

## Neilah Introduction - Rabbi Walker Yom Kippur 5780

There was a young shepherd who was unable to recite the Hebrew prayers. The only way in which he worshiped was “God of the world! It is well known to you that if you had cattle and gave them to me to tend, even though I usually take payment for tending others sheep, from you I would take nothing, because I love you.” One day a rabbi passing by heard the shepherd pronounce his offer and shouted at him: “Fool, do not pray that way!” So the shepherd asked him: “How then should I pray?” So the rabbi taught him all of the blessings in order, the recitation of the Shema and the Amidah, so that from that point forward the shepherd would not pray the way that he used to. But after the rabbi left, the shepherd forgot all that had been taught him, and did not pray. And he was even afraid to say what he had been accustomed to say, because the learned man had told him not to. One night the rabbi had a dream, and in it he heard a voice: “If you do not tell the shepherd to pray the way he used to before you came to him, know that misfortune will overtake you, for you have robbed Me of one of My most precious blessings.” At once the rabbi went to the shepherd and said to him: “What prayer are you now making?” The shepherd answered: “None, for I have forgotten what you taught me, and you forbade me to say what I used to.” Then the learned man told him what he had dreamed and said: “Please, say what you used to say.” Here is a person who had neither Torah nor words; he only had it in his heart to do good, and this was prized the most in heaven.

This Hasidic story, retold by Abraham Joshua Heschel, is one I love. It is a great reminder as we get ready to finish Yom Kippur. These high holidays are filled with prayers we only say once or twice a year, there is so much in here that is unfamiliar or might not connect.

Prayer is something that can be difficult because it is unfamiliar, both the type of prayer that happens at a Jewish service and also just prayer in general. Sometimes it can be hard to shut off that intellectual side of the brain to connect to something larger than ourselves, maybe that thing is God, or some sense of the divine, or the universe.

The prayer this story tells us about is the genuine, heartfelt prayer of a shepherd. Here we have someone with no background, who doesn't know the “traditional” way to pray, and whose prayer is not only accepted but

actually a favorite of God. The value of the prayer is not in how correct it is, but rather if it is genuine and heartfelt. Doing something with our heart is a powerful action and it is what makes the shepherd's act one that is so valued.

So in these last moments of Yom Kippur as we enter into Ne'ilah we have one last chance to open up our hearts. Each time we have hit our chest during the vidui prayer, it is a reminder to open up our hearts, and we will have that reminder one last time this year. A reminder to open, to be vulnerable, to be kind.

Ne'ilah, is this last service of Yom Kippur. It gets its name from the hebrew word naal which means lock. The gates of teshuva are closing and this is our last moment to get in what we need to say. The gates of repentance are closing, this is our final chance, maybe there is something left unsaid, maybe there is someone we still need to say sorry to, maybe there is a commitment we need to make to ourselves that we haven't made yet.

While the gates of repentance are closing... we can open another gate. We can open up the gates to our hearts. We can stand before our community and before God as our honest, open, authentic selves...**and that is a powerful prayer**. Like the Shepherd we can also find our prayer, and it doesn't just have to be the words on the page. What is truly in our hearts, and how do we give voice to that?

As we honor the closing of the gates with Ne'ilah, I hope we can all find another opening, and that together with open hearts we can open the gates we need to open for ourselves and as a community.