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# BEYONDING



A really practical guide for  
meaningful prayer for this  
Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur  
if you can't go to shul at all,  
or only for a short while

**Rabbi Dr Raphael Zarum**

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# INTRODUCTION

**C**oronavirus epidemic. National lockdown. The world is forever changed, and we have so much to pray for.

But the synagogues are only open for short services with limited attendance. Passionate singing with a large crowd is no longer possible. So how do we make our High Holy Days meaningful? Without the services we know, without hearing the familiar tunes, and without people we recognise sitting around us, how can we pray with a full heart and communicate with our Creator?

This short guide suggests original and creative ways to help you pray at home. Some will speak to you, others may seem a little strange. I suggest that you 'have a go' and see where they lead.

I know of nothing more personal than the act of *tefillah*, prayer. Only you know what you experience, but I truly believe that we all have the ability to develop further. Your openness to new dimensions of being is the first step to change.

More than ever before, in this most unusual year, we need to move beyond what we are used to and explore uncharted terrain. For it is there that our deepest selves can encounter God. Prayer has that power.

It is not easy; just going through the motions and 'ticking the boxes' is much simpler. But ask yourself: is that enough? If you let yourself go beyond, then you can emerge from Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur changed. Still you, but more. More reflective, more thoughtful, more ready to take on the coming year, and continue the path you have begun.

Prayer is a natural and ancient form of human expression. I am a modern rational person who appreciates and benefits from the advancements of science and technology. But I am also a unique human being, created in God's image, who yearns for spiritual awareness and a deeper sense of self and purpose. I care deeply about my family's health and safety. I worry about antisemitism and Israel's security. I hope for greater global peace, love and understanding. And, most of all, I want my life to mean something. Prayer is about acknowledging all these wants, hopes and fears as we contemplate our place in the world.

For prayer to 'work', you have to work. It needs your determination. The rabbis of the Mishnah were well aware of this: "A person should not begin to pray unless they are in the right state of mind. The Sages of old used to take some time before praying so they could focus their hearts on God." (Mishnah, Berachot 5:1). With some planning, effort, and honest reflection you can have a transformational experience that will, at times, touch your soul.

If you want to know more, read on. I wish you well on your inner journey.

"It's a dangerous business... going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don't keep your feet, there's no knowing where you might be swept off to." (*The Lord of the Rings*, J.R.R. Tolkien)

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Much has been written about *tefillah*. Many *machzorim* and *siddurim* (festival and daily prayer books) include English translations, background information, and some valuable explanations for each of the individual prayers. This booklet is about more than that.

It is about how prayer can help you to transcend your everyday life. An apt word for this is 'beyonding':

"Without the capacity for symbolic transcendence, for seeing life in terms of a realm beyond it, without the capacity for 'beyonding'.. one would be trapped in a world of what has been called dreadful immanence. For the world of daily life seen solely as a world of rational response to anxiety and need is a world of mathematical necessity.. It is through pointing to other realities, through beyonding, that religion [can].. break the dreadful fatalities of this world of appearances." (Robert Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 2011, p.9)

Religion, and especially prayer, can lift you from your daily routine of working, eating, chatting, shopping, streaming and sleeping into a world full of unexpected meanings. This is a deliberately unsettling experience. It activates your imagination, enhances your perception of reality, and so connects you to God.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik believed that, like the biblical prophets, we can all experience this: "All Jews can fulfil their aspiration toward God by joining the prophetic tradition.. The confrontation between God and Man, between Creator and creature, never ends; the discourse with God is constantly being renewed – in prayer, in transcendent thoughts, and in man's longing emotions.. The God who walked about

in the Garden of Eden and called to the first man, "Where are you?" (Genesis 3:9), is still marching in the garden of history and calling to us.." (*And From There You Shall Seek*, 2008, p.134-135).

Indeed, beyonding is an overarching theme of the High Holy Days. You will notice an extra word in the reciting of every single Kaddish of the Ten Days of Repentance, from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur. Instead of relating to God as *le'ela min kol birchata v'shirata*, 'beyond any blessing or song..', it says we relate to God as *le'ela le'ela mikol birchata v'shirata*, 'beyond, **beyond** any blessing or song..'. That extra 'beyond' is a signal that this time of the year requires you to make a supreme effort to reach out beyond yourself and enter a more self-aware and reflective realm of deeper meaning.

There are many paths to beyonding through prayer. You can prepare the right atmosphere, identify major prayer themes, recite carefully and slowly, move your body to reflect the words, and maintain your concentration.

But more than anything, beyonding asks you to be open to a range of emotions, ready for fresh thoughts, and eager for new experiences. Keeping focus is not easy, but with practice and commitment, it can become more and more rewarding.

"It takes both time and considerable introspection to get beyond the elaborate mental constructions, the words and ideas, devised by everyone." (Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*, 2006, p.140)

Keep beyonding in mind as you read this guide.

## 1. Set up a place

Choose a good spot for praying in your home and make it extra special. Do this by keeping some objects there that are useful or meaningful to you while you pray. Here is a selection to enthuse you: *machzorim*, photos of loved ones, a *kippah*, a special shawl or wrap, a *tallit*, books or articles about the High Holy Days, a precious necklace or bracelet, a family heirloom, a beautiful picture or piece of art that inspires you.

You may want to pray near the candles you light for Rosh Hashanah, or near the *Yahrzeit* light that is traditionally lit before Yom Kippur. Or you might prefer to pray outside where you can appreciate the

sights and sounds of nature. We cannot all pray together this year, but we can be united in the direction we face. So, make sure your spot faces eastward, to Israel our homeland and Jerusalem our holy city.

To deepen their spiritual concentration (*kavanah*), the medieval kabbalists would stare at the holy four-letter Hebrew name of God (Y-H-V-H) when they prayed. You could carefully write out the *yud*, the *hey*, the *vav* and the *hey*, of this Hebrew name on a piece of paper and place it before you when you pray. If you do this, please remember to look after it and store it safely in your machzor. God's name is forever and should never be thrown away.

## 2. Manage your time

Don't try to run through a long service all in one go. Take breaks. Pray for ten to fifteen minutes and then get a coffee or wander round the garden. This will enable you to be more focused when you do pray.

As you pray, when you meet an idea or concept in the text that intrigues you,

pause. Take a moment to reflect on it. Ask what it means to you personally.

And just before you begin praying, sit motionless for an entire minute. Feel yourself wanting to start.. and then don't. Try to quieten your thoughts; breathe and calm yourself. Then begin.

## 3. Be active

As well as your mind, prayer should physically engage your head and body. Recite some sentences or paragraphs aloud. God can hear you if you pray silently, but can you? Be bold and raise your voice for the words or phrases that have personal meaning. And if you know a good tune then sing the prayer out loud, with gusto. Relish the feeling of forming the words in your mouth.

Do not stay still when you pray. Sit for some parts, stand for others. Bend and

bow. Stand on tiptoes. Stretch and relax. Don't be sheepish, these motions awaken your mind and body and will heighten your experience. Sway forward and back or side-to-side to help you find the rhythm of the prayers. Close your eyes to concentrate. Listen to your heart beating. Occasionally, stop dead and be still for a moment or two. Never underestimate the choreography of prayer, as King David wrote, "ALL my limbs shall say, 'Lord, who is like You?'" (Psalms 35:10).



**W**e all know the science. Every breath you take draws air into your lungs, oxygenating blood which is pumped around the body by your heart to enable your organs and muscles to function. But how does this actually feel?

Try holding your breath for thirty seconds and then breathe out slowly. Close your eyes and focus on how your body responds. Notice the sensation of energy returning. Adults breathe in and out 12 to 20 times a minute, and more than twice that when exercising. That adds up to about a billion breaths in an average lifetime. How conscious are you of this little miracle that sustains you at every moment?

The unique ritual of Rosh Hashanah is blowing the *shofar* (Leviticus 23:24). To be precise, the *mitzvah* is to 'hear' the *shofar* being blown. The *bracha* requires you, "to listen to the sounding of the *shofar*." At that moment the synagogue falls silent as everyone awaits that mysterious sound.

But what exactly are we hearing? Not the *shofar* itself, but rather the sound that emanates from it. The point here is that this *mitzvah* is simply hearing sound, just the vibration of soundwaves in the air. Why is it so insubstantial?

Beyond historical reasons, one purpose of the *shofar* is the conscious recognition of human breath. This is the source of the *shofar's* sound; it is the sound of breathing. This is fitting, because Rosh Hashanah is the anniversary of the birth of humankind, on the sixth day of Creation, when God breathed life into Adam (Genesis 2:7).

Human life began with the breath of God. Indeed, God is with us wherever we go because God's breath is inside us. How

can we be thankful for this? How can we show our appreciation for every breath we take? The answer is straightforward. We show our gratitude by blowing back. Every sound of the *shofar*, reaching up to the heavens, announces another human breath. It shows God that we cherish the gift of life through breath.

Only the *Ba'al Tekiah* blows the *shofar* for the community, but this idea of the centrality of breath can also profoundly help each one of us pray on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Every time you get distracted or your mind wanders, then just pause and breathe...

Inhale slowly and purposefully, hold for a moment, and then exhale gradually. As you do this, try to be aware of every little sensation that your body is experiencing. Then repeat a few times. This will help you to refocus. It's so simple, and it works every time. And with every breath you are recognising the God-given miracle of breath.

It is no coincidence that the Hebrew word for 'breath' *neshima*, has the same root as the Hebrew word for 'soul', *neshama*. When you concentrate on your breath, you are concentrating on your essential being, your very soul.

One vicious effect of coronavirus is its attack on the respiratory system. Shortness of breath is a hallmark symptom. Every breath of a COVID-19 patient can be a painful effort. So, remember this year especially, to value how effortlessly you are able to breathe. And use your breath to help you pray.

## God as King – *Malchut*

**T**hough a human monarch has a responsibility to care for their subjects, historically they spent more time defending their family line, expanding territory and establishing their legacy. God's kingship is totally different. Defence, expansion and legacy are meaningless. Instead, God's kingship is an elaborate metaphor for the divine unity and harmony of all Creation. Through it we recognise that God's lone rule brings order to the entire world. On Rosh Hashanah we continually praise God's sovereignty and so commit to our role in

working for a just and fair society for our people and for all.

Here are examples, with page numbers in three Ashkenazi *machzorim*: *HaMelech* (Routledge: 80, 176; Artscroll: 262; Koren: 341); *Adonai Melech* – 'God was, is, and will forever be, king' (R: 105, 203; A: 0328, 370; K: 437, 695); and *Melech Elyon* (R: 145, 201; A: 366, K: 689).

A result of God's kingship is that Rosh Hashanah becomes *Yom HaDin*, the Day of Judgement, when the one true King judges how responsible and just we have been in our lives (R: 106, 205; A: 330, 374; K: 441, 701).

## To Life – *L'Chayim*

**R**osh Hashanah recalls the sixth day of Creation, on which human life first began. So, on these days, we ask God to remember us for life. This encourages us to desire life, to value being alive and never take life for granted. Four special sentences are added to every *Amidah* (standing prayer) throughout the Ten Days of Repentance – two near the beginning and two near the end – and they are all about life, *chayim* (R: 15, 91, 131, 186, 227; A: 78, 350, 486; K: 65, 387, 517, 763).

Another vital aspect of appreciating life is admitting our own vulnerability and mortality. Our lives are precarious, like a fiddler on the roof. Surely COVID-19 has reminded us of this inescapable fact. So, at the heart of the *Mussaf Amidah* on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is *Unetaneh Tokef*, an intense prayer about life's transience: "Humanity is founded on dust and ends in dust... like a fleeting shadow, like a passing cloud... like a dream that slips away" (R: 146; A: 480, 538; K: 565, 801).

## Faithfulness – *Eemunah*

**O**n Rosh Hashanah we declare our faith in God's justice. Faith is not about abstract belief; it is about being faithful to Judaism, living a life committed to values and ethics. It means being loyal to a people that has – against unbelievable odds – survived for centuries, because we have never given up on trusting our Maker. Year after year, we continue our traditions. And so we

sing, *Vechol ma'aminim*, "And all believe that God is a God of faithfulness" (R: 149; A: 490, 546; K: 581, 813).

Every time we answer a blessing or end a prayer with the word *Amen*, we are once again showing our faithfulness to God. This is because *Amen* has the same Hebrew root as *Eemunah*. For example, *Hayom* (R: 166; A: 532, 582; K: 633, 861).

**T**he *machzor*, like the *siddur*, is a collection of prayers compiled by the Sages over centuries to enable Jewish communities to pray together. I do not see this as a straitjacket but rather a suitcase full of possibilities. If you live with your partner or family then you might choose to pray together. Even so, I still suggest that you find time to pray alone as it is so important that your *tefillah* is personally meaningful and stimulating. Here are some helpful pointers to produce your home prayer services:

**(i) Shema and Amidah** – These are the most important prayers in the book. “Rabbi Shimon said: Be meticulous in reciting the *Shema* and the *Amidah*; and when you pray, do not do so as a fixed routine, but as a plea for mercy and grace before God...” (Ethics of the Fathers 2:18).

Every *Amidah* on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is focused on the themes and meaning of the day. The *Shema* is our most profound declaration of faithfulness. It’s your daily check-in with God. Take your time with it.

**(ii) Avinu Malkeinu** – This prayer is recited twice each day of Rosh Hashanah (R: 111, 175, 210; A: 384, 622; K: 455, 715, 915) and four times on Yom Kippur (R: 55, 104, 269; A: 144, 436, 700, 758; K: 171, 711, 1093, 1185). In it we address God both as our loving parent, *Avinu*, and our fearsome king, *Malkeinu*. For this Divine-Human relationship to last, we must be God’s children and subjects; treated with fondness as well as justice. Every loving parent knows that their child needs boundaries. That is how they learn right from

wrong. In *Avinu Malkeinu* we acknowledge this and talk intimately with God about our hopes and needs. It has an enticing rhythm too.

**(iii) Hebrew or English?** – The answer is both. Hebrew, our national language, connects you with Jews past and present. Even if you comprehend very little, let its blend of authenticity and strangeness wash over you for some prayers. As well, or instead, read the English for the prayers you want to fully understand. Sometimes flicking between the two can be a satisfying alternative. God is multilingual.

**(iv) Themes** – Choose the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur themes that you want to focus on and include them in your prayer service. If you can, look through the prayers a few days in advance and mark-up or make a list of what you select.

**(v) Time slots** – If possible, you should attempt to pray all the services of the High Holy Days. But if that is difficult, then I suggest you try something like this:

- Pray twice on both the days of Rosh Hashanah, some of *Shacharit* at 9.30am and some of *Mussaf* at 11.30am, for half-an-hour to an hour each time, with a good break in-between.
- For Yom Kippur, pray part of the evening Kol Nidre service, and then three more times during the day: some of *Shacharit* at 9.30am, some of *Mussaf* at 1.30pm, and some of *Neilah* at 5.30pm; again, for half-an-hour to an hour each time.

## Confessing our mistakes – Viddui

**T**he first step to improvement is admitting what you have done wrong. Bringing back to mind the uncomfortable memories of your mistakes enables you to recognise not just what you did, but how and why you came to do it. Psychologically, this enables you to work on your character. *Viddui*, ‘confessing your sins’ is the main challenge of Yom Kippur. This is why there is a confession component, containing a checklist of sins, to all five prayer services of the day.

But rather than racing through the long list of sins over and over again, I suggest

you choose one time during the day to really focus on your *viddui*. Pause after reading each one and ask yourself: When did I do this or something like it? Why did I do it? How can I make sure that this does not happen again, or at least less often? The Artscroll and Koren *machzorim* have useful elaborations of each sin to help you examine yourself (A: 849-869; K: 1430-1149). The list is in the plural, ‘We have sinned’, because the full list applies to the Jewish People as a whole, but you will gain much by spending extra time reflecting on the sins that apply to you personally.

## Forgiveness – Selichah

**W**hat is the origin of Yom Kippur? When Moses returned from forty-days on Mt. Sinai, he was carrying the Ten Commandments on two stone tablets. But when he saw the Golden Calf deified by the Israelites, he smashed the tablets, punished the people and went back up to God to seek forgiveness. God relented and when Moses came back with a new set of tablets, everyone knew for sure that they had been forgiven for their sin. This, say the Sages, happened on the tenth of Tishrei.

And so, Yom Kippur became the ‘Day of Forgiveness’ for all time.

The roles are clear: you must ask for forgiveness and God must forgive. But there is no shortcut. If your request is rushed or insincere then it is meaningless. Throughout Yom Kippur we remind God and ourselves of our special relationship. Sing, contemplate, repeat: *Ki Anu Amecha*, ‘For we are Your people...’ (R: 92, 183, 232, 264; A: 128, 418, 596, 682, 750; K: 145, 681, 947, 1067, 1171).

## Repenting – Teshuvah

**N**o matter what you have done, no matter how ashamed or disillusioned you might feel, you can return to God. Nothing is fixed, you can change. This is the gift of *teshuvah*, literally, ‘returning’. The story of Jonah and his mission to Nineveh is about people grappling with the possibility of repentance: the sailors on the boat, the king of Nineveh and his people, and even

Jonah himself. In the end God asks Jonah, ‘Should I not take pity...?’

Study the story and think about the decisions and the motivations of the characters (R: 201-204; A: 634-645; K: 994-1005). Ask yourself the questions that the sailors asked Jonah: ‘What is your trade and where do you come from? Which land is yours and who are your people?’



## SING

In prayer you need to focus on reading, meditating, swaying, reciting, repeating, bowing, breathing, and singing. Carrying a tune carries you beyond yourself like nothing else. It lets your soul dance. You don't have to have a good voice, you just need to have an open heart. Singing has psychological, medical and spiritual benefits – it really is good for you. Don't hold back.

There are so many wonderful and well-known traditional tunes for the prayers of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur: *Avinu Malkeinu*, *Unetaneh Tokef*, *Hayom*, *Adon Olam* and many more. In preparation for these days, search online for different recordings of the best-known prayers. Find the ones you particularly like and listen to them a few times. Maybe make a personal playlist. Then you will be ready to try them

yourself when you start to pray. On the LSJS website we have put together a list of the ones we quite liked – have a look.

You can also sing the traditional prayers to more modern or alternative tunes. This gives them a new lease of life. So, to help carry you through Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, why not try singing some prayers by fitting the words to memorable or inspiring musical pieces, such as 'Greensleeves', uplifting songs from musicals, Israeli folk tunes or whatever moves you. Try to choose melodies that fit in with the atmosphere of the words and themes of the prayers.

You can prepare songs in advance or try things as you go along. Either way, when you sing you lose a bit of control and dive into what you are doing – and that can only help you when you are praying.

## A PRAYER ABOUT PRAYER

שְׁמַע קוֹלֵנוּ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ  
חוֹס וְרַחֵם עָלֵינוּ וְקַבֵּל  
בְּרַחֲמִים וּבְרַצוֹן אֶת תְּפִלָּתֵנוּ

*Shema koleinu Adonai Elohai nu,  
chus v'rachem aleynu, v'kabel  
berachamim uv'ratzon et tefilateynu*

"Listen to our voice, Lord our God, take pity and have mercy on us;  
and accept, in mercy and with favour, our prayer."

This is one of my favourite prayers. It comes from the weekday *Amidah*, but on Yom Kippur it becomes a highpoint of the *tefillah* and is repeated four times over the day (R: 45, 92, 183, 232; A: 126, 416, 596, 682; K: 143, 679, 945, 1065).

For me, it sums up the entire gamut of prayer. We are saying, "Please God listen, just listen. We're only human, so have pity on us. Be merciful, give our prayers a chance, give us a chance."

### THREE FINAL TIPS TO HELP YOU PRAY

Say less, feel more.

If at first you don't succeed,  
pray pray again.

The more you  
open up, the more  
you will receive.

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"It is not easy; just going through the motions and 'ticking the boxes' is much simpler. But ask yourself: is that enough? If you let yourself go beyond, then you can emerge

from Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur changed. Still you, but more. More reflective, more thoughtful, more ready to take on the coming year, and continue the path you have begun."

**In this little booklet, Rabbi Dr Raphael Zarum, Dean of LSJS, suggests useful and innovative ways of rethinking our prayers on the holiest days in the Jewish calendar. This is especially for the many of us who will not be attending shul this year due to coronavirus.**

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