

Thoughts for Rosh HaShana

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By

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LET US ALL OFFER SPECIAL PRAYERS FOR THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL AT THIS VERY DANGEROUS TIME. MAY THE ALMIGHTY GRANT SAFETY, SECURITY AND STRENGTH TO THE STATE OF ISRAEL AND ALL ITS INHABITANTS. MAY THE ALMIGHTY GRANT ISRAEL A GENUINE PEACE, AND MAY HE BLESS ALL GOOD PEOPLE EVERYWHERE WHO STRIVE FOR PEACE AND UNDERSTANDING AMONG HUMANITY.

Thoughts for Rosh Hashana 5774

A few days ago, I received a phone call from a journalist in Chicago who was working on an article about the Jewish Holy Days. She told me of a synagogue in her area that has two separate sanctuaries—one in which the Ashkenazic custom is observed and one in which the Sephardic custom is practiced. The participants in both of these services were all members of one congregation; after having separate prayer services, they all get together in the synagogue auditorium for Kiddush and socialization.

They function as one congregation; but they pray in two different spaces.

The reporter, who is not Jewish, wanted to know why it is necessary to have two separate synagogue services: don't all the members pray to the same God?

My first reaction was to praise that congregation for its creative way of serving its diverse membership. The goal is to have all members feel that they are part of one community. They all have a stake in the vitality and well-being of the congregation, and should not splinter off into smaller, ethnic-based groups.

I then stated that there are various dimensions to the prayer experience. Yes, we all pray to one God; but we each come with individual sensibilities and communal traditions. When we choose to pray in a synagogue setting, we not only find inspiration in the words of the prayer book; we also function on an aesthetic/emotional level. We are elevated in our worship if we feel a special and unique kinship with the manner of prayer, the melodies, the spiritual "atmosphere."

When we follow a Sephardic or Ashkenazic (or Yemenite, or German, or any other of the many Jewish minhagim), we connect ourselves to the generations of ancestors who also prayed according to these rites and who sang these same melodies. Our level of religious experience is vastly enhanced when the form of the prayer service—its words, customs and music—are pleasing and familiar to us. We transcend ourselves.

I read an article by a Jewish journalist in which she complained that High Holy Day services are boring. They are too long. People tend to sit passively and listen to the cantor chant the prayers and to the rabbi preach sermons. They don't feel engaged. While she was writing most particularly about non-Orthodox synagogues, her critiques also relate to many in the Orthodox world. If people come to synagogue without basic knowledge of the prayers, without a spiritual yearning to reach out to God, without a sense of connection with the words of the rabbi—then indeed services can seem boring.

For services not to be “boring” requires work on the part of the worshipper. After all, synagogue is not an entertainment center but a place of prayer to the Almighty. People should not come with the idea that the service should not “bore” them, but rather should want to connect themselves to the words, and music, and spiritual strivings that should be manifest in the services.

I remember the “old days” when I prayed at Yeshiva with a room full of Yeshiva students and rabbis. No one was bored! No one expected a lavish musical production or a scintillating sermon. We strove, with all the energy of our souls, to be at one with God and with each other. That was a lot of work, a lot of spiritual exertion.

It is helpful to pray in a setting that is warm and familiar to us. It is inspiring to really get caught up in the service, to hear the voices of fellow congregants, to imagine the voices of the earlier generations who prayed these same words and sang these same melodies. It is helpful if we don't seek to be entertained in synagogue, but rather seek to work hard at deepening our religious sensitivities and coming closer to God and our tradition.

When we feel a personal connection to the prayers and the synagogue service, we are more likely to reach higher levels of appreciation and satisfaction. When we attend services, let us remember that we are not coming as members of an audience. We are coming as active souls striving to reach out to our God as best as we can. The more we invest of ourselves, the less likely we are to be “bored.”

The more we give of ourselves, the greater our sense of spiritual excitement, liberation, transcendence.

Tizku leShanim Rabbot.

[Angel for Shabbat](#)