

Ki Savo

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The days are passing very quickly and *Rosh Hashanah* is fast approaching. As in the old days, it is making people uptight. But unlike in the old days when people became nervous because they knew the Day of Judgment was coming, people are mostly nervous today about all those hours spent praying, and all the meals they have to prepare for family and guests, three days' worth this year:

That may sound a little cynical, but this is what people have told me. The reality of many hours in *shul* is real, as is all the preparations for the *chag*. But judgment is less real given how people seem to make it through each year regardless of how well they *doven*. It almost feels as if God is overlooking our sins, but family and guests don't overlook poor preparation.

Of course, that thinking is not only silly but dangerous. This week's *parsha* reminds us of that, and so does this past year. We've made it through many *Rosh Hashanahs* unscathed in the past, only to live to see all hell break loose during a particular year. It's dangerous to mistake God's patience for a lack of care, or to assume that escaping judgment one year doesn't add culpability to future years. Sins can accumulate from year to year if we don't work hard to erase them in the current year.

Having said that, how *does* one "deal" all the many hours of prayer, or if just being in *shul*?

The answer to that will depend upon who you are, what you are capable of, and what you are willing to do. One person I know used to go home and grab an hour nap during the *Chazon's* Repetition of the *Shemonah Esrai* of *Mussaf*. Very risky. Another person I know takes something to read to keep themselves from drifting off from boredom.

And then there are those people who actually like all the time in *shul*, and enjoy the *dovening*. On the contrary, praying for hours on *Rosh Hashanah* for them is something to look forward to all year. The rest of the year, prayer is so short and rushed,

and it is hard to use the opportunity to connect to God. On *Rosh Hashbanah* and *Yom Kippur*, no one is going anywhere for at least six hours, allowing them to cut themselves off from the rest of the world at least for their own *Shemonah Esrai*.

That is, of course, the ideal way to spend the three days. The question is, how does one reach such a point? Is it the nature of their soul? Upbringing? Education? All of the above?

Yes, yes, yes, and yes. But it is really one thing, and it is the basis of all of the above and the theme of this week's *parsha*, which is all about Divine judgment.

The Torah starts this week's *parsha* with the *mitzvah* of *Bikurim*. That's when someone brings up their first fruits to the Temple and says a special *viduy* (confession) regarding all the good God has done for them and the Jewish people. In other words, it's a *mitzvah* of *hakares batov*—recognizing the blessing of God and thanking Him for it.

Hakares batov is hugely important for many reasons. The *parsha* will later say that all the terrible curses mentioned will happen because we failed to appreciate the good God gave to us, while we had it. *Hakares batov* may not seem like such a big deal. . . until it does, by which time it is already too late to do anything about it.

The problem is that it is difficult to stay grateful for something that keeps going further into the past. It is also difficult to maintain the kind of demeanor that allows us to feel emotionally grateful for what we keep getting. Life happens and distracts us, making us take things for granted, or making us focus more on what we don't have than what we do have. How much more so is this the case when living in a world that constantly bombards us with new products "we must have" to feel complete.

But that is the *avodah*. That's what we have to work on. We have to become aware of every *brochah* we can think of, and see it as the gift that it really is. It doesn't matter how much you don't have or how much more someone else has. All that matters is how much you have at any given moment, and being grateful for it.

What people do not realize is how such a change in mentality affects their overall happiness. People who expect little and are grateful for everything they have, even if it is a lot less than what others have, are happier people than those who have a lot, but expect more and do not appreciate what they have. Life is about being happy, not materialistically rich.

That's the key to enjoying all the *shul* and prayer. That sense of gratitude to God for blessing in life is the secret to feeling intense love for Him. We enjoy spending as much time as possible with anyone we love, and we get tremendous pleasure from connecting with them. Just ask someone who does.