

Leyl Rosh HaShanah 5782
Rachel's prayer is most effective
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Shanah tovah!

Whose prayers are most efficacious on Rosh Hashanah? Mine? Yours? The person next to you?

Only G-d knows. I mean that literally.

I do know that it's not necessarily the ones that are said aloud, or in Hebrew, or from the Mahzor, or even in synagogue. Those all help, but they're not guarantees.

Only G-d can see into our hearts. On Rosh HaShanah, only we can open them up.

Jews are heirs to our Patriarchs and Matriarchs. It's encoded into our name Israel - Yisrael.

(Yisrael - Yod - Yitzhak, Yaakov; Sin - Sarah; Raysh - Rivka, Rachel; Aleph - Avraham; Lamed - Leah)

Our tradition celebrates all of them and champions one's prayers in particular.

The Midrash in Eicha Rabbah paints the picture of the Jews being exiled after the Temple was destroyed. One by one, our ancestors offer their most passionate prayer in the hopes G-d would intercede. Here are their words in the moment of greatest need:

Abraham's prayer: Sovereign of the Universe, when I was 100, You gave me a son, and when he was 37, You commanded me to sacrifice him. I followed Your commands exactly despite my parental mercy. Won't You recall my sacrifice and have mercy on my children?

But this did not sway G-d.

Isaac's prayer: Sovereign of the Universe, when my father said to me, 'G-d will provide Himself the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son,' I raised no objection to carrying out Your wish. I, as an adult, willingly let myself be bound on the top of the altar and stretched out my neck beneath the knife. Won't You recall my sacrifice and have mercy on my children?

But this did not sway G-d.

Jacob's prayer: Sovereign of the Universe, did I not stay twenty years in Laban's house? And when I left his house, the wicked Esau met me and sought to kill my children, and I risked my life on their behalf. Now they are delivered into the hands of their enemies like sheep to the slaughter. Won't You recall my sacrifice and have mercy on my children?

But this did not sway G-d.

Moses' prayer: Sovereign of the Universe, was I not a faithful shepherd to Israel for forty years, running before them like a horse in the desert? When the time arrived for them to enter the promised land, You decreed that I should die in the wilderness. Now they are exiled. Won't You recall my sacrifice and have mercy on my children?

But this did not sway G-d.

Rachel's prayer: Sovereign of the Universe, You know that Jacob loved me exceedingly and worked for my father on my behalf for seven years. When those seven years were completed and the time arrived for my marriage with Jacob, my father planned to substitute my sister for me. It was very hard for me because I knew about the plot, and I gave Jacob a sign whereby he could distinguish between me and my sister. So my father couldn't switch my sister.

But then I relented, suppressed my desire, and had pity upon my sister that she should not be shamed. In the evening they substituted my sister for me with Jacob, and I told my sister which signs to use, the ones I had shared with Jacob. I did her a kindness, was not jealous of her, and did not expose her to shame.

And if I, a creature of flesh and blood, formed of dust and ashes, was not envious of my rival and did not expose her to shame and contempt, why should You, a King Who lives eternally and is merciful, be jealous of idolatry in which there is no reality, and exile my children and let them be slain by the sword?

This swayed G-d to have mercy and say: "For your sake, Rachel, I'll bring the Jewish exiles home."

And so it is written in the Haftorah for day two in the Book of Jeremiah: "Thus says G-d: A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping, *Rachel* weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are gone. Thus says G-d: Restrain your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for your work

shall be rewarded... and there is hope for your future, says G-d; and your children shall return home.”

Whose prayers are most efficacious on these High Holidays?

Only G-d knows. It may not be who we expect, like Rachel's being more powerful than Moses'. But don't count yourself out because you have a heart that beats and lips that move.

Over the next two days we will immerse ourselves in the words of prayer. Use the Hebrew. Use the English. Sing. Be silent. Use the book. Don't rely on the book. We open our books to open our hearts, just like Rachel did for us, her children.

Shanah tovah!