

**Why am I spending all this time praying when I could be playing?**

**Rosh Hashana Day 1, 5774**

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The heavenly powers decide to destroy the earth via flood. One human is warned of the upcoming deluge and is commanded to build a ship. The man fills the ship with his family members, as well as wild and domesticated animals. The man sends forth a dove which returns to the ship. The man then sends forth a raven which does not return to the ship. After this the man releases all the animals and upon leaving the ship offers a sacrifice. Who is this man? Before answering, listen to the next part.

The gods gather like flies over the sacrificial meat hoping for a cut to eat. After much debate the man is admitted to the council of the gods. Obviously, this is not Noah. Noah only had one God, a God which does not need to be fed or bribed by humans. This man is Utnapishtim, who is referred to as the Noah of the Babylonian epic of Gilgamesh.

Though the details of the biblical flood account and the Babylonian account are strikingly similar, the lessons of the two accounts are not. According to the biblical account, God is concerned with justice. The one and only all-powerful God flooded the world because he needed to remake the world, for the world in its pre-flood state had become full of *Chamas*

(violence). According to the Babylonian account, the gods need to be provided for by humans. According to Greek mythology (as related in the play, "The Birds," by Aristophanes) humans could even form an embargo against the gods by refusing to send up sacrificial food, subjecting the gods to starvation. On the other hand, humans could obtain divine favor by feeding the gods. In other words, sacrifice was a quid pro quo, or bribery, in an attempt to gain divine favor. In fact, the ancients did not believe that religion and morality were related. Morality was a philosophical matter, while religion was a tool used to manipulate and gain favor from the gods.

Now let me ask you a question. Are we not doing the same thing by praying to God? Are we not trying to barter with or bribe God for favor by praising him? We bless God over and over again:

*Blessed are you, God who:*

*Resurrects the dead*

*Heals the sick*

*Blesses his people Israel with peace*

Then, after buttering up God, we demand:

*Our father, our king, inscribe us in the book of good life.*

It sounds like bribery, but it's not. We do not believe that the lord, *Koneh Shamyim Ha'aretz* (the maker of the heavens and earth) is in need of our praises. So what are we doing here in shul? We had better figure it out because over Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur we will be spending upwards of 27 hours praying to God. Think about all the things you can do with an extra 27 hours over the next ten days. You could be at work saving your vacation days for something else, you could be shopping, doing household chores, but yet, you are here praying. Why? What's the point of praying to God if he is not in need of our prayers? If they don't serve as leverage, what's in it for us?

Judaism has different approaches to prayer. The Talmud (Berachot, 20b) explains that *tefillah* (prayer) is a request for *rachamim* (mercy). We are not bribing God to treat us with compassion; we are begging. Imagine that your teenager returns home drunk and vomits on your nice new rug and begs you for forgiveness. Of course, this is your child and you are inclined to forgive him or her. But would you forgive your child if 27 hours later, instead of attempting to clean it up, your child continues to beg for forgiveness? Of course not! You would say, "If you are really sorry, get down on your hands and knees and try cleaning the carpet. If you can't clean it, you can use the money you earn from your after-school or summer job to help replace it." Just as we expect more of our children than supplications for mercy, God expects more of us.

The word for praying in Hebrew is *L'hitpalel*, which is a reflexive word which comes from the word *palal*, to debate. In other words, when we pray we are debating or judging ourselves. Over these *Yamim Norayim* (Days of Awe) God judges us. But if we are smart, before God renders his verdict, we should judge ourselves. Our prayers should inspire us to engage in a process of self-judgment. Over and over again we recite:

*We are guilty, we have betrayed, we have stolen.*

Have we? Do you really betray people? You're not Benedict Arnold. Well, let me ask you this. Over the past year have you made promises that you did not keep that family, friends and colleges counted on?

I will give you an example. Jody and Tom decided that they could really use a second income to pay for the private school that their twin sons were about to begin. Jody loved to be a stay-at-home mom, but agreed to go back to work if Tom promised to spend less time at the gym and more time helping out with the boys. Jody now frequently complains that Tom has not kept his promise. While she rushes home from work to care for their children, despite her exhaustion, Tom can usually be found at the gym for hours after work. And sometimes after the gym he goes out with his friends for a drink or bite to eat. Tom has betrayed Jody; she went back to

work based on a promise Tom is yet to fulfill. But Tom can still belatedly fulfill his promise. He doesn't even have to give up exercising; he can come home earlier from the gym or, instead of going to the gym, he can play ball and run around with his sons as a form of exercise. By doing so, he will have a happier wife and build a stronger relationship with his kids. And perhaps, it's not too late for us to fulfill our unkempt promises.

We also confess by declaring *gazalnu* (we have stolen). But have we? We're not thieves! Did you ever get stuck at home waiting for a repairman to come? Of course, it has happened to all of us. He says he will be there by 10:00 am but doesn't show up until 1:00 pm. What are you thinking about between 10:00 and 1:00 as you're stuck in your house waiting? You're thinking about the chores you could have been running if you were not stuck in the house waiting for this guy. We feel as if he is stealing our time and unlike money, that is something that you can't be compensated for. Now let's be honest. We all run late from time to time. We get overwhelmed and we wind up running late, it happens. But let's try to minimize it. And if you are running late, call, just as if the repair man had called and told you he was running late, you would have appreciated it.

Now these examples may sound mundane, but it is our mundane behavior we should be taking pains to scrutinize. Sure we remember the big mistakes we have made over the

last year where we clearly hurt others and embarrassed ourselves. Those are the errors we are aware we have committed and are not likely to repeat. On the other hand, the small mistakes that nobody sees are the ones we forget about and are likely repeat time and again. However, somebody does see our small mistakes. Over three thousand years ago Moses proclaimed to the Israelites that, "The hidden [sins] are for God" (Deut. 29:29.) In other words, God will judge us for the sins we are oblivious to the fact we have committed. And today, we are reminded of this message in the *Zichronot* (Remembrance) section of the Rosh Hashana Musaf Amidah which emphasizes that God takes into account all our actions while judging us, even our mundane actions, good and bad.

So if God does not need our prayers, if he only has limited patience for our supplications, what does he desire? God certainly doesn't desire our empty words or to observe us going through the motions of ritual observance. Isaiah, speaking on behalf of God declares, "You continue to bring me worthless meal-offerings...your appointed festivals my soul hates...even if you were to increase your prayer, I do not hear...purify yourselves, remove the evil of your doing from before my eyes (1:13-17). In other words, God desires our *Teshuvah* (repentance). Every weekday, three times a day, we praise God in the Amidah, "Blessed by you our God, who desires repentance." The 27 hours of liturgy we find in the *Machzor* (Holiday prayer book) serves as a repentance manual

giving us the opportunity to uncover our mundane errors. As we pray we should not passively await judgment, we should be judging ourselves, analyzing our actions both big and small and pledge to avoid committing the sins we are now confessing to.

Conversely, we can head down the road of disaster by sweeping our sins under the carpet or even worse, blame others, but if you chose to do you may make a fool out of yourself like the Mayor of San Diego, Bob Filner. After being accused by eight women of unwelcomed advances and admitting his behavior was “inexcusable” Filner is arguing that the city should fund his legal defense for failing to give him anti-sexual harassment training. Bob, you should have stopped after admitting your behavior was inexcusable and focused on doing *Teshuvah* instead of blaming the very city which you lead. I think you would have found that we Americans can be very forgiving. Unfortunately, you made yourself a laughing stock and provided us with a great example of what not to do. We can learn from Bob Filner’s error.

Though we stand in judgment today, it is not too late to present new exculpatory evidence before the stern decree is finalized. How? By doing *Teshuvah* (repentance) which can mean:

- admitting wrongdoing (I was wrong)
- apologizing (saying sorry) ,

- making restitution (which can be financial or emotional)
- a commitment to attempt to avoid committing the same sin again.
- asking for forgiveness (please forgive me)

*Our father, our king, be gracious with us and answer us though we have no worthy deeds, treat us with charity and kindness and save us.*

Why should our father and king be gracious to us though we have no worthy deeds? Because the person standing before him now is not the same person who entered this room. The person who stands before him now is attempting to improve and will leave this room an improved person.