

Good Shabbos, Good Yom Tov Everyone. On Rosh HaShanah we stand together in prayer before the Master of the Universe. Boruch Hashem that we have Artscroll which has provided us with translated and even transliterated prayer books. In any case however, each and every Jew still has a challenge on Rosh HaShanah to have in mind what he is saying, i.e., to daven with kavonah - intent. The holy Shlah remarked in the name of the Abarbanel, that davening without kavonah, is like a body without a soul, it has no life. The following story will help inspire us to have kavonah in during our Rosh HaShanah prayers.

For Jews in the Ukrainian city of Lvov (Lemberg), 1989 was the year of miracles. It was that year, in the wake of the Soviet Union's demise, that the city's main shul was returned to the long-oppressed Jewish community. Even after decades of Communist rule aimed at eradicating religious faith, Lvov contained a large population of Jews who, despite their complete lack of knowledge of their heritage, managed to cling tenuously to their Jewish identity.

Therefore, even with fear of the authorities still quivering in their hearts, throngs of Lvov's Jews poured into the restored synagogue on the first night of Rosh Hashanah in that year of miracles. With a mixture of caution and pride, they crossed the once-forbidden doorway with their children in tow, gazing around the room with the wondering eyes of strangers. The vast majority of people sitting there had no idea what to expect, nor what would be expected of them as they prepared to pray for the first time in their lives!

The chazzan who was to preside over this monumental occasion was Reb Eli Mintz of Monsey, New York. From the moment he had heard about the reopening of the shul for Rosh Hashanah, he was driven by an urge to be a part of it. With no idea of what he would encounter, he offered to lead the prayers for the desperately starved neshamos - souls of the former Soviet Union. Reb Eli was well aware of the historic impact of this particular Rosh Hashanah service, in this particular spot in the world at this singular point in time. It was an opportunity that had to be maximized — one single shot that had to hit its target, for there would never be another first time. The spiritual insurance he needed, Reb Eli determined, could best be obtained through Rabbi Shlomo Halberstam, the Bobover Rebbe. Who would better understand the tragic history that saturated the air of Lvov than the Rebbe, whose own father, the Kedushas Tzion, was murdered along with his family in that very city.

Reb Eli succeeded in obtaining an appointment with the Rebbe. There, he told of the precious opportunity that had been placed in his hands. How could he make sure that his tefillos penetrated the hearts of these bereft Jews? How could he help them connect to the Father Whose very existence had been invalidated by everyone and everything they had known for the past 70 years?

The Rebbe, too, was awed by the gravity of Reb Eli's mission. The advice he provided translated into an experience that moved Heaven and earth. As Reb Eli stood before the curious, cautious congregation on that Rosh Hashanah, he understood that few, if any, of the people there would have had the opportunity to learn how to pray. Teaching Hebrew had been forbidden for decades, as had been Torah learning and prayer services. Only those old enough to remember life before the Communists, or those brave enough to have practiced their Judaism in secret, would have even the most rudimentary tools for approaching the Rosh Hashanah prayers. What, then, could the chazzan say that would allow their hearts and souls to open to Hashem?

Reb Eli began with a story. He spoke in Yiddish, with a community leader, Reb Melech Shochet, standing at his side translating into Russian: "Shalom Aleichem, everyone. We know that Hashem listens to our prayers. He understands every language, and He even understands our sighs and groans. Listen, my friends, to a story: There was a time when the Jews of Berdichev

A Refuah Shleimah to Shusha Malka bas Golda

"Anyone who brings merit to the masses, no wrongdoing will come into his hands." Avos 5:21

To sponsor a drasha: M. Wolfberg 19 Koritz Way, Spring Valley, New York 10977 (845) 362-3234

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were having great difficulties. There were pogroms, exorbitant taxes and many dangers facing their community.

On the morning prior to Yom Kippur, the holy Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev spoke to his congregants. He urged them, in view of the dangerous and difficult times they were facing, to prepare for Kol Nidrei that night by coming to shul and praying from the deepest recesses of their hearts for Hashem to abolish the troubles that had been decreed for their community. "That night, every soul in Berditchev poured into the shul. The room resounded with their wrenching prayers. Among the crowd sat an uneducated wagon driver whose heart cried out as did the others, but whose lips were incapable of articulating even the simplest words of prayer. He had never learned, and that night, he cried with frustration at his inability to express the longings of his soul.

Finally, unable to contain himself any longer, he turned to Hashem and pleaded, 'Master of the Universe, You know that I do not know how to daven. All I know is the alef-beis, which my father taught me as a child. Please, Hashem, take the letters of the alef-beis that I will say to You now, and turn them into the right words.' He then began reciting out loud 'Alef... Beis ... Gimmel ...' Many of those around him wondered what he was doing, reciting a school-boy's alef-beis at such an urgent time. But when the congregation had finished its prayers, the Berditchever Rebbe addressed them joyfully, informing them that in the merit of the wagon driver's alef-beis, the decree had been canceled."

By the time Reb Eli finished this story, every eye in the shul was turned to him. He raised his voice and pleaded, "My dear brothers and sisters, many of you who came today do not know how to daven and it's not your fault. Please just do as much as you can. Say Shema Yisrael, say Ani Ma'amin, say whatever prayer you know and if you don't know anything at all then simply say the alef-beis Yes, you can even say the alef-beis."

Next to Reb Eli stood a frail old Jew dressed in a well-worn woolen suit. His weathered face had betrayed no emotion as he listened to the impassioned speech, but now, there were tears running down his drawn, brown cheeks. In Yiddish, he suddenly cried out to Reb Eli, "I want to say the alef-beis! I want to say it too! But I don't even know how to do that."

With this old man's pained proclamation, Reb Eli suddenly understood the depth of spiritual deprivation endured by the people seated before him. "My dear, fellow Jews," he announced. "Let us say the alef-beis together. Repeat after me, Alef! ..."

The hundreds of Jewish souls gathered together in the shul that night cried out in one thunderous voice, "Alef!" And then beis, and then gimmel and daled, all the way to yud. Each new letter fanned the roaring flames of their suddenly ignited souls, the sound carrying them higher and higher. Reb Eli knew there was yet more within them, still greater depths to be plumbed, and so when they came to yud, he urged them on, "Again, let's say it louder!"

By this time, the emotion in the room was a riptide that left no one standing where he or she had started. People sobbed with emotion, crying like children whose only desire was to be once again held in their Father's embrace. To anyone who witnessed this scene, there was no doubt that these letters ascended straight to Heaven, to be arranged into the most exquisite prayer the Jewish people could offer. "Now," said Reb Eli, "I am going to daven in the customary way." He began the evening services. Nearly twenty years have elapsed since the doors of the shul first reopened to the Jews of Lvov, and yet, the impact of that first Rosh Hashanah remains.

To this day, Rosh Hashanah services begin with the unique custom of reciting the alef-beis, reminding the educated and the ignorant alike that prayer, at its essence, is a "labor of the heart." Let us daven to Hashem with all our hearts and souls. That way we will all merit a good year, a sweet year of personal and national salvation, of good health and happiness. **Shana Tova Everyone!**

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