

Kol Nidre Derasha (Sermon)
Yom Kippur 5767 (2006)
"Were Last Year's Prayers Answered?"
Sunday October 1, 2006

A year ago today, we gathered in Temple Israel for Kol Nidre. We spent Yom Kippur in solemn prayer and reflection. We prayed, and we contemplated. We poured out our souls to God, asking God's blessing and and God's guidance.

Did you ever wonder whether a prayer was answered? Wouldn't you love to know what came of last year's prayers? Were they ignored? Were they held in abeyance? Was fulfilling the prayer simply too much to ask? How can we ever know what came of prayers?

Well, tonight I am going to give you the opportunity you may have thought that you would never have. Tonight, I will give you the tools that you need to answer that question for yourself. So, do you want to know what happened to last year's prayers?

So, tell me . . . did you answer God's prayers last year?

Last year, God gave us another chance. God gave us the Torah, and in the Torah, the commandments to observe Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, because God wanted us to have the opportunity to return to God's ways. And so, we came to Temple Israel, and sought תשובה (*teshuvah*), repentance. Once again, we had the chance to change the direction in our lives. A whole year has passed . . . a whole year of opportunities to make more out of our lives. Last year, God gave us one more chance to fulfill God's prayers. So, tell me . . . did you answer God's prayer's last year?

It's a funny thing to think about God praying. Perhaps even blasphemous. After all, what exactly does it mean for God to pray? But the Talmud tells us that God prays:

אמר רבי יוחנן משום רבי יוסי: מנין שהקדוש ברוך הוא מתפלל? שנאמר +ישעיהו נ"ו+
והביאותים אל הר קדשי ושמחתים בבית תפילתי, תפלתם לא נאמר אלא תפילתי
Rabbi Yochanan says: How do we know that God prays? As it is written (in a
verse we use quite often during Yom Kippur) "*And I shall bring them to my holy
mountain, and shall cause them to rejoice in the house of my prayer*" it says "*the
house of my prayer*" not "*the house of their prayer*."

Babylonian Talmud Berachot 7a (quoting Isaiah 56:7)

What is God's prayer? According to the Talmud, God prays that God will be able to treat God's creations with kindness and mercy.

יהי רצון מלפני שיכבשו רחמי את כעסי . . . ואכנס להם לפנים משורת הדין.
May it be my will before me, that my mercy defeat my anger . . . and that I deal
with [my children] in a manner that goes beyond strict justice. (id.)

The Talmud pictures God praying for the opportunity to be kind to us. In Unetane Tokef last year we said ותשובה ותפילה וצדקה מעבירים את רוע הגזרה את רוע הגזרה: *repentance, prayer, just and charitable actions avert the severity of the decree*. So, tell me . . . did you answer God's prayer's last year?

Last year, we chanted the beautiful Haftorah from the book of Isaiah:

וְאָמַר סְלוּ-סְלוּ פְּנֵי-דְרָךְ הַרְיֵמוּ מְכַשׁוֹל מִדְרָךְ עַמִּי

And [God] said: Make way, make way! Remove the impediments from the path of my nation! (57:14)

God asked us to find our way back to the right path. To remove impediments from observing God's law. There are many things that turn us away from the right path. Maybe it just wasn't that easy to wake up in the morning and go to services. Maybe our life was too crazy to have Shabbat dinner with our family. Maybe our obsession with our career took us away from a life of religious meaning and the performance of good deeds. Maybe, we just were too used to the way it's been.

וְאָמַר סְלוּ-סְלוּ פְּנֵי-דְרָךְ הַרְיֵמוּ מְכַשׁוֹל מִדְרָךְ עַמִּי (And [God] said: Make way, make way! Remove the impediments from the path of my nation!) - in the Haftorah last year, God cried out to us to remove those blockages and move to become the Jewish people we should be. So, tell me . . . did you answer God's prayers last year?

Last year, we fasted. And the Haftorah challenged our fast. Isaiah quoted the words of those who were fasting in his day:

(ג) לָמָּה צָמַנּוּ וְלֹא רָאִיתָ עֵינֵינוּ נִפְשָׁנוּ וְלֹא תִדְעַהּ הוּא בְּיָוִם צָמַמְכֶם תִּמְצְאוּ חֶפֶץ וְכָל עֲצָבֵיכֶם תִּנְגָּשׁוּ :
(ד) הוּא לָרִיב וּמִצָּחָה תִּצְוִמוּ וְלִהְכֹּת בְּאֶגְרֵף רָשָׁע לֹא תִצְוִמוּ כִּיֹּם לְהִשְׁמִיעַ בְּמִרוֹם קוֹלְכֶם :

(3) Why have we fasted and God has not seen, we have afflicted our souls, and God does not know - because on the day that you fast, you go about your business, and you oppress all your workers.

(4) You fast while in strife and contention, and you strike with a wicked fist, your fast is not designed to make your voices heard above.

Isaiah 58:3-4. Note the translation uses "God," when the actual word is "you," but the statement is directed to God.

(ו) הֲלוֹא זֶה צֹם אֲבָחֲרֵהוּ פִתְחַ חֲרָצְבוֹת רָשָׁע הִתֵּר אֲגָדוֹת מוֹטָה וְשַׁלַּח רְצוּצִים חֲפָשִׁים וְכָל מוֹטָה תִּנְתַּקוּ :

(ז) הֲלוֹא פָּרַס לָרֵעִב לַחֲמֶה וְעֵנִיִּים מְרוּדִים תְּבִיא בַּיִת כִּי תִרְאֶה עָרִם וְכִסִּיתוּ וּמִבְּשָׂרְךָ לֹא תִתְעַלֵּם :

(6) Isn't the fast that I desire one which unlocks fetters of wickedness, and unties the cords of the yoke, that lets the oppressed go free; and breaks off every yoke.

(7) Isn't it to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the wrteched poor into your home; when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to ignore your own kin.

Isaiah 58:6 (Trans. per JPS)

As we fasted, the words of the prophet told us that God is not looking for us to make a show of fasting, while we go about our business, and continue with our enmity and self-interest. God asked for our fast to inspire us to a life of religious meaning and to creating a society of justice and compassion. So, tell me . . . did you answer God's prayers last year?

In ספר דברים, the Book of Deuteronomy, משה (Moses) tells us:

וְעַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל מָה ה' א-לֹהֶיךָ שֹׂאֵל מֵעַמְּךָ כִּי אִם לִירְאָה אֶת ה' א-לֹהֶיךָ לְלַכֵּת בְּכָל דְרָכָיו
וּלְאַהֲבָה אֹתוֹ וְלַעֲבֹד אֶת ה' א-לֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ :
(יג) לְשֹׁמֵר אֶת מִצְוֹת ה' וְאֶת חֻקֹּתָיו אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוְךָ הַיּוֹם לְטוֹב לְךָ :

(12) Now, Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you, but that you have awe of the Lord your God, so that you walk in God's path, and love God and worship the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul?

(13) To follow the Lord's commandments and laws, which I command you today, for your own good.

Deuteronomy 10:12-13

What God asks us is not a selfish request, but a request for our own good. So, tell me . . . did you answer God's prayers last year?

Later in Deuteronomy, Moses tells the people that he has presented them with blessings and curses. Moses explains:

(כז) אֶת הַבְּרָכָה אֲשֶׁר תִּשְׁמְעוּ אֶל מִצְוֹת ה' א-לֹהֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוֶּה אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם :
The blessing is if you listen to the Lord your God's commandments, which I command you today.

Deuteronomy 11:27

As Ibn Ezra understood this verse, Moses is not telling us that we will be blessed if we follow God's commandments, but that following the commandments is the blessing. And of course this is true. After all, our commandments give us rituals that inspire us with the awe of God, and an understanding of our responsibilities to God and the rest of God's creations. Our commandments are ones that lead us, to paraphrase our Haftorah for tomorrow, to unlock the fetters of wickedness . . . to share our bread with the hungry . . . to clothe the naked.

Indeed, many of our greatest blessings in this world have come when humanity has been inspired by its sense of justice, compassion, and responsibility. We have cured countless diseases. We have fed countless hungry people. We have sent billions of dollars for disaster relief. We have broken some of the bonds of slavery. In the last century we created a system of special education that gives some people an opportunity for living a meaningful and dignified life which was never possible before. On a more personal level, we have visited those who were sick. We have comforted those who were bereaved. We have been inspired with compassion and caring for others in the Long Beach community.

But of course, the work is not done. There are still many who are poor and hungry. We still have much to do to prepare for and prevent disasters. We still have slavery in our world - be it the rampant child slave trade, or the more casual bonds of discrimination. We still have wars between nations and fights amongst citizens. There are still others in the Long Beach community who need our support - physical, financial, and emotional. Alas, the work is far from done.

And so God continues to watch us. And God continues to pray. וְעַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל מָה ה' אֵלֶיךָ. וְעַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל מָה ה' אֵלֶיךָ - *Now, Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you?* Follow God's laws. Let observing God's Torah be an inspiration to you. Take time in prayer to reflect on your relationship to God, and your responsibility to God's creations. Take time on Shabbat to appreciate God's world and its potential - a potential which you must help realize.

Follow God's מצוות (*mitzvot*, commandments) and let them inspire you with compassion for those around you. Eat your bread, but at the same time share it with others. Enjoy the fruits of your own labor, while donating a healthy portion of those fruits and your personal labor to charitable causes. Fight injustice whether it be an international slave market, or sublime discrimination in the American work force. Let your study of Torah and your prayer remind you of your responsibility to your neighbor who is sick, to your friend who lost a loved one, or to your family member who is in need of help. Let Judaism be your inspiration to action.

Another year has come. What will the year 5767 bring? As we share this Yom Kippur together, let us pray not only that God answer our prayers, but more importantly that we answer God's prayers. Let this be a year where we grow in our Judaism, and thereby learn to act more often upon our compassion for others. Who knows, maybe when we answer God's prayers we'll also be answering some of our own prayers as well.

In the heavens, God is praying that God's compassion override God's sense of justice. Let us answer God's prayers with a year of ותשובה ותפילה וצדקה - prayer, repentance, and charity that will make us worthy of God's compassion. As God prays for God's compassion to override strict justice, may our love for Judaism and our concern for others override our self-interest.

Perhaps we will never know what became of our prayers. Were they ignored? Were they held in abeyance? Was fulfilling the prayer simply too much to ask? But this year, we should be ever more conscious of God's prayers. God asks us to follow the מצוות (commandments), and to care for one another. What will become of God's prayers? Will they be ignored? Will we put off answering God's prayers for another year? Is what God asks of us simply too much to ask? Or will we say yes? Will we bring more Judaism into our lives, and will we become better people for doing so?

Year after year we have come to ask God to hear our prayers on Yom Kippur. This year, we do the opposite. Certainly we hope that God will answer our prayers. But now we realize that there is something that is even more important. This year, we pray that we will answer God's prayers. And let us say, amen.