

Our Voices for Our King

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Throughout the year, we pray. Yet, prayer on Rosh Hashanah is different. We come to shul with a different set of expectations. We know that *davening* will be longer; we are prepared to listen to more elaborate tunes; we anticipate the haunting melodies of our youth. We have so much to pray for. We would expect that our prayers on this day would spell out our supplications for the upcoming year; it is, after all, those hopes that are on our mind. Interestingly, we do not find in the text of our prayers any list of requests.

From the prayer *Unetaneh Tokef*, we know that on Rosh Hashanah we are inscribed and that on Yom Kippur we are sealed. This theme influences much of how we think about Rosh Hashanah. We greet one another on Rosh Hashanah with the formula, may you be inscribed for a good year. Oddly, however, we push the request to be inscribed in the book of life to the edges of our prayers. We say the words *zachreinu l'chaim* (remember us for life) in the first blessing of the *Amidah* and the words *u'ketov lechaim tovim* (inscribe [all people] for a good life) in the second to last blessing. We do not place these blessings in the center of our prayers where requests normally belong. Why?

In this article, I will argue that there is a reason for this absence of typical requests. Our prayers on Rosh Hashanah serve a radically different function from our prayers the rest of the year. We are not asking for anything on Rosh Hashanah. Rather, we are doing something with our prayers on Rosh Hashanah. What is it that our prayers are doing?

Let me respond with a series of questions or clues. First, the Mishna *Rosh Hashanah* 4:6 describes the structure of our prayer at *Musaf* on Rosh Hashanah.

There should be recited not less than ten kingship verses, ten remembrance verses, and ten shofar verses. R. Johanan b. Nuri said: if the reader says three from each set he has fulfilled his obligation.

אין פוחתין מעשרה מלכיות מעשרה זכרונות מעשרה שופרות רבי יוחנן בן נורי אומר אם אמר שלוש שלוש מכולן יצא אין מזכירין זכרון מלכות ושופר של פורענות מתחיל בתורה ומשלים בנביא רבי יוסי אומר אם השלים בתורה יצא:

The Mishna describes the three central elements of the *Musaf* prayer on Rosh Hashanah: *malchiyot*, *zichronot*, and *shofrot* – kingship, remembrance, and shofar. The Mishna instructs us that simply describing these concepts in the usual style of prayer is insufficient. We must list a

series of ten texts to illustrate each of these concepts. If a person fails to include at least one such verse, he or she does not fulfill the obligation. This is striking: why would God need us to recite verses in our prayers? Are we trying to bring proofs to an argument by citing biblical evidence? Would God need such evidence?

Second, when describing the construction of this Rosh Hashanah prayer, Maimonides (*Hilchot Shofar* 3:8) suggests that the choice of texts is open to the choosing of the person praying.

These three intermediate blessings recited on Rosh Hashanah... [namely:] Kingship, Remembrance and Shofar - are each dependent on the others. In each of these blessings, one is required to recite ten verses reflecting the content of the blessing: three verses from the Torah, three from the Book of Psalms, three from [the words of] the prophets, and one more verse from the Torah.

שלוש ברכות אמצעיות אלו של ראש השנה ויום הכפורים של יובל שהן מלכיות וזכרונות ושופרות מעכבות זו את זו, וצריך לומר בכל ברכה מהן עשרה פסוקים מעין הברכה, שלשה פסוקים מן התורה, ושלושה מספר תהלים, ושלושה מן הנביאים, ואחד מן התורה משלים בו, ואם השלים בנביא יצא.

According to Maimonides, the text of the Rosh Hashanah prayer is not fixed. A person may choose any text that falls within the themes of *malchiyot*, *zichronot*, or *shofrot*. This stands in contrast to what Maimonides describes for the prayers of the rest of the year. In *Hilchot Tefilah* 1:4, Maimonides explains how the sages, upon witnessing the inability of their generation to formulate their own prayers, established fixed texts for the prayers. When the rest of the prayers of the year are fixed, why does the Torah allow us to choose the content of the Rosh Hashanah *Amida*?

What's more: The recitation of concepts like *malchiyot*, *zichronot* and *shofrot* seems at odds with the normal agenda of prayer. Jewish prayer follows a set structure: *shevach*, *bakasha*, and *hodaah*; praise, supplication, and thanks. Our prayers have a logic and a decorum to them: we come before the King to make our requests. We cannot make our requests until we have first addressed the King with respect acknowledging the awesome opportunity that prayer affords us – we, mortal creatures, may stand before our immortal creator. After we have set forth our requests, we take leave by offering thanks for all the kindness that God has performed for us. For 353 days a year, a Jew prays this way. Yet at *Musaf* on Rosh Hashanah, we speak about kingship, remembrance, and the shofar. What are we asking for? Why are we praying?

Finally, the Mishna *Rosh Hashanah* 4:5 tells us that the sounds of the shofar are to be affixed to the prayers of the day.

The order of blessings [in the Musaf Amidah is as follows]: [the reader says the blessing of] the patriarchs, [that of] mightiness and that of the sanctification of the name and includes the kingship-verses with them and does not blow the shofar. He then says the sanctification of the day and blows, the remembrance-verses and blows, and the shofar-verses and blows; and he then says the blessing of the temple service and the one of thanksgiving and the blessing of the priests. This is the view of R. Johanan b. Nuri. Said R Akiba to him: if he does not blow the shofar for the kingship-verses, why should he say them? No; [the rule is as follows]. He

סדר ברכות אומר אבות וגבורות וקדושת השם וכולל מלכיות עמהן ואינו תוקע קדושת היום ותוקע זכרונות ותוקע שופרות ותוקע ואומר עבודה והודאה וברכת כהנים דברי רבי יוחנן בן נורי אמר ליה רבי עקיבא אם אינו תוקע

says [the blessing of] the patriarchs and of the resurrection and of the sanctification of the name, and says the kingship-verses along with the sanctification of the day and blows the shofar, then he says the remembrance-verses and blows, and the shofar-verses and blows. Then he says the temple service blessing and the thanksgiving and the blessing of the priests.

למלכות למה הוא מזכיר
אלא אומר אבות וגבורות
וקדושת השם וכולל מלכות
עם קדושת היום ותוקע
זכרונות ותוקע שופרות
ותוקע ואומר עבודה והודאה
וברכת כהנים:

Rabbi Akiva's comment assumes that the only reason to recite a specific section of the *Musaf* is that it accompanies the sounds of the shofar. At no other time of the year – does a mitzvah align or interfere with the recitation of a prayer. The performance of mitzvot and the activity of prayer are distinct experiences. In prayer, we communicate with God. In the performance of a mitzvah, we perform the divine will.²⁷ Yet, shofar is the one place where the fulfillment of the divine command is linked to prayer.²⁸ Why?

To answer these questions and to decipher these clues, we must understand something about God. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik in his 1974 *teshuva derasha* explains that our actions on Rosh Hashanah have an affect on God.

The Almighty is the greatest subject, but He can also be an object. At times, He is influenced by human behavior ... [The] Almighty displays his gentleness toward man. He is not only ram (אֵר) [great] but nisah. Nisah in the sense of being influenced and carried by others. Who influences the Almighty? The Jew who prays and is repentant ...

My melamed, like all the elders of Habad, referred to the first night of Rosh Hashanah as the Coronation Night. This is because it is the first occasion that the Jew gives a royal crown to the Almighty. The first time in the New Year that the Jew declares: "Our God and God of our fathers, reign over the whole universe in Thy glory... O Lord, King over all the earth." Who grants the royal crown to the Almighty? Who give the royal crown to the all powerful Master of the Universe. My melamed, along with many other poor Jews, granted the crown to the Almighty... It was a crown constructed of Jewish tears and endless sacrifice for Torah. It was adorned with the love of Jews for the Almighty.²⁹

The shofar is the clarion call with which we greet the entering King. The prayer of Rosh Hashanah is the pronouncement of people in a ceremony to greet their king. Our prayer at *Musaf* on Rosh Hashanah is not for us to seek out our needs. Rather, the prayer on Rosh Hashanah allows us to serve as actors in a great ceremony – we are the actors on the greatest stage the world knows, the spiritual expanse of human souls. God enters upon the blast of the

²⁷ Prayer is itself a mitzvah according to Maimonides, but it is a commandment of a different sort from other actions that are prescribed by the Torah. Prayer is *avoda shebalev* – service of the heart.

²⁸ The four-species are taken during *Hallel* but are not connected to the *Amidah* which is the central prayer. Talit and Tefilin are worn during prayers, but the fulfillment of these commandments is achieved immediately upon wearing them; they are thus not connected to prayer in and of themselves.

²⁹ Rakeffet-Rothkoff, Aaron. *The Rav: The World of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* pp.153-154.

shofar and upon the calls of our lips as we chant *malchiyot*, *zichronot*, and *shofarot*. The texts of the Torah that we quote are not proof texts. Rather they are the embodiment of our participation in acknowledging the reign of the true king. The verses are essential to the function of these blessings. They do not prove an argument – rather they embody an idea that we shout as if we were at a political rally or in a massive stadium cheering on our team. The sounds of our voices are a compliment to the sounds of the shofar – they create the cacophony of excitement for God’s presence. The coherence of one chant to the next is irrelevant; it is the cumulative feeling of excitement and passion that matters. Therefore, we may choose our own verses to exemplify the ideas of God’s presence and power. Our prayers on Rosh Hashanah join together with the sound of the shofar to create the music that brings our King into this world.

Prayer on Rosh Hashanah is about God. Our words serve to raise up God. Prayer at *Musaf* on Rosh Hoshanah is not about the needs of mankind – any content that includes requests for human needs is incidental. The preoccupation of the prayer at *Musaf* on Rosh Hashanah is God and God’s presence among mankind. The words of our prayer are not expressions of our innermost desires so much as choreographed elements within a great performance. Shofar is one such element – our prayers are another.

As moderns who cherish our autonomy, the idea that our prayers are not for our own needs feels strange. Yet, with our prayers on Rosh Hashanah, we matter on the divine stage – we stand among those whose tears and endless sacrifice for Torah construct God’s crown. To be a part of something great often means more than just doing your own thing. This runs against our modern culture, but it speaks deeply to our souls.