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## The Yom Kippur Debate 5779

**Does structured prayer  
enhance or obstruct us?**



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## Motion:

**This House believes  
that structured prayer  
is out of date**



## INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the Yom Kippur Debate 5779!

This is an immense opportunity to capture the imagination of the many youth and students who fill our shuls on Yom Kippur so that we can discuss contemporary issues within the framework of our Jewish community.

This year, rather than providing a single debate motion, we have for the first time expanded the debate resources to include three stand-alone topics which can be used during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, or at any other time.

**The debate motions are:**

- 1) This House believes that a young person brainwashed by a terrorist group is not responsible for their actions.
- 2) This House believes that you should kill one person to save the lives of many others.
- 3) This House believes that structured prayer is out of date

Each topic has its own set of materials which consists of: **a)** A promotional clip for you to share on social media in advance of the debate; **b)** An information pack which contains notes for the debate moderator and presenters; and **c)** A short movie clip which summarises the topic, for you to share on social media after Yom Kippur.

The key theme of the High Holydays is **teshuvah**. Commonly translated as 'repentance', *teshuvah* literally means 'return'. These discussions provide a forum in which we can return to a reflective space at the start of the year and spend time considering principles that will help to guide us in the coming months.

Tremendous thanks to Rabbi Gideon Sylvester, the United Synagogue Israel Rabbi, for his expertise in writing the information booklets; to Oliver Anisfeld of JTV and his team for producing the clips; to Rebbetzen Lauren Levin, Luis Herszaft and the students and staff of JFS, for participating in the filming; and to Rabbi Michael Laitner, David Collins and Sharon Radley for reviewing and contributing to the debate content. I also want to acknowledge David Turner, the Chairman of South Hampstead Synagogue and the young people of the South Hampstead community for helping me to initiate the Yom Kippur debate project.

I hope you have stimulating conversations, an engaging communal experience and a meaningful Yom Kippur!

**Shana Tova!**

*Rabbi Eli Levin*

## INTRODUCING OUR TOPIC

Fewer British Jews are joining synagogues. Our membership figures have fallen by 20% in just under a generation and now stand at less than 80,000 for the first time. It's not just Jews who are affiliating less with their places of worship. British Christians are experiencing a drastic decline in church membership which has declined from 10.6 million in 1930 30% to 5,4 million in 2013 (about 10.3% of the population. A 2014 survey, found that the British were the amongst the most irreligious population in Europe.<sup>1</sup>

Edgar Bronfman, former head of the World Jewish Congress was quoted as saying<sup>2</sup>: "I don't like going to synagogue, I generally find the atmosphere stultifying, the services overly long, boringly repetitive, and mostly without meaning to the young Jews of today." In the mid twentieth century, the American Jewish community established numerous impressive synagogues, but they "seldom came to them and even more seldom identified with what was going on inside." From the outset, they were not necessarily looking for a place of inspiring prayer: "The community needs a place for our children and we adults need some place to carry on our social lives. What better place can there be than our synagogue?"

But our question is slightly different. We recognise that there are many obstacles to prayer. It's hard to pray in Hebrew if you are not at ease with reading it. It can be hard to sit through a long service, especially if you have not yet studied the prayer book and don't really know what's going on.

However, does that make structured prayer out of date? Does it remove all possibility of heartfelt communication with the G-d? Or does it offer us a challenge to learn more about our prayers and seek ways to find our own spiritual expression through the prayer book?

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics for Church membership from the Faith Survey <https://faithsurvey.co.uk/uk-christianity.html>

<sup>2</sup> 'A New Synagogue for a New Era.' Printed in 'Contact' the journal of Jewish life network Vol 2, number 1



## **NOTES FOR MODERATOR**

This debate focuses our attention on what we are all doing here today. On the one hand, the huge number of people in synagogue over Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is testimony to the deep connection that so many of us feel to the traditional prayers which are deeply ingrained in our Jewish identity. On the other hand, the insertion of debates, “Ask the Rabbi & Rebbetzin” sessions and so on into our day of prayer is an indication that the prayer services are not entirely meeting our needs. We are searching for something more.

Perhaps the very fact that people are coming to our synagogues in search of meaning is a positive sign. We may not fully grasp the meaning and significance of the prayers, but we wish to connect and we wish to connect through our United Synagogue communities.

While allowing for an honest dialogue between the sides, we cannot be neutral on these issues and perhaps at some stage it would be worth introducing the following ideas:

1. The Talmud<sup>3</sup> tells us that when it comes to prayer, God requires the heart. Indeed, the Shulchan Aruch, the great Code of Jewish Law written in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, discusses whether it is better to say a few heartfelt words than to gabble at length without really engaging with the words. This idea was summed up by the founder of Chassidism, the Baal Shem Tov, who wanted to ensure that prayer and Torah study was made accessible to all Jewish people not just the intellectual elite. He told the story about a peasant boy who was taken to synagogue for the first time on Yom Kippur. The boy heard all the people fervently praying and he longed to join in, but he lacked the words to do so. Eventually, unable to control his urge to connect with God, and unable to formulate it into words, he pulled out a whistle from his pocket and blew a loud, shrill blast on it. The people in shul looked at him askance, but the rabbi refused to condemn his actions. "If our prayers were heard in heaven today," he said, "it is by virtue of the sincere prayer of this young boy". God requires the heart.
2. Although coming to shul to see our friends may not rate as the most spiritual motivation, it certainly has its place. In the third volume of his

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<sup>3</sup> Ta'anit 2a

“Guide for the Perplexed”, the renowned Torah scholar and philosopher, Rambam, attempts to explain the reasons for mitzvot. He suggests that one of the reasons for the festivals in the Jewish year is that it is healthy for human beings to relax and spend time with their friends While prayer is the central reason for shul attendance, building a sense of community by talking to our friends in the Kiddush also has its place!

**Let the debate begin!**

In summing up the debate, the moderator may wish to open a short discussion on what we could do to improve our prayer experience. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are the time for formulating our new year's resolutions. How much would it help if we understood the meaning of the words of the prayers and their content? Is that something we could work on this year by forming a group to study some of the prayers with our rabbi, rebbetzin or youth director?



## ARGUMENTS FOR THE MOTION

There is a famous anecdote of the elderly Jewish woman who makes a trip to India. She is anxious to see the "Guru". Despite her advanced age, her frail body, and the sweltering heat, she clammers up the mountain and waits in the long queue to see the venerable spiritual leader. After many hours, her turn finally comes. But before she is allowed to approach the "Guru", she is given strict instructions. She is only allowed one sentence and it must be delivered respectfully. While everyone else seems to be in awe of this spiritual leader, she approaches him with confidence. "James" she says. I am your mother; enough already, it's time to come home".

The story reflects our challenging reality. Too many Jews have failed to find spirituality in their prayers and Buddhism has become the destination for many Jews in search of spirituality. Significant numbers of Israelis on completing their army service flock to the Far East hoping to find something that will speak to their souls. Some estimate that about 30% of the Western Buddhist leadership is Jewish. For them, Buddhism appears to have tapped into a spirituality that our prayers are failing to meet.

We argue that traditional prayer is not only out-dated, it has actually been too hard for Jews from the get go. Even some of the rabbis at the time of the Talmud found it almost impossible to concentrate when praying. They summoned all their efforts but it was not long before their minds were wandering. In the Jerusalem Talmud (Berachot 2:4) one rabbi confesses how he admires the birds outdoors during prayer while another speaks of counting the bricks in the wall. Great Chassidic rabbis like Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav (1772-1811) wrote of how hard it was to achieve spirituality in prayer, and for each day that one managed it, there could be many other days when he or she may feel distanced from God and even pushed away by Him (Shivchei HaRan 11).

The Jewish philosopher and legalist, Rambam explains in his Laws of Prayer (1:3), that originally, people would pray as frequently as they wanted using their own words to express their prayers to God. This is how things worked from time immemorial until the beginning of the second Temple era. It was only then, when people found it hard to create their own prayers, that Ezra, the leader of the Jewish people at that time, together with the Jewish Supreme Court known then as the 'Anshei Knesset HaGedolah,' began establishing a siddur and fixed prayers for people to say which would enable ongoing, meaningful prayer to God.

Perhaps in our times, we should return to the way things were once done. If our people find it hard to pray from fixed prayers which were written thousands of years ago, we should make room for them to write their own prayers, pray at their own pace and achieve the spirituality that the prayer book is no longer giving them.

## **ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE MOTION**

In defining the term 'spirituality,' Rabbi Sacks explains that "spirituality in essence is what happens when we open ourselves to something greater than ourselves. Some find it in the beauty of nature, or art, or music. Others find it in prayer, or performing a mitzvah, or learning a sacred text. Yet others find it in helping other people or in friendship or love." For many, spirituality is about the search for G-d and His place in our lives. Lots of Jews don't necessarily feel spiritual all of the time. Yet, reaching out to God in prayer has been a hallmark of our people from its foundations.

Abraham, was in constant contact with God. He spoke with God about his need for children, and even when he saw the dysfunctional cities of Sodom and Gomorrah slated for destruction, he cried out to God setting out his objections to the plan.

While our forefathers are credited with instituting the formal times of prayer in the morning, afternoon and evening, it is the matriarchs and others, whose heartfelt cries to God when faced with infertility form the basis of prayer. When the rabbis wanted to teach us how to pray, they drew on the example of Hannah, a woman who was struggling to bear children and whose passion in prayer was mistaken for drunkenness by the High Priest in the Temple of Shiloh where Hannah prayed. This narrative, which appears in the first chapter of Samuel 1, was selected as the Haftarah reading for the first day of Rosh Hashanah.

When Ezra, the leader of the Jewish people at the beginning of the second Temple era, instituted the Amida prayer of eighteen blessings, he was recognising a reality. Not everyone found it easy to compose a spontaneous prayer. As such, he empowered them with a tool which would help structure the concept of prayer.

This idea continues to resonate today. As much as we like to think that we are spiritually minded, many people find it challenging to take time out to reflect on our lives, let alone fit in the three established prayers each day. In the midst of a regular week, with all the pressure of work, study, family and friends, how many of us would honestly manage to carve out a serious amount of time in the day to compose our own heartfelt prayers to God? Structured prayer doesn't stop us from finding space for composing our own prayers too, it merely ensures that we don't solely rely on that in case it doesn't happen.

Furthermore, would we really want to break down the communal structure of the synagogue which is largely based around prayer times, considering that it also provides for seeing friends, catching up on community news, supporting the sick and bereaved and enjoying a chat together at Kiddush?



The Talmud<sup>4</sup> tells us that when a person comes home in the evening, they should be sure to pray before they eat, because otherwise they will eat, settle down, relax and forget to pray. The rabbis were recognising that we are not always in the perfect condition to pray and our prayers may not always feel the most uplifting or focused. However, that is not a good reason to put structured prayer aside. Prayer is a muscle and it's one that we should keep in shape.

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<sup>4</sup> Berachot 4b

## Appendix: Sources

### Rambam Laws of Prayer Chapter 1, Laws 3 & 4 (from Chabad.org)

**3** A person who was eloquent would offer many prayers and requests. [Conversely,] a person who was inarticulate would speak as well as he could and whenever he desired. Similarly, the number of prayers was dependent on each person's ability. Some would pray once daily; others, several times. Everyone would pray facing the Holy Temple, wherever he might be. This was the ongoing practice from the time of Moshe Rabbenu until Ezra.

**4** When Israel was exiled in the time of the wicked Nebuchadnezzar, they became interspersed in Persia and Greece and other nations. Children were born to them in these foreign countries and those children's language was confused.

The speech of each and every one was a concoction of many tongues. No one was able to express himself coherently in any one language, but rather in a mixture [of languages], as [[Nehemiah 13:24](#)] states: "And their children spoke half in Ashdodit and did not know how to speak the Jewish language. Rather, [they would speak] according to the language of various other peoples."

Consequently, when someone would pray, he would be limited in his ability to request his needs or to praise the Holy One, blessed be He, in Hebrew, unless other languages were mixed in with it. When Ezra and his court saw this, they established eighteen blessings in sequence.

The first three [blessings] are praises of God and the last three are thanksgiving. The intermediate [blessings] contain requests for all those things that serve as general categories for the desires of each and every person and the needs of the whole community.

Thus, the prayers could be set in the mouths of everyone. They could learn them quickly and the prayers of those unable to express themselves would be as complete as the prayers of the most eloquent. It was because of this matter that they established all the blessings and prayers so that they would be ordered in the mouths of all Israel, so that each blessing would be set in the mouth of each person unable to express himself.

### Hannah's Prayer - Talmud Berachot 31a

Rabbi Hamnuna said: How many most important laws can be learnt from these verses relating to Hannah! *Now Hannah, she spoke in her heart*: from this we learn that one who prays must direct his heart. *Only her lips moved*: from this we learn that one who prays must frame the words distinctly with their lips. *But her voice could not be heard*: from this, it is forbidden to raise one's voice in the Tefillah.

*Therefore Eli thought she had been drunken*: from this, we learn that a drunken person is forbidden to say the Tefillah.

*And Eli said to her, how long will you be drunken, etc.* Rabbi Eleazar said: From this we learn that one who sees in his neighbour something unseemly must reprove him.

*And Hannah answered and said, No, my lord.* 'Ulla, or as some say Rabbi Yossi ben Hanina, said: She said to him: You are no lord in this matter, nor does the holy spirit rest on you, that you suspect me of this thing. Some say, she said to him: You are no lord, meaning the *Shechinah* and the holy spirit is not with you in that you take the harsher and not the more lenient view of my conduct. *Do you not know that I am a woman of sorrowful spirit: I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink.* Rabbi Eleazar said: From this we learn that one who is suspected wrongfully must clear himself. *Do not consider your handmaid for a daughter of Belial* a man who says the Tefillah when drunk is like one who serves idols. It is written here, *Don't count your handmaid for a daughter of Belial*, and it is written elsewhere, *Certain sons of Belial have gone forth from the midst of you.* Just as there the term is used in connection with idolatry, so here. Then Eli answered and said, *Go in peace.* Rabbi Eleazar said: From this we learn, that one who suspects his neighbour of a fault which he has not committed must beg his pardon; moreover, he must bless him, as it says, *And the God of Israel grant your petition:*

*And she vowed a vow and said, O Lord of Hosts* Rabbi Eleazar said: From the day that God created His world there was no man called the Holy One, blessed be He, Hosts until Hannah came and called Him that. Hannah said before the Holy One, blessed be He: "Sovereign of the Universe, of all the hosts and hosts that You have created in Your world, is it so hard in Your eyes to give me one son?" A parable: To what is this matter like? To a king who made a feast for his servants, and a poor man came and stood by the door and said to them, "Give me a bite", and no one took any notice of him, so he forced his way into the presence of the king and said to him,

"Your Majesty, out of all the feast which you have made, is it so hard in your eyes to give me one bite?"