

WORDLESS PRAYERS

by Rabbi Naftali Reich

High noon on Rosh Hashanah. The people tremble in fear and trepidation. What will the future bode? Will it be life or death? Health or sickness? Riches or poverty? All morning, songs and prayers rocked the synagogue walls, and now, the Mussaf prayer, the highlight of the day, begins. Suddenly, the sounds are muted, and the prayers become ethereal murmurs fainter than the softest whisper. Why is this so? Why don't we give free rein to our emotions and shout our prayers with all our might?

The answer lies in the Haftorah reading of Rosh Hashanah. It tells the story of Hannah, the barren wife of Elkanah. She makes a pilgrimage to the Tabernacle in Shiloh and prays her heart out for a child, but not in the customary manner. Her prayers are not demonstrative nor vocal. Instead, she stands in a corner with her eyes squinted shut and her lips moving soundlessly. Observing her strange behavior, the High Priest assumes she is drunk and asks her to leave.

"No, my lord," she protests. "I am a woman distraught; no wine or spirits have I drunk. I was pouring out my heart before Hashem."

"Go then in peace," says the High Priest. "The Lord of Israel will surely grant your wish."

Surely not everyone who prayed in the Tabernacle had his wish granted. Yet something about Hannah's reply convinced the High Priest that her prayer had been favorably received before the Heavenly Throne. What convinced him of this?

The commentators explain that the ultimate prayer emanates from a yearning so deep that it is beyond articulation. Words, no matter how eloquent, are boundaries to the aspirations of the soul. But the yearning in Hannah's soul for connection with the Almighty was so profound that it transcended all verbal boundaries, so profound that she found it impossible to pray aloud as other people did. Instead, the whispered words of her silent prayer just opened the floodgates of her heart and allowed her torrential feelings to flow upward to Heaven. Such prayers, the High Priest was convinced, would surely be answered, and indeed, it has become customary to pray silently in an attempt to achieve Hannah's exalted state of prayer.

On Rosh Hashanah, the sound of the shofar is the conduit through which the deepest feelings of our hearts flow upward to Heaven. On this awesome day, we do not constrain our prayers in boundaries of specific personal requests. Instead, we offer up our intense yearning for connection with the Almighty, for if we can truly connect with Him, all our needs will be abundantly fulfilled.

A great sage was mulling over the question of who would sound the shofar in the synagogue. A number of his disciples asked to be considered for this great honor.

"This is not simply an honorary task," said the sage. "I need someone who really knows how to sound the shofar." He pointed to one of his disciples. "How about you? What would you think as you sound the shofar?"

"I would think about the deep mystical significance of each of the individual sounds."

"Not good enough," said the sage and shook his head. He pointed to another. "How about you?"

"I would concentrate on extracting pure, perfectly pitched sounds from the shofar."

"Not good enough," said the sage and shook his head again. He pointed to another. "How about you?"

"I would not think any specific thoughts. I would simply close my eyes and let my inner feelings flow through the shofar."

"Ah!" said the sage. "You are the one I am looking for."

In our own lives, we all prepare a long list of personal needs and requests which we will intend to present to Hashem on Rosh Hashanah. But if we would really be in touch with our innermost feelings, we would realize that all our desires and aspirations derive from the insatiable yearning of our souls for connection with the Creator. We would discover that if we focused on achieving that divine connection we would experience joy and fulfillment beyond our wildest dreams. Text Copyright © 2011 by Rabbi Naftali Reich and Torah.org.

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