

פרשת אמור תשס"ה Keeping the Bread Warm

Last Thursday, I traveled to Washington to participate in the President's commemoration of the National Day of Prayer at the White House. I bet most of you didn't know that there even is a National Day of Prayer. I certainly didn't – until I was invited to participate in one. Actually, when I told my uncle what I came to town for, he said to me, "For us, every day is a national day of prayer," and he's right.

It was an invigorating experience – from actually having my name on a list and being ushered into the White House, to sitting not fifteen feet from the President of the United States, to hearing a fellow rabbi – Rabbi Kenneth Auman, the president of the Rabbinical Council of America, recite a chapter of Tehillim in Hebrew in the White House, to the impromptu little tour of the main floor of the White House I took during the reception. It's a pretty wild feeling to look out at the Capitol and Washington Monument from inside the White House.

At the ceremony, the President spoke about the power of prayer, and said that we pray for three reasons: "We pray to give thanks for our freedom. Second, we pray for help in defending the gift of freedom from those who seek to destroy it. Finally, we pray to acknowledge our dependence on the Almighty." Now, I don't know who wrote the President's speech that day, but he was actually right on the money, and he took his ideas right out of the way that we daven, if not in a different order.

Every שמונה עשרה – every time we stand before God in the Amidah, we do three things. You might notice that every פיליה starts and ends the same way: it starts with the same three blessings. Then there's a section in the middle for whatever specific day it happens to be, and then we close the prayer with the same three ברכות, each and every time. Each of these sections has a purpose.

The first section is called שבת, in which we praise God's greatness from His relationship to our forefathers, to his Power of and dominion over the world, to his exalted Holiness. In the words of the President, "we pray to acknowledge our dependence on the Almighty." The next section we call בקשה – which we use to ask for the things we need to help us navigate our lives, from health for our families and well-being for the Jewish people, to asking for a sense of peace and tranquility and sanctity on Shabbos. We call out to God to ask, because only He has the ability to answer and fulfill those requests.

Finally, the President noted that "We pray to give thanks for our freedom." That's the last section of every שמונה עשרה, called הודאה, or thanks. Each time we daven, we must remain mindful of these three things when we communicate with God. First, we must acknowledge His greatness. Then, we can ask Him for His help and guidance. And finally, we must give thanks for the blessings that we already enjoy.

Still, the most important aspect of the whole trip, at least for me, was what I learned from the event itself. When different members of the clergy got up and spoke about the importance and centrality of prayer, it wasn't just lip service. They really meant it. You could feel the President's sincerity and honesty when he said that he really gets great strength when people come up to him and tell him, "Mr. President, I'm praying for you."

And it made me wonder: we pray here all the time. We come here day and in and day out, week in and week out and we pray. But all too often in our shul, I feel that something is missing. Sure, we're saying the words. But are we reaching out to God with our hearts? Are we connecting to the Almighty? Do we pray with a sense of warmth, or has that warmth somehow waned and we simply recite the cold words without any sense of passion or purpose?

At the end of the Parshah, the Torah tells the tragic tale of the מקלל – the man who curses and blasphemes God in public. ויקב בן האשה הישראלית ויקלל – and the son of the Jewish woman blasphemed and cursed God" – a crime punishable by death.

Why does he do it? What brings him to curse and defame God before the Jewish people? Rashi tells us that לילג – "he scoffed and said," the Torah commands us to place the

לחם הפנים – the showbreads – on the שלחן each and every Shabbos. They would only change the bread once a week. דרך – "a king should eat warm bread each and every day." So why then are we giving God cold bread and only changing it at most once a week? He couldn't accept that God should have cold bread, so he cursed God and His people.

There's only one problem with the man's complaints: they're not even true. The מנחות teaches us that these were no ordinary breads. Rather, חם גדול בלחם הפנים – "A great miracle would happen with the showbread" – סיליקו כסידורו – "it was as warm and fresh and inviting when removed as it had been when it was first placed there." So why then was the blasphemer so annoyed by the לחם הפנים, if the bread actually did stay warm in the end anyway?

Yet, maybe the man wasn't really complaining about the bread, but about the people serving it. Sure, the bread might stay warm, but that's only because God Himself miraculously keeps it that way. But what about the people? What about us? We might have a moment of warmth and passion and spirituality every now and then, but on an average Shabbos, or an average morning davening at home, between the time you have to get the kids dressed and rush out to work, are we serving God warm, fresh bread? Or has our davening somehow gotten cold and stale? Why did I feel a sense of prayer at the White House that's often missing at the Young Israel of Oak Park? And, most importantly, what can we do to make things just a little bit better?

I've given this a lot of thought over the past few weeks, and I have some answers, and a challenge: First and foremost, it's easy to be spiritual once a year. My uncle was right: for us, every day is a national day of prayer, and that only makes creating meaningful prayer that much more challenging: no less critical, but more challenging.

Second: without a doubt, all too often, we allow the words of davening to become a formula, a recipe to recite, in the proper way at the proper time, without taking the time and energy to discover what the words mean – not just in translation, but to our personal lives, and how they can connect us with God. It's like some magic spell that we're supposed to say, [rush through some of the davening real fast] And, when you think about it afterwards, what did it really mean to God? What did it even mean to us? The גמרא tells us that more important than the words we say is the worship of the heart, without which, there really isn't that much prayer going on. So take the time to daven a little slower – actually, a lot slower. And if you don't finish, it really doesn't matter. Pick one part of the davening each day to focus on to understand and meditate on. If we're going to feel a sense of warmth, we need to begin to say less, and daven more.

But the lack of warmth is larger than just the davening. Somehow, I fear that there's a sense of pressure – be it social pressure or malaise or discomfort – from exhibiting a sense of religious passion and fervor at least in the Modern Orthodox community, whether we're talking about singing at Shalosh Seudos or during davening, or just taking your time during Amidah and concentrating and connecting with God in our own personal way. All too often, while we might say the right words and bow at the right time, our motions are wooden and formulaic and hollow. Stand here. Bow now. Answer this. And then we wonder why we don't find Judaism uplifting, when we ourselves for some reason are unwilling to exert the mental and spiritual and emotional energy to lift ourselves.

I don't have any easy answers to this question. I can only leave it as a challenge for each of us: has the bread I serve God in my religious life gotten cold? Or do I maintain a sense of warmth and passion and connection? And, what can I do to maintain not just the ritual worship, but the internal worship – the עבודה שלב in my religious life? That's not a question for the rabbi to answer – but for each of us to answer for ourselves, because the answer will be different for each of us.

It's true that the לחם הפנים only stayed warm through a miracle. But that's a miracle that each and every one of us must strive for. Because only when we reach for miracles do we have a chance of attaining them.