

# The Prayers of Women

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*“Once upon a time, there was a great city, and it was surrounded by an insurmountable and unshakable wall. All of the kings wanted to conquer this city and they tried with all their might, but they did not succeed. Their legions of soldiers fell victim to the arrows shot from the city’s wall.*

*Later, a very wise king came to examine the wall itself, and he understood that if he would order all of his troops to drive against the wall itself then and there, they could take it down. He did this, and all of his troops fell from exhaustion. The king remained alone.*

*He walked around the wall to see if it had sustained any damage during the attack and saw in his wisdom that indeed it had; the inner wall was nearly completely collapsed and the outer wall only appeared to still be intact. The king realized that if he were to mobilize even the elderly, the ill and the children, they would topple it completely.*

*The king did just this. He gathered together all of the women, children and the ill—whoever was left to him—and he went and broke the wall down completely and conquered the city.*

*Now we have to consider... Who tore down the wall? Those last lagging weaklings? How could it be so—had they tried with all their might for a million years, they would never have been*

*able to make the slightest impression on the wall. We have no choice but to admit that it was only through the combined efforts of all of the earlier warriors who managed to weaken the structure until it was nearly in pieces that the conquest was possible. At the same time, we cannot say that the ones who came first actually conquered the wall because in actual fact it was the weaker ones who came later that tore it down."*

*(Siach Sarfei Kodesh, III:177)*

This parable was Reb Nosson's way of explaining to his students how the redemption will be catalyzed in a generation that is spiritually weaker than its predecessors. We had so many great *tzaddikim* who came before us who tried with all of the power of their prayers to bring the redemption. How will we manage to do it, if we are sickly and weak compared to them?

I always find Reb Nosson's insight very encouraging, especially this time of year. We might look at ourselves and suffer from a nagging feeling inside, "Does Hashem really need me to declare Him King? What do my prayers during the high holidays really accomplish?"

The deeper sources teach us that the spiritual work of the period of *yamim nora'im*—which is considered to extend all the way until *Shemini Atzeres*—is that of "building *Malchus*." Although this is a very deep concept, the way we can understand it practically is that through our prayers we help—in our own way, just like in the parable—to reveal Hashem's Kingship in the world. We cannot say, "Why should another *Shemonah Esrei* make a difference?" It makes a difference. Every word of prayer makes a difference, every extra chapter of *Tehillim* moves the worlds.

Reb Nosson made clear that the main work needed to trigger the redemption has already been accomplished by the *tzaddikim* of

earlier generations. But without our prayers and self-sacrifice for the King, their great work remains incomplete.

Bearing this in mind, we come to the next practical question (and I happen to have a copy of one already sent to me by a woman, which makes my life easier):

*"...What are your thoughts on [praying on Rosh Hashanah] versus caring for small children? I once spent Rosh Hashannah with a lady with many small children (the oldest was maybe 8). She gave them lots of toys and snacks and let them entertain themselves while she slowly made her way through (what seemed to me to be the entire) Machzor. I, on the other hand, was grabbing a rushed Amidah and returning to my baby. It was a real eye opener for me. If my 'job' and what the Master of the universe wants from me at this stage of life is to care for my children, to what extent does that free me from prayer? This is not just a halachah question, but how should I ideally be spending my time on Rosh Hashannah? When I try to focus on my prayer I end up feeling resentful towards my children and like a failure on the mothering front and on the praying front. On the other hand, it doesn't feel right (or like a very inspiring role model) to just do the minimum and play lego and cut up schnitzel all day..."*

Here's my response, and everyone is free to disagree as they like.

The Rebbe said that even though "*ones Rachmana patrei*"—someone who cannot do a mitzvah is freed from duty—nevertheless one should not let go of one's desire to do the mitzvah or be satisfied with being freed from obligation. (*Likutei Moharan* I:66)

For us, the obligation to care for the children overrides the duty to spend a lot of time in prayer. [Note: In terms of the halachic obligations of women and prayer, please consult with your local Orthodox rabbi or a good text on the subject.] Yet

we also know that there are moments here and there to steal for Hashem, and when we don't we have a sinking feeling that something is not right. That's because we are not supposed to be satisfied with "*ones Rachmana patrei.*"

So...when my children were all too young for me to go to shul on the high holidays, I prayed at home to whatever extent I could, and that depended on the year, the needs of particular children, etc.

There were times when I could barely get much davening in and I think that there was at least one when I didn't even get out to hear shofar (someone came to blow for me—three of our children are born in Elul), and there were times when I was able to pray for hours at home, and so on.

Halachic reality [women are freed from time-bound *mitzvos*] leads me to believe that Hashem wants us to put the children/household first, but to not let go of my desire for holiness. How to do this without making the children feel like second fiddle is challenging. The way I think of it is like this: the children are first, but whatever prayer I can squeeze in is all to the good. I work hard to remember that this balancing is *a priori* for my circumstance, and that helps to keep me from giving off a feeling of resentment when I am interrupted.

And take heart: the period when all of the children are young ends very quickly. After that, you have more flexibility in terms of time in shul or praying at home. And, believe it or not, one day you can actually go back to spending most of the day praying with the community.

As a final note I will add that, generally speaking, the women who happily go back to praying in shul when the children are old enough are those who kept the fire of their *ratzon* [desire] burning during the years when they could not get there. This is actually one of the main points of that lesson

in *Likutei Moharan*: when one keeps the fire of *ratzon* burning, in the end one attains the object of desire. (Spiritually, that is.)

Now, for all of the women who are not at this point in time carrying the load of young children or a household, the situation is different. At every stage, Hashem desires the Divine service that we can offer. The degree to which we exert ourselves for His sake is the arbiter of the value of the *avodah*. If your circumstances allow you to spend the days in prayer, then this is what you give of yourself. If circumstances prevent it, then you give to Hashem your acceptance of His will and devotion to the task at hand. Either way, we have ample opportunities to serve Hashem with all of our heart, soul, and means at every moment of every day.

Getting closer to the big days! May Hashem have pity on His people, His land, and His world. It's time to tear down that wall.