

President Richard M. Joel

Foreword: Reflections of a Lay Ba'al Tefillah

I recall the very first time I stepped up to the *bimah* in the Glueck Beit Midrash to lead our Yeshiva in prayer on the first night of *selichot*. I recall how the soft velvet covering felt as my hands came to rest on the podium. I recall the crinkling sound that the pages made as I found the starting place in my *machzor*; the cacophony of hushed yet excited voices as hundreds of *talmidim* primed themselves for an intensive evening of supplication. I recall the electricity of that moment and the seriousness with which I signaled the cue to commence to all those assembled in that house of worship:

Ashrei yoshvei veitekha, od yehallelukha selah.

I have always found the very notion of prayer itself a magnificent and somewhat mind-boggling proposition. Three times daily, we take advantage of the audacious yet Torah-ordained directive to confront the Almighty in the second person, to beseech Him directly and to spill our hearts and our minds: *Barukh atah Hashem*. How frighteningly exhilarating!

And yet, I find the task of representing the congregation in prayer an *even more* daunting and humbling experience. Those words of the introductory *Hineni* prayer, “*af al pi she-eini kedai ve-hagun le-kakh*” – “even though I am not worthy of this,” always cause me to pause for a moment’s reflection on the daunting representational task at hand. For much of my adult life, I have served as *sheli’ach tzibbur* for the services on the *Yamim Nora’im*. For me, though, that experience never became more real than when I assumed the presidency of Yeshiva University. Only then did I truly grasp the profound paradox of the whole experience: in a singular moment, I harbor a sense of extreme intimacy with the Almighty as well as an acute awareness of my duty as a representative of the larger community and of my own limitations in my eyes and in the eyes of God.

The finest part of serving as a *ba'al tefillah* is in striking this delicate but crucial balance: he must allow the prayers to resonate with him on a personal level so as to maintain the authenticity of his prayers, and yet he must realize that the experience is ultimately not *at all* about him. The job of *sheli’ach tzibbur* is not to accrue honor for himself or to showcase his vocal acrobatics or even to beseech God regarding his personal needs. The role of the *chazan* is to create a space for the community to succeed in their collective encounter with the Transcendent. He may rally them through his own stature, he may inspire them with his soft falsetto, he may rouse them with the outward sincerity of his own prayers; but ultimately, his focus must be on both the personal and the communal, on the public and the intimate.

Focus on the “communal” extends to even the most basic of human concerns: an effective *sheli’ach tzibbur* must remain cognizant of the duration of the services, the temperature in the room, and whether his singing elevates the congregation or amounts, in fact, to a *tircha de’tzibura*, an unwanted burden upon them. But the *sheli’ach tzibbur* assuredly tends to higher order concerns as well. Essentially, he must generate a space that the congregation can own – he must fill that otherwise ordinary space with the sort of melodious spirituality which allows others to feel elevated and lifted to another place altogether. And, of course, all of this with an acute awareness of the historical context of that particular Divine encounter amongst the span of generations. Perhaps the most powerful moments in the service for me is when I think of my own grandparents of years past and my own grandchildren of years present and future and how those same prayers which bind us truly transcend time.

In many ways, the role of the *ba'al tefillah* resembles that of the *Kohanim*, who served as both *shluchoi didan*, messengers of the people, as well as *shluchoi d’rachmana*, messengers of God. A *sheli’ach tzibbur* serves as a *shali’ach* of the congregation as he pleads on their behalf, as well as a *shali’ach* of the *Ribon Shel Olam* as he steers the congregants themselves towards a more sensitive and meaningful prayer experience.

Truthfully, and while certainly distinctive to prayer, the above description could be said about effective leadership. At Yeshiva University, we often urge our students and community members to view themselves as a *mamlechet Kohanim ve-goi kadosh*. Regardless of actual priestly lineage, we believe that it is the responsibility and the privilege of every Jewish man and woman to both know and own their stories, and to share that knowledge with the wide world around them as the leaders of tomorrow.

In the same vein, regardless of vocal talent or performative prowess, we must all view ourselves as *shluhei tzibbur* of *Kelal Yisrael*: on the one hand, we must constantly develop ourselves and our personal connection to God with seriousness and sincerity. And yet we must recognize that our true sense of wholeness and will only arise out of a dedication to others, a recognition of the needs of *Kelal Yisrael*, and through the fulfillment of our mandate to matter to the world at large.

In the concluding blessing of the *Amidah* service, we beseech God for *shalom*. To which sort of *shalom* does the blessing refer? Certainly it cannot merely indicate “peace,” as in the absence of war. Rather, *shalom* speaks to a sort of meaningful wholeness which we seek, the filling of an empty space that we so often sense in our own souls. And therefore we say in the blessing of *shalom*, “*barkheinu avinu kulanu ke-echad*” – “bless us, our Father, all of us as one,” and express our desire as individuals to merge in the most meaningful way as a singular entity of *Kelal Yisrael* – not merely those electrically charged *Yamim Nora'im*, but throughout the year. The Jewish people know full well that this sort of meaningful wholeness can only stem from a focus on the personal *and* communal. And we recognize that only through the *kehillah* may we reach the concluding blessing, *Ha-mevarekh et amo Yisrael ba-shalom*.