

Yom Kippur 5785

יום כיפור תשפ"ה

## Sacred Words in Liturgy and Life

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In a 1958 lecture on prayer, Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, “It takes two things for prayer to come to pass – a person and a word. Prayer involves a right relationship between those two things. But we have lost that relationship... We do not think about words, although few things are as important for the life of the spirit as the right relationship to words.”

Beyond the realm of prayer in particular, this elusive “right relationship” between persons and words is central to our ability to have relationships at all. “Words have become clichés, objects of absolute abuse. They have ceased to be commitments. We forget that many of our moral relationships are based upon a sense of the sacredness of certain words...”

What Heschel worried about in 1958 is even more true and even more concerning in 2024. Human communication, the commitment to taking words seriously and to viewing the words we write and speak as serious commitments, has become even more imperiled in an age where our words are mediated through the technologies of social media, artificial intelligence, and the crippling social phenomena of political polarization and widespread mistrust.

Heschel’s sense that there is a deeper ethical significance to the notion of taking prayer seriously echoes a statement found in *Pirke Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers). *Pirke Avot* is an ancient compendium of moral aphorisms and a foundational work of Jewish ethical thought. Throughout *Pirke Avot*, special attention is given to the power of words. In *Avot* 2:18, Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai, the ancient Jewish rabbi and mystic, turns to the words we speak in prayer, and cautions us to be “extremely careful in... prayer.” Seriousness prayer, according to Rabbi Shimon, is linked to compassion and mercy. He concludes his statement about taking prayer seriously with a moral imperative to be a virtuous person.

For Rabbi Shimon, being a virtuous person entails being self-reflective and true to ourselves. Virtue begins with “not being a bad person in our own eyes.” Rabbi Shimon thus connects taking prayer seriously with an ethics of compassion that begins with an ethics of honesty and self-awareness.

Heschel’s 1958 lecture on prayer builds on this ancient rabbinic tradition connecting serious prayer with a deeper moral seriousness. He argues that taking seriously the words in our liturgy is a step in a broader process of reclaiming the gravity of words. This means that we must know what the words in our liturgy mean, and, when we say them, that we “must learn to establish the right relationship between the heart and the word we are about to utter.” From prayer and liturgy, Heschel believed this morally important relationship to words would permeate our lives more broadly.

This High Holiday season is an ideal time to work on reclaiming our relationship with words, beginning with the liturgy in our Mahzor. To that end, I want to call attention to a liturgical poem that appears in the Amidah on both Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, a series of three paragraphs that each begin with the word “*u’vekhen*” (ובכן) Typically translated as “and therefore” or “so then,” I leave the word untranslated, because according to an old Jewish tradition it is a much more significant word: not a conjunction, but a name of God, or, in a similar but alternative tradition, it is the alphanumerical equivalent of a phrase that refers to the divine-human relationship itself.

These paragraphs were introduced into Jewish liturgy in the geonic period, as attested by siddurim from that era. The first of these three paragraphs begins “*u’vekhen ten pahdekha*” (ובכן תן פחדך). It was this very paragraph, where we envision a human world completely united in its awe and

fear of God, that inspired the Protestant theologian Rudolf Otto, who spent Yom Kippur in the year 1911 in a Jewish synagogue in Morocco, to describe, in *The Idea of the Holy*, the Yom Kippur liturgy as “a liturgy unusually rich” in hymns that express his concept of “the numinous,” or the profound and non-rational experience of feeling the presence of God as a tremendous mystery.

In this paragraph, it is the fear and awe of God that leads “all of God’s creatures” to collectively submit to God, and to become “bonded together as one” to do God’s will “with a full heart.” For Heschel, this very paragraph in the High Holiday liturgy reflects the broader essence of all prayer, in general, not just the High Holidays. Heschel sees this as a prayer in which we are trying “to make God immanent,” to bring God’s presence into this world. He writes:

“The true motivation for prayer is... the sense of not being at home in the universe. Is there a sensitive heart that could stand indifferent and feel at home in the sight of so much evil and suffering, in the face of countless failures to live up to the will of God? ... That experience gains intensity in the amazing awareness that God Himself is not at home in the universe. He is not at home in a universe where His will is defied and where His kingship is denied. God is in exile; the world is corrupt. The universe itself is not at home. To pray means to bring God back into the world, to establish His kingship for a second at least.”

Heschel sees the “*u’vekhen ten pahdekha*” paragraph in the High Holiday liturgy as an emblematic expression of the ultimate aim of all prayer, at “the most important moment of the Jewish liturgy.” The payoff comes in the next paragraph, “*u’vekhen ten kavod*.” After we have come together to bring God’s presence back into this world, we feel a sense of dignity (*kavod*) and good hope (*tikvah tovah*) for the future; there is “happiness in the land and joy in the city.”

Let this new year, 5785, be a year in which we all learn, once again, to take seriously the sacred value of words. We can learn this value by taking seriously and paying attention to the words we say in prayer, which reflect, in turn, the very

essence of prayer. Let us turn to our Siddur and Mahzor and pay attention to the words and their meanings and pray them with seriousness.

When we turn from the High Holiday season back into daily life, let 5785 be a year in which we speak to one another with words that are carefully considered – words that we can truly own and stand behind. This involves engaging in deep and extended conversation – not the kind of conversation that happens in fits and spurts on social media – and with words that are our own, whose authorship has not been outsourced to technology. This involves listening carefully to the words of others, giving them the benefit of the doubt, asking questions for clarification, assuming good will, and when we disagree, expressing that disagreement with frankness and honesty, but also with thoughtfulness and respect, in a way that preserves relationships. When we do this, we can hope that others will do the same for us, and, over time, if we continue to take words seriously both in prayer and in daily relationships, we can become a unified community, even across difference. And perhaps we will experience again that good hope, dignity, and joy that we see in the “*u’vekhen*” prayers – for the Jewish people together with the broader community of humanity.