

Yom Kippur : The power of spontaneous prayer

One of my favorite Chasidic stories is a tale about a young boy who attended Yom Kippur services one year with his father. Having grown up far from town on a farm, the boy was illiterate in the words of the *siddur* (prayerbook) and Torah. Although he could not understand the words of prayer being chanted in the synagogue, the boy was deeply moved by the experience and wanted to lend his own expressions of faith. In his pocket, the boy carried a whistle that he had lovingly carved himself. He frequently played it at home to soothe the farm animals when they became anxious or restless. Throughout that day in shul, the boy fingered the whistle in his pocket, wishing to pull it out and offer his own song to G-d. Yet his father, sensing his son's desire, always took hold of his hand, insisting that the whistle remain in the boy's pocket. Finally, during the *Neilah* service that marked the culmination of the holiday, the boy could resist no longer. During a silent moment of meditation, he whipped out his whistle and blew a glorious note. The room was hushed as the boy's father looked at him in annoyance and shame, rushing him towards the door to leave. Just then, the rabbi's voice called out: G-d had opened the gates! The prayers of the entire congregation had ascended to heaven on the pure note of the boy's whistle. The members of the shul, with all their learned prayer, could not prevail upon G-d as the young boy was able to by his simple desire to communicate through his heart with G-d.

In my work, I often meet people who are afraid that they need to know "the right words" to offer in prayer. They turn to me asking for the words from our tradition that are correct for this or that occasion. Emotional and spiritual healing occurs when we connect with each other in these most elemental and cathartic ways. Yet as this Chasidic tale teaches us, the words of our hearts carry a powerful force.

Our tradition has always recognized the interplay between *keva*, the "fixed" or structured aspects of prayer, and *kavanah*, the intention that we bring with us to prayer. As we complete our recitation of the amidah prayer, we intone the words "*Yi-h'yu l'ra-tzon im'rei fi v'heg-yon li-bi l'fa-neh-ha, Adonai tzu-ri v'go-a-li*: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to You, *Adonai*, my Rock and my Redeemer."

Sometimes it is the soulful shout, the short but impassioned prayer that leads most directly to the ears of G-d. At our times of deepest need it is important to remember that the impulsive cries from our heart, the spontaneous words that leap from our mouth may carry the most meaning and offer the most comfort, both for us and those we love.

Written by Rabbi Janet Offel for the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center

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