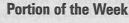
Don't waste a single word or prayer





RABBI SHARYN HENRY RODEF SHALOM CONGREGATION Yom Kippur

Think that the letters of prayer are the garments of God. What a joy to be making a garment for the greatest of Rulers!

- Baal Shem Tov

For the last few weeks, we have been watching a show on the public television station called "Word World." It's aimed at children younger than mine, but "there's nothing else on" (and we don't watch the news because I don't have the courage to explain the world to my children before my first cup of decaf) while we're getting ready for school, so ... "Word World" it is. One of the things the animal characters

do on this program is build words that then become the objects themselves. For example, if the character needs a pot in which to cook corn, she assembles the letters p-o-t and then a pot-shaped object appears that is made up of the letters. It's creative and

entertaining.

This morning, after stumbling upon the quotation above from the Baal Shem Tov, I realized that prayer works in the same way. Just as the characters on "Word World" form objects from words, which are themselves a combination of discrete letters, our prayers, a combination of discrete words, become something else. For the Baal Shem Tov, if we "do it right," our prayers become something else — a garment for God.

To imagine that God is "clothed" by our

sincere prayers, this is a beautiful idea. But I would like to add on to the teaching by suggesting that prayer is really prayer when it becomes something else — action. Prayer is really prayer when it motivates us to do: to ask for forgiveness, to make changes in our behavior, to be more generous, to take up a worthy cause. We must not waste our precious time, we must not waste our words - when the words fly off the pages and spring us to action, then we have truly prayed.

The message of the Haftarah portion for Yom Kippur morning urges, in a similar manner, not to waste our fast: "Is this the fast I have chosen? A day of self-affliction? Bowing your head like a reed, and covering yourself with sackcloth and ashes? Is this what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Eternal? Is not this the fast I have chosen: to unlock the shackles of injustice, to loosen the ropes of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to tear every yoke apart. Surely it is to share your bread with the hungry, and to bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, never withdrawing yourself from

your own kin." (from Isaiah 58) This year, let us agree not to waste a single letter, word or prayer. May we arise from our prayer stronger, motivated and with a pure heart — and then go out to make a difference in the world.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah.

(This column is a service of the Greater Pittsburgh Rabbinic Association.)

Pondering life's questions on Yom Kippur



SUSAN **JACOBS**

In the late 1980s, singer Edie Brickell and the New Bohemians produced a song, "What I am," that mocked the shallowness of American culture and our reluctance to be educated, thinking people.

"Philosophy, is the talk on a cereal box," sings Brickell in the 1988 release, "Religion, is a smile on a dog."

The implication is that empty aphorisms and superficial experiences have replaced profound ideas and beliefs.

The song continues: "Chuck me in the shallow water before I get too deep." In other words, "don't let me get confused by more complicated ideas."

The phenomenon that Brickell mocked in 1988 is even truer today. With a culture that is saturated by socalled reality television, flashy images and an emphasis on instant gratification, there is even less incentive to think deeply about life, or even to think at all.

The trouble is, no matter how deafening the sound on one's MP3 player, we can't shut out life's complications and complexities. Eventually the music stops and we are left alone with ourselves, wondering why things happen the way they do and what it all means.

For Jews, the High Holidays are an appropriate time to dip our toes into those deeper waters, to consider the fragility of life, the awesomeness of God and our responsibility to live ethical lives.

At the end of all of our searching, it is entirely possible, even likely, that we

will emerge with even more challenging questions, and fewer answers. And that is precisely the point.

We enter this season with the audacity to believe that our prayers can somehow affect our fortunes for the next year, but conversely, one of the themes of the High Holidays is that God's actions are beyond our comprehension.

A person who believes in God must wake up every morning and wonder why a merciful God would allow there to be so much pain in the world. The existence of evil is not proof that God is not there, but a challenge to humanity, both to grapple with the difficulty and to do our part to alleviate the world's injustices.

The High Holidays bring this dilemma into stark relief.

As we pray for good health, sustenance and peace, we simultaneously acknowledge that there is sickness, poverty and war in the world, and that while we personally may be safe, healthy and well-fed, there are others in the world who are suffering, and it is hard to understand why this is so.

By the end of Yom Kippur, when we triumphantly recite the Shema, we believe that we have done all that we can to be inscribed for a good year. But the doubts don't end there - Yom Kippur is not a once-in-a-lifetime event, but an annual phenomenon that keeps us religiously centered and aware of life's unanswerable questions.

By the day after Yom Kippur, it is tempting to set aside the big ideas and to go back to our sugar-coated comfortable lives. But if our prayers are to have an impact on the coming year, then we have an obligation to continue pondering life's difficulties.

(Susan Jacobs can be reached at siacobs@pittchron.com.)

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