



Rosh HaShana

Opening Thoughts

What is the job of the shliach tzibur (cantor/prayer leader)? One of the characteristics of the New Year/Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur prayers is the tunes the chazzan uses to create an atmosphere of the High Holidays. The tunes can offer an interpretation of the liturgy and bring the public into the mesmerizing world of the synagogue, standing before He who created the world.

One can see that there are parts of the prayer which are meant for the public to say or sing together, such as Lecha Dodi on Friday night; there are parts of the prayer which are whispered or said silently, such as the Amidah; there are places in the prayer where the public responds to the chazzan such as Modim deRabanan or Amen for blessings; and there are also parts meant for the chazzan alone, as part of his job as the prayer leader. In these cases, the chazzan stands among the congregation and asks God to open his mouth in his name and in the name of the Jewish People. As such, the chazzan must understand his task and when he is confronted with each type of prayer, knowing when to engage new tunes and when to remain steadfast with traditional tunes and interpretations of the prayers.

Over the past few years, one poem – Ochila – has come to be sung in many communities to the wonderful and elevating tune composed by R' Hillel Paley. Originally this section was said by the chazzan in Spanish communities before the prayer of Musaf and by the Ashkenaz community it serves as a request by the chazzan from the public to act as their emissary, as an opening to the prayers of Malchuyot (Kingship), Zichronot (Remembrances) and Shofarot. Many of the words are in singular form (I will beseech, I will ask, I will sing etc.), signifying that they are said by an individual. Rabbi Moshe Sternbuch discusses the question of whether a person praying alone should say it:

Maimonides, in the order of prayer at the end of the book of Ahava, seems to believe that "Ochila" should also be said when one prays alone... and in the book Hararey Kedem this opinion is also brought in the name of the Brisker Rabbi. However, I have my doubts, as from the wording it is clear that this prayer is meant for the chazzan alone. It can be argued that originally when this prayer was composed it was written for the chazzan as he was the one who prayed for the public who were not proficient in their prayers. However, in our times when each individual prays for himself, each person should say the same prayer as does the chazzan.

From the words of the Abudraham it seems that the meaning is actually for the prayer leader to say this prayer, and not for each individual as part of his own personal prayer:

And it seems from [the words of] "Ochila" that an individual should not say it, as it is a request for the prayer leader, for it states "That I may sing His praise among people."

Whether we accept the words of the Abudraham and allow the chazzan to say these words alone, as one who obtains permission from the public, or whether we accept Rabbi Sternbuch's opinion and sing together with the chazzan whereby each person stands in these moments as an individual before the Creator, we must return to the opening question – what is the job of the shliach tzibur? When must he lead the community and expect them to repeat after him? When must he allow the community members to conduct themselves as individuals, with each one progressing in his own way, pace and understanding? When must he go hand in hand with the public, singing, joyous, mourning and crying together with them? And when must he lead the people, march them forward, but always thinking and knowing that he is there in the name of and for the public?

The answer may be found in the liturgical poem of "Ochila": "A person can prepare the thoughts in their mind" – if one desires with all his heart and opens his heart, without masks and inhibitions, to lead the public upwards through prayer, then "the tongue's eloquence comes from the Lord" – God will put the words into his mouth.

Sources and Questions for Discussion

The Sound of the Shofar

Happy are the people that know to sound [the blast]; Rabbi Yoshiyahu said 'Don't the nations of the world also know how to make the same sound? Rather, happy are the People who know to appease their Creator with the sound [of the blast of the shofar]. What does the Holy one, blessed be he, do [when He hears this sound]? He rises from His seat of justice and sits on the seat of mercy and is filled with mercy for them and changes their verdict from one of justice to one of mercy.

(Vayikra Rabba, Emor, 29)

- What thoughts come to mind when you hear the sound of the Shofar?
- What is special about the sound of the shofar which supposedly makes God change His seat and also His verdict?

The nature of the day

And Nehemiah, who was the Tirshatha, and Ezra the Priest the Scribe, and the Levites that taught the people, said to all the people: 'This day is holy to the Lord your God; mourn not, nor weep.' For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the Torah. Then he said to them: 'Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions to the one who has nothing prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord; don't grieve, for the Lord's joy is your strength.'

(Nehemiah 8, 9-10)

- Should we cry or be joyous on Rosh HaShana?
- What is the objective of Rosh HaShana and how does this influence the nature of the day?

Law and Justice

"When there is no one to plead our case against the accuser. Speak on behalf of Jacob regarding the statute and the law and make us righteous in law" (from the High Holiday prayers). Just as the Jewish People fulfill the laws and statutes, the laws of the Torah, even though they may not know their reasons and meanings, do so as well and "make us righteous in law" – acquit us even if there is no reason or explanation. (Kedshat Levi)

- Is it right to ask the judge not to execute judgment with the accused?
- What should we learn from this about our attitude toward other people around us?

What are we really asking for?

On Rosh HaShana we ask "May you renew for us a good and sweet year". Good is not enough, since we must say "this is also for good" when bad things happen. Therefore, we pray for the year to be sweet as well – a truly good year. (Peninei Torah)

- What are we asking for as we head into the new year?
- Are the days of Elul and Ten Days of Repentance, days of forgiveness and mercy, the right time to make requests for the coming year, or should we only seek forgiveness and mercy for what happened in the past?