



## Harmonizing Our Prayers With Our Attitudes



By Jonathan Caplan

Since last Rosh Hashanah, whether you invested in stocks, bonds or Bitcoin, you are likely nursing some disappointing returns. Moreover, rising inflation has become a stubborn annoyance that is shaping your annual expense budget. Rather than rehashing the gory details of this year's financial and geopolitical dislocation, I would like to once again take advantage of the High Holiday season with a message of chizuk as we contemplate the meaning of this solemn period.

Last year I offered certain suggestions regarding how one can bring greater personal meaning and satisfaction to one's High Holidays experience. This year, I would like to focus on one of the main themes of Rosh Hashanah and explore how true we are to the hopes and aspirations that we express in our prayers.

Unlike all the other Jewish holidays, which mark major events and milestones in Jewish history, the main themes of Rosh Hashanah are much more universal. It is not so much about the Jewish people as it is about the dominion of Hashem over all His creations, Jews and non-Jews.

### The Character of Rosh Hashanah Is Unique

If one deeply explores the liturgy of the High Holiday prayers, one notices that our bequests are more nuanced than just "a happy and healthy new year." We pray for things well beyond our own personal needs and aspirations. In the first paragraph of the High Holidays Amidah, we recite the following:

וּבְכֹן תִּן פְּחָדֶךָ הַאֲלֹהִינוּ עַל כָּל מַעֲשֵׂיךָ וְאֵימָתֶךָ עַל כָּל מַה שֶּׁבְרָאתָ. וְיִירָאוּךָ כָּל הַמַּעֲשִׂים וְיִשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ לְפָנֶיךָ כָּל הַבְּרִיאִים. וְיַעֲשׂוּ כְלָם אֲגָדָה אֶחָת לַעֲשׂוֹת רְצוֹנֶךָ בְּלִבָּב שְׁלָם

And so, grant that Your awe, Hashem our God, be upon all Your works and Your dread upon all You have created; and all works will fear You, and prostrated before You will be all created beings. And may they all form a single band to do Your will with a perfect heart...

This opening to the special liturgy for the High Holiday amidah is rather astonishing. The focus is not on our special relationship with Hashem as individuals or as a people. Rather, the focus is on all mankind recognizing Hashem's dominion over the world.

The Siach Yitzchak says that this inclusive narrative indicates that we ask Hashem to cast His dread even on those people who have not yet accepted His Divine Kingdom.

Throughout the Rosh Hashanah Amidah, we acknowledge that Hashem judges all mankind at this time of the year. In the poignant prayer Unetaneh Tokef, the author reminds us that the Rosh Hashanah is not only a day of judgment for Jews but rather for all God's creations:

וְכֹל בְּאֵי עוֹלָם יַעֲבִרוּן לְפָנֶיךָ כְּבָנֵי מִרוֹן

On Rosh Hashanah we are all judged before Hashem. Thus, we are not only praying for ourselves and the Jewish community at large, we are also hopeful that all mankind will appreciate Hashem as Master of the Universe. In this sense, one could say that "we are all in this together."

I bring this to your attention because I believe that we Jews at times forget about the role of non-Jews in our world. Regrettably, I have often encountered what I would delicately term "anti-gentile" sentiment, particularly in the Orthodox Jewish community. This kind of sentiment is not at all consistent with much of the hashkafa that we see in teachings throughout the Talmud as well as in our liturgy.

### Growing Up Outside the Center of Jewish Life

I reflect back on my childhood, growing up in a small Jewish community on the Jersey Shore. I was raised by parents who embraced the ideal of celebrating our Jewish identity while also developing healthy relationships among the non-Jewish world. My mother, who recently turned 97, was a proponent of fostering healthy relationships with the non-Jewish world. She sent my brothers and me to a summer day camp which was nearly exclusively African American. We made many friends and learned to mutually appreciate and respect our differences.

We imparted the basic beliefs and ritual practices of our religion: why we wore yarmulkes, why we needed to eat only the kosher snacks, etc.

The following year my parents sent us away to a sleepaway camp primarily serving children from ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities in New York City. It was indeed a culture shock for us.

From the moment we stepped on the bus to the Catskills that summer, we were exposed to attitudes toward non-Jews of all colors, races and religions that were dismissive at best and rather crude at worst. This was not the brand of Torah Judaism to which we were accustomed.

### Fast Forward to the Present

While I believe negative attitudes toward non-Jews have improved over the past few decades, we should take the lessons and behaviors of revered Tannaim and Amoraim to heart. Aggadic literature throughout the Talmud supports the notion that we Jews should be pursuing amicable and healthy relationships with the non-Jewish world. The Gemara in Berachos characterizes one of the great positive attributes of Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai (Berachos 17):

אָמְרוּ עֲלָיו עַל רַבֵּן יוֹחָנָן בֶּן זַכַּאי שְׁלֵם הַקְדִּימוּ אֶת שְׁלוֹם מְעוֹלָם וְאִפִּילוּ נִכְרֵי בְּשׂוּק

"They said about Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai that no one ever preceded him in issuing a greeting, not even a non-Jew in the marketplace."

Rabbi ben Zakkai was the man who nearly single-handedly saved Torah Judaism and the Mesora from extinction during the period of the destruction of the second Temple. Moreover, the rabbi's behavior went well beyond minimal engagement with the gentile world. Should we not emulate the behavior of one of the greatest gedolim in Jewish history?

The other Talmudic source I would like to cite is an incident that happened to the Tanna Rabbi Meir and his wife, Bruriah (Berachos 10A). In Rabbi Meir's neighborhood, there was a band of violent men (perhaps Jewish, but that is not relevant to my point). Rabbi Meir prayed for their destruc-

tion. His wife, Bruriah cited a pasuk from Tehillim to drive home the notion that her husband should not be praying for their destruction. Psalm 118, which we recite on Rosh Chodesh, says:

יָתֵמוּ הַטְּשָׂאִים מִן־הָאָרֶץ

"May sins disappear from the earth."

Bruriah explained that the pasuk explicitly uses the word "chataim" rather than "chot'im" to drive home the point that we should always pray for the end of wickedness rather than the demise of wicked people. In fact, that band of violent men did indeed do teshuva, and Rabbi Meir's prayers were ultimately answered.

### Making Our Prayers More Meaningful

Getting back to my original point, I believe that the Rosh Hashanah prayers should help us focus on the universal aspects of the High Holiday season. Indeed, we should pray for our own individual repentance and welfare. And we should also pray that Am Yisroel succeeds in achieving teshuva and is blessed with peace and prosperity. But we need to keep in mind that all of God's creations are judged on this day and should be included in our prayers.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, zt"l made one of the most profound statements in a piece titled "Why I Am a Jew," laying out how we Jews should consider our unique values in the context of the primarily non-Jewish world:

"I admire other civilisations and traditions and believe each has brought something special into the world, *Aval zeh shelanu*, "but this is ours." This is my people, my heritage, my faith. In our uniqueness lies our universality. Through being what we alone are, we give to humanity what only we can give."

May we be true to the pleas of our prayers at this time of year, extending our good wishes and prayers to all mankind.

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