

# Praying Together

Rosh Hashanah Day 1 - 5768 (2007)  
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A number of years ago, shortly after Frayda and I got married, we visited my *nona* and *nono*, my grandparents in Israel. Upon arriving at their home, towards the evening time, my *nono* asked us if we had prayed the evening service. We had not.

*“Tov, titpalelu itanu”* - “Good, you’ll pray with us”, said my grandfather.

He invited us to sit in the living room, along with my grandmother. Frayda and I believed that we would pray silently, each to himself or herself, in an undertone. But to our surprise, *nono* had something else in mind. That evening, he undertook the role of *shliach tzibur*, he prayed the entire service out loud. We followed him word for word, page by page, answering “amen” to each of the blessings.

What does it mean to be on the same page of the prayer book?

On one level, it means that when you are on page two, I am also on that page, and when you are on page five, I am also on page five. It means that when you are saying a particular prayer, I am also saying that particular prayer with you, at the same time, in unison.

On a spiritual level however, it means something quite deeper.

For a moment, focus on the prayers of significant people in your life, people in your family and or in our community. For a moment focus only on *their* prayers. What are they longing for? What are their worries and what are their concerns? What are their hopes and what are their dreams?

Ask yourself this question: Do I share their prayers? Do I share the prayers of the most significant people in my life?

Or in other words: Are we on the same page?

I believe that this is a fundamental question on this day.

Do we share the prayers of our parents and our siblings?

Do we share the prayers of our spouses, our partners, and our kids?

Do we share the prayers of our loved ones, our friends, and our community?

*Do we share the prayers of the most significant people in our lives?*

On Rosh Hashanah, on this day of holy prayer, how open and how attentive *are we* to each other's prayers?

This is the challenge of this day. At the end of this most intense period, will our prayers bring us closer together or will our prayers set us further apart?

I believe that today's Haftara reading offers two contrasting models, two paradigms of prayer that can guide us on this day. The model of Elkanah, the husband of Channah, and the model of Eli, the Kohen Gadol, the high priest.

In the beginning of the Haftarah we are introduced to Elkanah and his two wives, Chanah and Penina. Penina had several children, while Channah was barren. Every year the family would go on a pilgrimage, journeying to Shilo, where they would worship and offer sacrifices to God. This was the family's practice, year after year.

And yet, on one such year, Elkanah made a slight change in the family's practice.

*"Vayehi HaYom"* — "On one particular day" during one of those visits, Elkana gave one portion of the sacrifices to Penina and her children, while he gave a double portion to

Channah: “*Ki et Chnnah ahev ve’Hashem sagar richma*”—“for he loved Channah and God had closed her womb.”

Elkhnah believed that he understood the pain of his wife, he tried to reach out to her, wishing he could comfort her. But Channah would not be consoled. Outraged by her husband’s gesture, embittered, and drunken with rage, Channah leaves to pray alone in the sanctuary in Shilo.

What changed on that day? What led to this dramatic reaction? What drove Channah to pray alone on that day?

Our rabbis explain that “*Vayehei Hayom*,” the day of the family’s pilgrimage to Shilo, was none other than Rosh Hashanah itself, the first day of the year, commonly known as “*HaYom*” or “the Day.” Every year, every Rosh Hashanah, Elkanah’s family went up to Shilo where they *davened* and prayed together as a family. And every year, as husband and wife, together, Elkanah and Channah prayed for a child.

But on this year something critical changed. Rav Soloveitchik explains: “*Mehayom Elkanah meshaneh et hanhagato*”—“that year Elkanah changed his way of prayer.” “*Ve’omer le’Channah ein makon odd l’bechi ve’tachnunim ve’chasal seder tefilla*”—“On that day Elkanah said to his wife, there is no more room for pleas and tears, there is no more room for such prayers.” (Rav Soloveitchik, *Mesorah Journal*, Volume 13, p. 4)

This is so painful and heartbreaking. On that Rosh Hashanah, Elkanah and his wife stopped praying for the same things. That Rosh Hashanah marked a breakdown in their spiritual and emotional communication. Elkanah and Channah were no longer on the same page of the prayer book. He offered his wife a double portion because he was no longer able to offer his prayers.

A devastating description of two individuals coming apart; of a broken marriage and a broken home.

Every year, on Rosh Hashanah, like Channah and Elakanah, we come to shul with the people we most love, our close family and friends. Are we all on the same page? What happens to us, as individuals, as families and communities, when we no longer share our deepest prayers with each other?

On Rosh Hashanah, like Channah, we run the risk of fleeing to the sanctuary in Shilo, to a spiritual place of solitude, a place where each individual prays alone.

But the story doesn't end here.

While praying alone in Shilo, Channah is approached by Eli the priest. Initially, Eli dismisses Channah's prayers as the unrestraint behavior of a drunk. But soon after, he recognizes the depth and authenticity of her pain. Eli comforts her. He tells her that God will answer her prayers. And to our surprise, Channah is comforted and she leaves Shilo.

What enabled Eli to reach out to Channah, to calm her fears, to quiet her rage? How did Eli manage to cross over the spiritual solitude that engulfed her just moments earlier?

In a beautiful midrash our rabbis explain that Eli succeeded because, unlike Elkanah, he was willing to pray together with Channah. Now, this is never stated explicitly in the biblical text, but months after Channah gives birth, she returns to see Eli, and she reminds him of who she is with the following words: "*Anni Haisha hanitzevet imacha baze*"—Remember me?—"I am the woman who stood with you." "I am the woman who stood with you." Eli and Channah stood together. Our rabbis seized on these words. What does it mean that they stood together? It must mean that they stood together in prayer. They prayed the *amidah* service together. Unlike Elkanah, Eli succeeds because of his ability to join the prayers of Channah.

In fact, a critical halakha pertaining to prayer is learned from this encounter. "Amar R. Yehoshua ben Levi: 'Mikahn she'assur lei'shev be'toch arbah amot shel tefillah.'"—"R.

Yehoshua ben Levi taught: 'From this encounter we learn that it is forbidden to sit ideally by a person who stands in prayer.'" (BT Berakhot 31b) In other words, if I completed saying my prayers, I am forbidden to sit down as long as the person next to me still stands in prayer. I cannot leave that person to stand-alone.

In his book "*Haggadah Le'Ma'aseh*" R. Yehudah Brandes explains: "The Halakha that forbids sitting ideally by while another person stands in prayer is merely the formal, external manifestation, of an inner spiritual need to acknowledge the vulnerability of the praying person, his or her feelings. There is not room for apathy towards the praying person...sensitivity towards the other is of central importance in the synagogue, as it was in the Holy Temple." (R. Yehudah Brandes, *Haggadah Le'Ma'aseh*, p. 48)

In prayer we don't only open up to God. In prayer, we are also challenged to open up to each other. It is not sufficient for only God to hear our prayers. We must also learn to hear the prayers of one another. Eli understood this challenge. Unlike Elkannah, he understood that Channah, in her vulnerability, should not stand-alone.

On this Rosh Hashanah, let us not stand-alone.

We spend so many hours, countless hours, over Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, sharing our prayers with God, when was the last time we spent so much time sharing our prayers with one another. When was the last time we spent so much time sharing our prayers with the people we love?

This is one of the great secrets of this day. Prayer is two directional. On the one hand, it is directed towards God, in the hopes that God will hear, and perhaps even respond to our prayers. On the other hand, our prayers must also be directed towards each other.

This Rosh Hashanah, take the time to share your prayers. At your Rosh Hashanah meals take a moment, ask your loved ones, your family and friends, to share their prayers for the new year. Take the time to check in with the people you love. What are they praying

for? How can you stand together in their prayer? How can you ensure that your loved ones and you are on the same page?

On this Rosh Hashanah, may we all have the strength, may we have the patience, may we have the sensitivity to listen to each other's prayers, to honor each other's prayers, to share in each other's prayers.

I deeply believe that if we learn to pray with one another, then God Himself (as it were), won't have the choice but to join us as well. On this Rosh Hashanah, may *Hakadosh Baruch Ho*, may the Holy One, share our prayers as we share the prayers of one another.