

HAVEN'T GOT A PRAYER?

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

You shall set up judges and law enforcement officials for yourself in all your cities . . . (Devarim 16:18)

Elul Zman. Once upon a time these two words alone were enough to make Jews shake in their boots. Everyone felt Yom HaDin breathing down their backs ever since Tisha B'Av was over. The beginning of Elul meant, however, that Rosh Hashanah was just around the corner. The King and His Heavenly Tribunal were approaching, and with it, Divine judgment. Once upon a time that meant something, or at least a lot more than it means to many today.

Part of the problem in recent generations is that we have had it quite good. Most of us have not experienced much Divine retribution, at least not in any obvious way. There is a lot of suffering in the world and specifically within the Jewish nation. Most of it though is viewed as being either "natural" or as the result of "hester panim," the hiding of God's Face. It is not seen as the result of direct involvement of God in someone's life.

In many respects, people just go through the motions on the High Holidays. We know it is a serious time and we respect the holidays. We understand that they entail many hours in shul and even fasting. I'm just not sure how much the average Jew believes though that what he or she does on these days makes that much of a difference to the quality or safety of their lives.

The same can be said for prayer in general.

One might have thought that prayer lost its importance for many in more recent times. As the Talmud points out, the generations have been moving spiritually "backward" as history moves materially forward. There are more atheists today than ever before.

After all, the mishnah speaks about "Chasidei Rishonim," pious individuals from the time of the Second Temple who used spend one hour preparing for prayer, one hour praying, and one hour "coming down" from prayer. That meant nine hours a day devoted to prayer, prompting the Talmud to ask when they had time to learn Torah or take care of their livelihood.

Nevertheless, the Talmud also writes:

One of the rabbis said to Rav Bibi bar Abaye, and some say Rav Bibi said to Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak: "What does, 'When vileness is exalted amongst men' (Tehillim 12:9), mean?"

He answered him: "These are the things that stand at the height of the world and people

disgrace." (Brochos 6b)

Like prayer, which ascends to Above. (Rashi)

Thus, already in the time of the Talmud prayer had lost its seriousness.

It's a problem. It's a problem because of the implication, which is that many people don't really believe in tefillah. They may accept it as an obligation, but not much more. If they did, given to Whom tefillah is directed and what it is supposed to do, they would treat it differently.

MUCH differently.

The following story is an example of the same idea.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm making a suggestion."

"I can see you're making a suggestion. You're putting a paper into the Suggestion Box. I'm asking why?"

"You think that no one reads the suggestions people make?"

"I think that there is a paper shredder on the inside of the box. This box is here to give workers the impression that their opinions count and will be taken into consideration. It's purely therapeutic."

"Don't be so cynical."

"Cynical? When was the last time you saw any real change around here, or any of your suggestions being implemented?"

"Change takes time."

"Around here, it takes forever!"

"Well, I believe that all the suggestions in this box are read by someone, and make a difference somewhere."

"You're entitled to your own delusional beliefs."

"I certainly am! Anyhow, we should get moving to the staff meeting. It's almost 10 o'clock."

The company had over 600 staff members and employees, and all of them showed up for the mandatory meeting. Rumor had it that the CEO himself was going to speak, a rare occasion. Sure enough, he entered the room through a different door and went right for the microphone.

Waiting until everyone was seated and quiet, he began with a quick discussion about the company's growth and future plans. He then paused for a moment, and scanned the entire

crowd before him. Everyone could see he had something important to say, but no one knew what. Finally he spoke.

"You may or may not have noticed an addition to our lobby a couple of months ago, a suggestion box."

The two employees turned to look at each other, one with an expression of wonder and the other with a look of, "I told you so." They turned back to the CEO to hear the rest.

"This was our way of giving you, the worker, a say in how our company works. We wanted you to know that we care upstairs about what you think and feel down here. I personally looked at every note put into the box. In fact I was so impressed with how seriously some of you took our gesture, that I decided to give bonuses to those who took the time to make their suggestions, and to put the names of these people on a list for possible promotions. I think it is a reward well deserved, and it should encourage others to do the same in the future."

After the meeting had long been over, the one who had earlier defended his participation in the Suggestion Box Program caught the one who had questioned him putting his own note into the box. When their eyes caught each other, the latter didn't even wait for the comment and said, "Hey, after finding out that this makes a difference to the company and my paycheck, why wouldn't I make my own suggestions!"

This is the problem with prayer. We "drop" it into a "box" but have little or no idea what happens to it after that. Where do our prayers go? Does God even pay attention to them? Do they really change anything for the better? Our "CEO" hasn't called a meeting to explain the difference our tefillah makes to the "company" and to our "salary."

If He would, then we would really believe.

If He did, then we would really pray.

Until then, it seems as if many haven't got a prayer, at least not in the ultimate sense of the idea.

This is one of the problems of living on this side of history, as the parshah intimates. The Talmud says that a person does not sin until a spirit of insanity enters him (Sotah 3a). After all, who in their right mind would sin against God, given Who He is, what He can do, not to mention where we would like to go after death: the World-to-Come?

Yet people do sin, even those who try to live according to the Torah. Yom Kippur is not only for the lowest elements of society. It is for every Jew, those who try to be good and those who do not. As Shlomo HaMelech said, "For there is no righteous man on earth who does good and does not sin" (Koheles 7:20).

Thus, judges alone are not enough. We have to appoint enforcers as well to make sure that the decisions of the judges are followed. Not only do people not take sin seriously, they do not take

those who have judged them seriously either. Only the fear of punishment in this world keeps them in line.

In fact, it is only the fear of harm that keeps most people in line, as the expression, "There are no atheists in a foxhole" implies. Simply, it states that people can believe anything they want, and will, until they have to confront the possibility of paying for their beliefs. When that happens, all of a sudden the doubts that made them side with atheism now make them side with God when they start to wonder if they might be about to meet Him—face-to-face.

This brings us back to Elul Zman as the preparation for Rosh Hashanah. It represents, in a way, a proverbial foxhole. It is the time for a person to get real with life, real with the idea that he has to answer for his belief and the life he has led. It is THE time of year that we feel the Presence of the CEO of Creation, and find the inspiration to pray as if it truly counts.