

The Important Hours: Rosh Hashanah 5787

Rabbi Jonah Rank - Hebrew Seminary Rosh Yeshivah

Christifino Kenyatta Leal had been incarcerated for some six years. Serving a harsh sentence ranging from 25 years to the rest of his life—Leal was doubtful that he had any reason or any capacity to change. As he ambled aimlessly through the prison yard, he chanced upon a man who had incarcerated at least four times as long. The elder handed him a pencil and piece of paper, instructing Leal to write down what mattered most to this young prisoner. After reading what Leal scribbled, this unsuspected sage replied, “You got 24 hours in a day. You work 8 hours, and you sleep 8 hours. How many of those remaining 8 hours do you devote to those things that you say are important to you?” Leal began to ponder his life more deeply, and he found himself changing.

After some 19 years in prison, a moment of grace fell into Leal’s lap. California revised the laws and punishments surrounding his previous infractions. A parole board found in Christifino a renewed spirit and overturned the rest of his sentence. Leal joined the ground floor of a tech company training prisoners for a life beyond bars.

Although parents may hope that their children are naturally born righteous, it takes many of us many years to discover and to rectify certain flaws in ourselves. In fact, it often takes embarrassing or even injurious missteps in our lives before we grow into the people we wish to be.

Although Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are designed to inspire us to transform into people of greater ethics and holiness, these holidays

produce mixed results. As made clear in his 1822 *Machzor Korban Aharon* (מזחור קרבן אהרן) commentary, Rabbi Aharon ben Yechi'el Mikhel of Michalishki (now in Smolzavod, Belarus) understood this shortcoming. People truly intent on committing sins might sit through hours of prayer on Rosh Hashanah completely immune to any sort of spiritual impact from the music, the sermons, the space, or anything at all. However, Rabbi Aharon of Michaliski believed that there was one prayer that was composed for ossified souls.

A prayer-poem often called *HaYom* (הַיּוֹם, meaning “Today”)—as the word *hayom* repeats in every single line of this semi-alphabetical composition—commonly appears near the very end of Rosh Hashanah’s morning service. Its origins are murky, but Rabbi Aharon writes that in this address to God—where we demand, “תַּאֲמִצֵּנוּ” (“Embolden us!”) and “תְּבַרְכֵּנוּ” (“Bless us!”)—we recall that God has let wicked people double down on their actions before something good finally transpires. God, after all, willingly hardened Pharaoh’s heart (in Exodus chapters 7–11) before Pharaoh finally had a change of heart and let the Israelites go free (in Exodus 12:31). *HaYom*, in the words of Rabbi Aharon, “נִקְבַּע לְבַעֲלֵי תְשׁוּבָה וְלֹא יוֹכְלוּ לִקְבֹּעַ בְּאִמְצַע וּקְבֹעָה בְּסוֹף הַתְּפִלָּה” (“was written for people undergoing spiritual transformation, and they could not have placed this in the middle of the service, so they placed it at the end of the service”). Anyone who is committed to resisting the meaning of the songs, the messages, the readings, the community, or any of the fanfare of Rosh Hashanah might have to grow weary first of shielding themselves from the power of the day before they might begin to show their vulnerable side.

Congregations often sing *HaYom* to melodies where the word *HaYom* itself repeats many times—because the substance of *HaYom* is about God blessing us with different kinds of grace in this very moment, right

now. Because *HaYom* is such an important word—and the rest of the prayer less so—the exact content of *HaYom* has changed many times in the last millennium or so. While most prayerbooks today print only seven lines of this short but impactful prayer, the British Museum's 14th–15th century manuscript of *Seder Rav Amram Ga'on* (attributed to Amram Ga'on who died in Babylonia circa 875) contains 11 lines. (See the Mosad HaRav Kook edition, p. 137.) The German-Israeli Rabbi Dr. Daniel Goldschmidt (1895–1972), seemingly citing fragments found in Codex Hebraicus 102 in the Library at the University of Hamburg, reconstructed a version containing 27 lines. (See Goldschmidt's *Machzor LaYamim HaNora'im, Rosh Hashanah*, p. 275.) It almost goes without saying that there is little consensus on what we demand of God in *HaYom*, other than that God act kindly towards us on this very day.

If we find ourselves doubtful that a higher power might grace us this Rosh Hashanah, we must accept one simple doctrine: we are worthy of and capable of changing for the better. There's no time to waste.

This week's Torah commentary has been sponsored anonymously.