, *Aleinu* is here to keep us grounded. But, as we are about to leave shul today, and after our *tefillot* every day, *Aleinu* is there to remind us of the heights we can achieve and the people we want to be.