

One of the ironies of Jewish history concerns the Chasidim, who today are regarded as the most devout and observant of Jews and as a significant segment within Jewish ultra-Orthodoxy. However, in the 1770's and 1780's, shortly after the Chasidic movement emerged in Eastern Europe, it was looked upon with horror and contempt by the Jewish religious establishment of the day because of its appeal to the downtrodden and unlearned masses of Jewry, the very slight deviations from traditional Jewish practice that it carried out, its downplaying of the importance of Talmudic study as a path to God in favor of enthusiasm and fervor in prayer, and the boisterous and uninhibited nature of its worship services. Mitnagdim, as the opponents of Chasidism were called, issued orders of excommunication against the group and went so far as to denounce Chasidic leaders to the Czarist authorities. It was not until almost half a century passed that Chasidim and Mitnagdim began to come together in a common front against secularization and Enlightenment. Yesterday's radicalism becomes today's reaction.

The Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Chasidism and his disciples in the first generations of the movement were religious geniuses. Much of what I know about them comes to me, filtered through the story-telling of I. L. Peretz, a secular Yiddish writer, and the works of Martin Buber, whose approach to Judaism was, to say the least, non-traditional. And there is some question as to how faithful Buber's neo-Chasidism was to the teachings of the Chasidic movement. Gershom Scholem, for one, thought that Buber had misrepresented Chasidism by de-emphasizing its roots in Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism. There is no question, however, that there is much in the teachings and sayings of the early Chasidic masters that has a relevance to and a resonance with modern Jews, particularly with regard to the practice of prayer.

The Ba'al Shem on one occasion following the conclusion of the silent Amidah greeted his congregants as if they had just returned from a long journey. Asked about his strange behavior, he replied that the congregants had not truly been present in the synagogue and focused on their prayers. You have been thinking about the grain exchange, you about your lumber mill and the timber that you will be purchasing from the nobleman's estate, and you about the fair in Lublin which you will be attending next week. And so as you make your way back from such faraway places, I extend my greetings. The Ba'al Shem Tov is also reputed to have said that one who prays and

remains the same after he has prayed as he was before, that the worst scoundrel is a better person than he.

Feel free to attribute the exaggeration to homiletic license. As I think of the many scoundrels I know of in this world and the nature of their wrongdoing, the sins of being unfocused during worship or unresponsive to the power of prayer seem relatively minor. But the Ba'al Shem was making an important point - that prayer is meant to be transformative, that it is less about changing God and more about changing us. There are, to be sure, other concepts of what Jewish prayer is. For some, worship is simply an obligation, a mitzvah like any other. We are commanded to praise and thank God every day, and whether or not the act of so doing changes us or touches us emotionally is secondary to fulfilling the commandment. Moreover, the Ba'al Shem himself believed in prayer's power, if it is genuine and heartfelt, to move God. But the notion that prayer's purpose is the transformation of the worshiper seems to me more in line with our modern sensibilities. That we should aspire to be different after praying from what we were before is an especially appropriate message for this day, when we will spend long hours in the sanctuary listening to the chanting of prayers and reading either aloud or in silent devotion the words of the Machzor.

Prayer is a demanding discipline, as the Chasidic masters knew; they were well aware of the *machshavot zarot*, the alien and frequently inappropriate thoughts that intrude on our consciousness and distract us from concentrating on our prayer. But at least on this Yom Kippur day, when we come to synagogue with such lofty intentions, there is a greater likelihood that our prayers will change and transform us.

In what ways might we hope to be transformed by our prayers? The possibilities are many. We can change from thinking that the world revolves around us and our needs (or as is more frequently the case, our wants) to a posture of humility, based on the knowledge that there are others sitting with us in the congregation or residing in our city whose needs and wants are as legitimate as ours. We can change from being totally self-absorbed to an awareness of the bigger picture: we are links in a chain of tradition that goes back three millennia and in the grand sweep of evolution going back billions of years, infinitesimal cogs in a vast universe, which functions as a unified whole, all of its parts linked together by an underlying unity. We are each of us but one of seven billion

people living on this planet, all of us (and our descendants) affected by the manner in which we conserve and protect our natural resources. Not that there is anything wrong per se with self-interest and the satisfaction of our needs. Was it not Hillel, who said, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” But we need the moderating influence of a broadened perspective, a transformation of our way of thinking that can be brought about through prayer, a reminder of the second part of Hillel’s maxim, “if I am for myself alone, what am I?” We can change from disregard for others and obliviousness to what they may be feeling or how our words and actions will affect them to an attitude of empathy and sensitivity. Prayer, particularly those passages which express our thanks to God, can transform us, so that we are no longer discontented, envious, endlessly striving for more and better possessions but rather grateful for and appreciative of the blessings that we already enjoy in our lives . Prayer can help us become kinder and less judgmental, less despairing about the prospects for human society and more motivated to work for a just and peaceful world. Through prayer we can develop a sense of awe and wonder when we contemplate the world around us; we can learn to no longer take the vastness and beauty, the intricacy and orderliness of the universe for granted. We can be cleansed through prayer of the bitterness and resentment that poison our inner life and arrive at a readiness to let go of ancient grudges, to forgive, and to allow by-gones to be by-gones. When we pray we can come to the understanding that much of what transpires in our lives is influenced by factors that are beyond our control. We can and we should take prudent steps to protect ourselves and our loved ones, to preserve our health and our well-being; Judaism does not advocate fatalism or passivity. But prayer enables us to understand our limits, quiets our anxieties, and gives us the faith that we possess the inner resources to cope with adversity and find meaning in the most difficult of circumstances.

So many possibilities, so many avenues for change – more than can be accomplished even in an entire day devoted to worship and contemplation. Perhaps, this is why daily prayer is part of our tradition. But can change and transformation really happen? Let me paraphrase another Chasidic teaching. The rebbe asked his students, “where is God’s dwelling place?” and the students replied, quoting the words of the Kedusha, “the whole earth is full of his glory.” No, the rebbe retorted. “God dwells wherever we allow Him to enter.” Old habits are ingrained, resistant to change, but

change is possible when we are receptive to it, when we allow it into our lives. We have a spiritual side to our nature that this day is intended to foster, a desire to find meaning and purpose and to connect with something larger than ourselves, and a capacity to be changed, to become different people spiritually and ethically. Sometimes such changes occur as the result of trying and difficult circumstances that impart an appreciation of what is really important in life. Sometimes they are inspired by interaction with a mentor or role-model. And sometimes, as the Ba'al Shem suggested, it is meaningful prayer that is the agent for change.

From time immemorial religion has been closely associated with magic, with the endeavor to assure favorable outcomes and to guarantee success, prosperity, health and blessing through the knowledge of esoteric lore, of secret rituals and formulas. Ancient Judaism rejected magic and taught that God could not be manipulated or controlled. Rituals were to be understood as tokens of our desire to serve and obey God, not as an assured means of attaining material or spiritual goods. Magic and superstition did persist, however, within all of humankind's faith traditions; lofty and profound insights about the universe and about the human condition co-exist within all of them alongside naïve and primitive folkloristic beliefs and practices.

Prayer's power to change us is not magical. Worship is a discipline. The words and the music do cast an aura, but what is truly required for us to change is *kavvana* - focus, inwardness, concentration. I hope that our services are uplifting and inspiring, but more importantly, I hope that they are transformative, that at the conclusion of this Yom Kippur you will not be the same as you were at its commencement.