

Rabbi's Message  
"Sucker Sermon"  
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The high holy day season induces mixed feelings in most rabbis. On the one hand they rejoice that so many of their co-religionists attend services and fill pews that are usually vacant. At the same time, however, they are de-pressed that the beautiful prayers of the traditional liturgy do not move congregants as they were wont to in days of yore. Alas, that too often it is like the rendering of magnificent symphonic music to audiences that are tone deaf!

Indeed, when one considers how few are the Jews in the modern age to whom the prayers are truly meaningful, one has reason to exclaim that Jews are very loyal, long-suffering people. They crowd into their synagogues, give handsomely of their resources in order to do so, and then patiently suffer through hours of ritual which neither quickens their hearts nor stimulates their intellects. Apparently they do all of this because they want to be counted among their people and thus identify themselves with the fate and destiny of their brethren. This, in and of itself, is commendable and is to be encouraged.

Yet rabbis want to do more to make this manifestation of the sense of Jewish solidarity a rewarding experience. May I offer a few suggestions?

If we Jews were not so sophisticated, perhaps our prayers could be made simple — as simple as nursery rhymes. However, we are sophisticated and we ought not act as retardates in religion when we are cultured persons in our appreciation of poetry generally. It therefore behooves us to study — and not only read — our prayers. We must ponder the words of the texts, their unusually insightful forms of expression, and even the crescendo of ideas they convey. For this we must use not only translations but also commentaries which are available in English as well as Hebrew. One should not be embarrassed to come to the synagogue with a volume or two that will help to make the hours spent there more enlightening and edifying.

What rabbi is there who does not glance at a commentary during the service to deepen his own appreciation of sentences and phrases he had theretofore committed to memory! Shall the layman do no less? Any good book on the Jewish faith will be replete with references to the themes of the high holy day liturgy. A copy of the Bible with commentaries can also be helpful. Acquire them, and make use of them as often as possible.

Second, what is more important than even the bringing of books to the service, is the bringing of your problems with you, your personal problems, your challenges, your frustrations, your disappointments. In the synagogue you should meditate upon them and ponder whether in the light of one prayer or another they are truly as insoluble or as devastating as you thought they were. From the text of the liturgy you will chance upon a phrase or a sentence that will address you. It will be like God's directive to you — helping you to see an old situation in a new and better light. Thus the prayer itself might be an answer to your prayer.

Rabbi Kook, of blessed memory, the first Chief Rabbi of the Holy Land, taught us that one may not pray for anything which is exclusively for one's own benefit. Who can dare to be so self-centered in prayer! A fortiori, one must not pray for anything that is good for one's self and harmful to others. Who would dare to approach God with such malevolence in his heart! The highest form of prayer is that which seeks a good for everyone. Thus in prayer we should concentrate on what is unequivocally a blessing for all — for peace and plenty, for the disappearance of all that is evil, for the brother-hood of man and the reign of justice. If we pray in this spirit — and this mood is central in all of the Rosh Hashanah liturgy — then the universalism of our own mood, and our transcendence of our preoccupation with ourselves, will help us to see our own personal problems and frustrations differently. The ego is subdued; pride is whittled down; animal appetites are dispelled — and what may once have been a problem is no longer a problem and what may once have been a disappointment fades into oblivion. Nothing can be as helpful to us to dismiss what weighs heavily upon our hearts as an overwhelming concern with the needs of others — our people, our country, all mankind.

What I am urging, therefore, is a determined effort on everyone's part to make the hours spent in the synagogue worth-while — not only by present-

ing our persons that we may be counted, and not only for socializing, but especially for study, meditation and introspection. A few questions we ought ever bear in mind: For what are we praying? Is it something for which good men ought to pray? What is God's answer to us? Is it possible that His answer is what He deems to be in our and mankind's best interest even if it is not what we sought? If so, can we fathom His will and make it our own?

In the final analysis, while Judaism encourages prayer as a social experience with one's fellow Jews, it is also a highly personalized form of communion, which should cause us to be better people because of the communion, and if that happens then automatically the new year will be a better one than the year preceding. As we become better men and women, it is inevitable that the new year must be a better one for all about us.

May our service during the coming festival thus achieve for us and all whose lives we touch.

Emanuel Rackman