

PRAYER IS OF THE ESSENCE

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

This issue is dedicated to the memory of my rebbe, HoRav Moshe D. Chait zt"l, Rosh HaYeshiva Yeshivas Chofetz Chaim - Yerushalayim, who passed away on 20 the eve of Tisha B'Av.

The days leading up to the High Holidays, in the month of Elul, are days during which we are to focus on the upcoming events. We are supposed to head down the path of repentance, reviewing our deeds of the past year. Come the judgment day, our sentence should be handed down with mercy and for the good, in light of the introspection and the resulting commitment to change for the better. The Torah, in essence, ordained a preparation period for the verdict day, the holiest day in the year, Yom Kippur. The Torah assures that we focus on the task at hand by giving us first a day on which we are judged and inscribed. After Rosh Hashana gets us in the mood, so to speak, for Yom Kippur, we have another few days to focus on the task on hand. Yet, despite the stress we find in the writings of our sages on focusing our minds and heart on repentance during the month of Elul, there is no biblical preparation period established for Rosh HaShana. The reason for this, R' Moshe Chait said, stems from the essence of Rosh HaShana.

The Talmud, in Rosh HaShana (26b) discusses the shape of the shofar. One opinion cited is that the horn used for the shofar on Rosh Hashana needs to be bent. Why is that the case? Rabi Yehudah is of the opinion that on Rosh HaShana, the more a man [so to speak] bends his mind, the more effective [is his prayer]. Rashi explains that this means the more a person bends himself downward toward the ground, the more one subjugates himself, it is better. Rosh HaShana is intended for prayer, and the downward position, our heads bowed to the earth, is more conducive to an effective subjugation of heart and mind to the service of our King.

It is based on this understanding of the day, Rav Chait said in the name of his teacher, R' Dovid Leibowitz, that we may appreciate what Rosh HaShana is all about: prayer. What is prayer? Prayer is known as "service of the heart." It is not a "physical" service. It is a service that pulls in our emotions. Emotional responses, the jurisdiction of the heart, usually do not need preparations beforehand to occur. They are usually spontaneous and often intense. Feelings swell up inside us and overtake us. They inspire us. Our prayers on Rosh HaShana, and blessings in general, carry a common theme: the supremacy of G-d, and his Kingship. We are to be faithful servants to a loving and caring King. Our prayers on Rosh HaShana should elicit within us a emotional response, feelings that put us in the

frame of mind to then work on the service of the mind - that of repentance.

Prayer is extremely powerful. In the weeks near Rosh HaShana, we read of the impending death of Moshe. Moshe, despite his strong longing and great desire, was never permitted to enter into the land of Israel. The Yalkut Shimoni (Vayelech 31) writes that ten references to the death of Moshe appear in the Torah. On ten occasions, Hashem decreed that Moshe would die and not enter the land of Israel. The decree was not sealed, however, until Hashem explicitly uttered "you will not cross over the Jord an River." When Moshe heard these words, he said to himself, "the nation of Israel sinned so many times, and each time I prayed to G-d and He forgave them. Certainly G-d should accept my prayers." Hashem felt this response indicated the slightest hint of a lack of urgency on Moshe's part, and Hashem immediately made an oath that the decree would not be annulled. Even Moshe's prayers, which the Yalkut said shook the world and was comparable to the powerfulness of a sword, could no longer help. Why? Because Moshe's immediate response was not prayer. If Moshe was completely serious, and completely understood the gravity of the situation, he would have began his prayers beseeching G-d without delay. That, the Yalkut implies, could have made the difference. The power of prayer, the emotion it can heighten, is great.

Prayer can seem routine. We may often feel like we are just going through the motions during prayers three times a day. But prayer, in truth, is a privilege. Daily, we have an opportunity to express our heartfelt thanks to G-d for that which He does for us. We have the opportunity to bond with Hashem through expressions of G-d's supremacy and our desire to serve Him with love. Yet we know we often fail to properly appreciate this powerful tool. Rosh HaShana, as Rashi stated, is a day for prayer. And prayer does not require intensive preparation to be effective. Failure year round does not doom us. One little spark of prayer can set our hearts aflame with a burning passion to be better subjects of our Father, our King. It can carry us to Yom Kippur with a newfound sense of remorse and commitment. It can lead to a path that heads to life and happiness. All we have to do is learn from Moshe and make the most of it.

May we all be inscribed and sealed for a good, happy and health year.
