



ICJW Online Study Program

“The Jewish Festivals”

Prayers for the *Yamim Nora'im*, the Days of Awe

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*To be able to pray...is the greatest gift
presented to the soul in revelation.*

Franz Rosenzweig, *Star of Redemption*

Prayer makes the heart “audible to God.”

Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man’s Quest for God*

We all perceive the Days of Awe, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, as the most serious time of the year, a “heavy” time when we do a *heshbon nefesh*, an account of our own souls, facing our shortcomings, our failures, our sins, and seeking forgiveness from the people around us and ultimately from God.

But think about it for a moment: this “new year” in our tradition is *also* a celebration of the creation of the world – it is, the rabbis teach us, the birthday of the whole universe.

And all the moreso for us. For by doing our *heshbon nefesh*, by taking account of our transgressions, and for asking forgiveness for them, we have the opportunity to *begin anew*. That is why the traditional dress for Yom Kippur is *white*: it is as if we are newborn, starting our lives afresh. No wonder, then, Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said two thousand years ago that Yom Kippur was a “festive day,” a day when the young women of Jerusalem, clad in white dresses, went dancing in the fields!

To help support yourself and your group in experiencing the joyous renewal that the Days of Awe can bring, here are keys for Preparing Your Own Prayers for the Days of Awe.

I. THREE KINDS OF PRAYERS:

***SHEVACH*: PRAISE *BAKASHA*: PETITION *HODAYA*: THANKSGIVING**

In our tradition, we have three kinds of prayers: those that praise the Creator of the Universe – perhaps for the beauty of the stars, perhaps for the fruitfulness of the land, perhaps for the chance to live our own lives. So, for example, the psalmist declares:

Sing joyously to God, our source of strength! Sing aloud to the God of Jacob!

Take up the melody, sound the timbrel,

The sweet harp with the lute.

(Psalm 81)





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Write your own Prayer of Praise, beginning with the line “Sing joyously to the Lord!” Don’t *think* too hard – let the praises that are inside you just pour out, whatever they are.

II. Some prayers are *bakashot*, requests, or petitions, in which we pour out the longings within us to God, as Moses did when his sister Miryam was stricken with a skin disease:

ה לאמר אל נא רפא נא לה-ויצעק משה אל

And Moses cried out to the Lord, saying: Oh God, pray heal her!
(Bamidbar 12:13/Behalotekha)

What are the longings within *you*? Write two or three lines beginning, “O, God, please...” expressing your own *bakashot* to God.

III. The third kind of prayers in our tradition are prayers of gratitude, of thanksgiving: *hodayot*.

I sought Adonai and He answered me, and saved me from my fears.
(Psalm 34)

Write a prayer in which you express gratitude to God for aspects of your life that you cherish. It can be one line, five lines, ten lines.... whatever you need it to be.

THE PRAYER OF SARAH AND THE PRAYER OF HAGAR

On the Days of Awe, we read the story of Sarah and Hagar from the Torah. It is a moving and difficult story which leaves us – particularly as women – much to ponder. First we read of Sarah’s joy in discovering that, though she was already past menopause, she was going to give birth to a child:

The Lord took note of Sarah as He had promised...Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age...And when his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him...Sarah said ‘God has brought me laughter: everyone who hears will laugh with me...’ (Gen 21:1-6/Vayerah)

Writing Opportunities:

- (1) What are *you* capable of now that you thought you would never be? Write a prayer expressing to God how you feel about a moment of surprised wonder in your own life.
- (2) Imagine to yourself *how* Sarah laughed. Was it a belly laugh? A big hoot? A wry quiet laugh? Was she laughing at herself? at life? Think about moments in your own life when friends laughed *with* you. Write a prayer about that moment.



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But at that circumcision ceremony for Isaac, Sarah sees her step-son Ishmael doing something strange – “playing,” says the Torah, cryptically. We don’t know what exactly she saw, but it resulted in her wanting Abraham to send both Ishmael and his mother, her handmaiden Hagar, away. Abraham is troubled by it, but God advises him: *Whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says.* It is as if Sarah – perhaps without realizing it – is in touch with the Divine Plan. ***Is there any time in your life when you have had to make a difficult – perhaps painful – decision, and yet it turned out there was a profound reason behind it, only to be revealed to you later?***

Abraham sends them into the wilderness, and just as Hagar despairs that both she and her son will die of thirst, God speaks to her.

When the water was gone from the skin, she left the child under one of the bushes, and went and sat down at a distance, a bowshot away; for she thought, ‘Let me not look on as the child dies.’ And sitting thus afar, she burst into tears. God heard the cry of the boy, and an angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water, and let the boy drink.”
(Gen 21:15-19/Vayerah)

Notice the line, “Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water.” Where was the well before this? Had it been there all along, but she was unable to see it because she had given up hope? Because she had despaired?

Can you find a moment in your life in which you thought everything was grim, terrible, hopeless, when you were very depressed, and you somehow discovered *your* “well of water”? When you saw something you had failed to see before, because you were blinded by your own sadness? When God “opened [your] eyes”? Write a prayer expressing to God how you felt about the change.

A FINAL PRAYER:

The mystic, Chaim Vital, had a beautiful prayer for the blowing of the Shofar on the Days of Awe. The prayer began, “May it be Your will that you...redeem the storm-tossed... draw up the oppressed...gather the scattered...tear up the veils that have separated You and Your people...May it be Your will, O God, that the angels evoked by the shofar...ascend the Throne of Your Glory and invoke goodness on our behalf, and pardon all of our sins.”



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When you hear the powerful blasts of the shofar, what will *your* prayer be? Begin by writing, “May it be Your will, O God, when we hear the great cries of the Shofar, that...” Write both personally and on behalf of the Jewish people. What *personal* message would you like the shofar to have for you, for your family, for your friends? And what message would you like God to hear, on behalf of our people?

Shanah Tovah!

Malchuyot/ Kingship

Remember us for life, oh King who delights in life.

Our father, our king, be gracious to us and answer us...

*Our God and God of our fathers and mothers,
Establish your glorious sovereignty over all the world,
Establish your glorious majesty over all the earth,
Let all who inhabit the world behold the grandeur of your might,
Let every creature know that You fashioned it,
Let every living thing recognize that You formed it;
Let every creature declare the God of Israel King,
And your rule extends over all creation.*

*The Supreme King who...bares what is hidden...sustains all...survives all...
commands forces of fire...unravels all hidden things...gives speech to the
speechless,
whose power performs all things...who robes himself in light,
as a garment, who fashions the shining stars...who directs the
waters of the sea...who is angry with the wicked,
who heeds entreaty...who remembers our ancestors...who ordained
the harmony of the universe...whose praise resounds
in the secret places of the universe...who is near to
all who call upon Him in love*

*He will be King forever.
(from Melekh Elyon)*