

Do Only the Orthodox Daven? A Teaching Service for Rosh Hashanah
Morning¹ (2019/5780)
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Note: This sermon was delivered throughout the service in sections as introductions to certain prayers.

Niggun - wordless prayer (Read before starting on pg. 108)

Good morning, and Shanah Tovah. We begin every service with a niggun, a melody without words. Practically, it is a way for me to get people to quiet down without having to say, “Alright already. Enough with the schmoozing. We are starting.” As I start singing, eventually people catch on, quiet down and join in.

But I really have an ulterior motive. Most of the time we use the left brain. That is the logical, analytical, and objective side of us, which serves us well most of the time, but not in worship services. The siddur is not a textbook, it is a collection of poetry and prayers, designed to help us connect to our inner souls, which in turn connects us with God. When we sing, the right brain is more accessible to us, especially using a melody without words, so we don't try to analyze it's meaning. These wordless melodies help us to access our more intuitive, creative, emotional, and thoughtful side. Niggunim help us to abandon our intellect, feel the melody, and experience the notes as an entry into prayer. It helps us release negative emotions such as anger, worry, fear. It is also a gateway to the mystical spiritual realm we call *Yetzirah*- the world of feeling. It helps us transform ourselves into God's instruments. Though you think you are just singing, you are really praying. The niggunim melodies transport us to places that words cannot.

So let's try the niggun again. Let go, let the notes fill your soul, close your eyes, and go for it.

Repeat nuggun #9

¹ Based on the book, Davening: A Guide to Meaningful Jewish Prayer by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi

We will be together for up to seven services over the next ten days. During that time, I would like to help you get the most you can out of each service. I recently read a book called, “Davening: A Guide to Meaningful Jewish Prayer” by Rabbi Zalman Shachter-Shalomi. It offers new ideas and insights into the prayers. For this service, instead of a sermon, I will stop periodically and offer you insights into certain prayers, before we read them. It is my hope that by doing this, your souls will be opened, uplifted, and joined in unity as we worship together as a community during this High Holy Day season.

We continue on page 108.

Before Asher Yatzar on page 120

There are Five Stages to the morning service -

1. Gratitude
2. Songs of Praise
3. Knowledge
4. Petition or Request
5. Descent or concluding prayers

I would like to expand on these stages to help us get beyond a two-dimensional understanding of the prayer service. Rather than seeing each prayer as a “To whom it may concern,” this approach helps to envision the prayers within the context of the mystical Four Spiritual Worlds.

They are:

Asiyah - World of action
Yetzirah - World of formation
Beriyah - World of creation
Atzilut - World of transcendence

The four worlds take us on a journey through four different landscapes that parallel four distinct human experiences - physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual. Each world speaks to a different part of us.

Asiyah is the **physical** world that we know. In this world it takes action to do anything. This correlates with the **first stage** of the service in which we express our **gratitude**. The morning blessings are about doing - such as prayers for putting on a tallit, for waking up, for our physical health and for the physical things that God does for us including: opening our eyes, freeing the captive, lifting up the fallen, giving firmness to our steps, clothing us, and giving us power. By grounding ourselves in our physical bodies in the here and now, we are then able to move on to the next realm or world.

The next stage is **Songs of Praise** - Sing!!! This takes part in the world of *Yetzirah* because it touches our **emotions**. It represents a Divine flow coming “down” to us. It helps us express our love for the Eternal so we can feel that love.

The Hebrew phrase for this section is *Psukei D'zimrah*. Zimra is our granddaughter's name. When people ask me what it means it is hard to explain. The translation is “singing” or “music” but the word goes even further. Zimra is music or singing that **lifts the soul**. This stage ends with Psalm 150, which requires us to praise God with lyre, drumbeat, strings, flute, cymbals, and dancing - with every breath. Through singing Halleluyah the boundaries between ourselves and others begin to feel permeable. Instead of “I” and my individual wants and needs, we move toward the collective we. Something emerges when we sing Hallelujah together. We form a chorus that is greater than its individual voices.

With all this in mind, let's continue with the first two stages of our service starting on page 120. And when we get to Psalm 150, sing it like a true *Zimra*.

Reading before Bar'chu pg. 142

Some of you are what we call, “Service Regulars,” coming to services once a month or more, and we will be honoring you later this morning. Those who come more often, may experience the service as an extension and enhancement of their usual prayer experience. For those who don't come as often, here are some suggestions to help you get more out of services.

- You may have an image of an ideal shul in your mind, or what an ideal High Holy day service should be. The first task then is to **empty your mind of any expectations** so you can free yourself of the hold it has over you. With no expectations, it is easier to see each experience as something new to explore and experience.
- Ask yourself, “**What do I want to do today?**” What are my goals for this worship experience?” How can you use the prayers and music to help you reach for those goals?
- Giving yourself **permission to go at your own speed**. You don’t have to stay with the group. The congregation will go on, but you might just decide that you need to take time out. Maybe you want to do a reading from the left side pages. Maybe you want to reflect on a prayer you just read. You’ll catch up with the congregation when the next page is announced.
- Give yourself the luxury of **using your imagination**. As we sing the *Mi Chamocha*, try to imagine what Moses might have felt in that very moment standing at the shores of the Sea. When we say the *Avot v’imahot* imagine what our Patriarchs and Matriarchs must have felt back then, walking the land of Canaan with the knowledge of God close in their hearts.
- When there is **singing**, sing along, or don’t. Close your eyes and listen, truly listen. Where does the melody take you? How does it inspire you?
- **Say Amen** - Even if you don’t say the prayer, if you say *Amen* it means you are confirming that you are part of the community who just said that prayer. Amen is a spiritual practice in itself.
- Appreciate that you are sitting among a **holy community**. According to tradition, whenever ten Jews gather for prayer or study the *Shekhinah*, the personal aspect of God, stands among them. Imagine the *Shekhina* filling and surrounding this room.
- Share your inner most thoughts with God. Once you do, a crucial shift takes place You have made the core connection that is at the heart of all prayer.

We are now ready to enter the world of **Beriyah** - The World of Creation. This is the world of intellect and knowledge, the world of awareness. The Beriyah mind yearns to tune in to the purpose of life. We call to **Yotzer Or**, the Creator of cosmic lights. We acknowledge that science can coexist with belief. We talk of the One who renews creation each and every day. Science can tell us when the sun will rise or set, and the

physics behind the colors, but only our souls can truly see a beautiful sky as a way to connect us here on earth to the One who created it for us.

In *Beriyah*, the language starts moving from immanent and close to transcendent and unknowing. *Beriyah* is the place of wow! - the place of wonder! It is where we can sit quietly, and close our eyes, and feel God's love through the beauty of the world God gives us every day. It is then that we recite the Shema which is our intellectual as well as spiritual declaration that God is One. The Hebrew is in the singular - you, just you. This message is for you. Imagine Moses speaking directly to you. Then as we sing this haunting melody, imagine all of our voices and souls merging into One, just as God is One.

Before we continue with the Bar'chu (on page 142) I would like offer a reading For "Those Who Cannot Rise." It is on page 125.

Intro to T'filah pg. 166

We are about to enter the world of *Atzilut* - the spiritual world of transcendence. But before we do, I would like to talk about "davening." No, I don't mean the Orthodox with their payos flying as they shuckle back and forth. Many of the ideas I am talking about this morning come from a book called, Davening, A Guide to Meaningful Jewish Prayer. It was written by a rabbi who was raised in the orthodox tradition but went on to become the founder of the Jewish Renewal Movement.

The word, *daven* is a hybrid of two words - *D'avot Inun*. *Avot* refers to our ancestors. It reminds us that every time we open our prayer books, we are reciting the same prayers and thoughts that our ancestors have handed down to us throughout the generations. So what does davening mean to us in today's modern world?

There is a shtetl story about Yankel who owes money to a wealthy landowner. Yankel somehow convinces the guy to forgive the debt if Yankel can teach a bear cub how to pray. He finds a cub and hands him a prayer book, with a drop of honey on its cover and on each of the book's pages. The bear wipes up the first drop of honey with its paw and puts it on his tongue. This very smart bear then opens the book and

locates the other drops of honey, too, turning the pages, using his paw to bring each drop to his tongue.

Yankel is ready. Presenting the bear to the creditor, he gives the animal a *siddur*. The bear opens it, turns a few pages, murmuring all the while, stops every few seconds to lick his finger, then resumes page-turning and murmuring. “That’s not praying,” complains the landowner. “Come with me,” says Yankel, leading the landowner to the local shul and opening its door. Lo and behold, an entire congregation is doing a pretty good imitation of the bear.

Davening with Kavanah

There is another story of a rabbi coming to a synagogue and turns back at the door, unable to enter. “Too many prayers inside,” he said. “But Master,” his disciples asked, surely a room full of prayer is a good thing. “But all the prayers are stuck in the building. None of them are going up to Heaven.”

How do we not just turn pages like the bear? How can we find ways to allow our prayers to leave this room and rise towards the heavens? We have a body, a heart, a mind, a soul. Each dimension—physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual—has its own needs, speaks its own language. Hardest to integrate with the others is our intellect. The mind meditates, contemplates, but also analyzes. Once it seizes upon a contradiction, once it detects what it perceives to be a logical flaw in the system, it is hard to appease. The thinking mind scrutinizes the language of prayer and finds it wanting. It asks, “What’s the theology behind this? Do I believe this?”

True Jewish prayer goes beyond the words in the *siddur* or *mahzor*. It beings with *Kavanah*. This means to pray with focus, intention, and meaning. It means praying from the heart rather than the mind. *Kavanah* means to aim. We try to aim our hearts towards the goal of connecting to the Eternal One, however you understand that term. You may start with your own personal prayer to God. “Dear God, help me to make this a meaningful experience.” Humans are theotropic beings - we are meant to grow towards God. *Kavanah* helps pull us forward in that direction.

At the level of *Atzilut*, we refer to something that is noble, high, beyond. It transcends our level of understanding. It is beyond logic, so we need to get our logic take a back seat. We begin the *T’filah* by saying , *Adonai*

S'fatai Tiftach - I am asking that God daven through me “Dear God, You know my true needs so much better than I do. Please let whatever comes through be real and true.” Can we find a way to be newly present? Our feet are grounded, in the world of *Asiyah*. Our hearts are humming in *Yetzirah*. We have pondered the cosmic mind-stretchers of the universe in *Beriyah*. Now, with new clarity and presence, as we prepare to enter *Atzilut*, we can connect to God on an even higher level.

You might ask, what can prayer do for me? Prayer can waters thirsty souls like rain on flowers. Prayer may not bring world peace, but it can give our hearts peace. Prayer may not cure the sick, but it helps us find healing. A prayer truly prayed is the beginnings of its own answer. So yes, prayer helps. I can try to teach you how to pray but only your own experience will ultimately convince you of the power of prayer. May reciting the *T'filah* be such an experience for you.

We continue with the *T'filah* on Page 166

Unetaneh Tokef - Page 174

This can be a challenging prayer. The words tell us that God is judging us and sealing our fate in the coming year. If we think intellectually about the words, we can get into trouble. We might say, “This is just a myth from times gone by, but it doesn’t really move me. Perhaps that approach come at it from the wrong mind-set. If we pray this prayer in the realm of *Asiyah* it lets us say, “Yes! This is our myth! Please, God, help us to walk that mythic landscape. Let it be as real to me as the everyday. People since the dawn of time-all over the world, in every culture, throughout history have been able to sense a Reality that is beyond our reality. Help me sense that reality beyond, too.

Kedusha - page 184

As part of the *T'filah* we go up on our toes and say “*Kadosh*” Three times.

- By going up on our toes we move up and down the spiritual ladder
- First *Kadosh* - There’s a *Kadosh*, a holiness, that we feel in the body, a kind of awe.
- Second *Kadosh* is our best understanding of *Kadosh*, the highest degree of holiness that we can possible grasp.

- Third *Kadosh*: If holiness were only what I understand, it would not be *Kadosh*. This *Kadosh* is the one beyond our understand.

Before Retze Page 209

Retzeh is the blessing for worship. We ask God to take pleasure in our way of praying. “God, Teach us to encounter Your presence. We want to be certain that we are not talking to the wall!” It ends with the phrase, “Blessed are You, God, who restores *Shekhinah* to Zion.” Where does the *Shekhinah* dwell today? In our hearts. Maybe you keep your heart, or part of your heart closed off to others, it is too private. It is not a place where we feel at our most adult and confident. It’s nobody else’s business, so we don’t let anybody in. But we can let God in.

When we say, “Blessed are You, God, for restoring Your *Shekhinah* to Zion,” put your hand over your heart for a moment, and say, “Thank You for giving Your *Shekhinah* a home in my heart.”

Before Aleinu Page 286

We have now come to the descent of the service - the closing Prayers. We’ve risen up; now we have to come down. It give us the opportunity to ask ourselves: What will remain after I close my siddur or mahzor? How long will my determination to live in a more ethical and loving way last? How I do a better job of putting my resolutions into practice?