

*Praying with Holy Chutzpah*  
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Shana tova.

There's a Yiddish song, "Kartofel Zup Mit Shvomen,"<sup>1</sup> about a mother just trying to feed her poor family. First her child Yosele enters and tells his mother that he wants to eat Kartofel Zup Mit Shvomen (potato soup with mushrooms). The mother responds, "Gehert a khutspe!" Have you heard of such chutzpah! Such nerve! I've made garlic soup and you want to eat potato soup with mushrooms!?"

Next her daughter Sosl enters, who wants farfel, little noodles, in a meat broth, and the mother responds, "Gehert a khutspe! Meat soup like a rich person!?" And finally the youngest, little Khaye comes in and requests beans with gnocchi. And again, the mother responds, "Gehert a khutspe! I made garlic soup and nobody wants to eat it!"

Oy, I feel for the mother in this song. Such chutzpah, such nerve, the things we ask our parents for sometimes!

But there are times that call for a little chutzpah.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://yiddishsongs.org/kartofl-zup-mit-shvomen/>

Especially after such a difficult year, I think some holy chutzpah is warranted. That is, we need prayer that really expresses what's within our souls to God, without our own self-censorship, without shame, without fear. We need to tell God whatever it is we need to say. I know that at least, that is what I need.

The song that we have chosen as our High Holiday anthem this year comes from Psalm 30 and I think is a text that reminds us that we can and should have a little chutzpah.

In the chorus of Joey Weisenberg's setting of Psalm 30,<sup>2</sup> we sing the verse:

אֱלֹהִי יְהוָה אֶקְרָא

I called to you, Oh God.

Rashi explains this verse as:

אֱלֹהִי יְהוָה אֶקְרָא תָּמִיד

I would call to you all the time, regularly

And what would I say to God?

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xUjAwINZZFU>

We won't sing these words, but it's there in the psalm. And it's actually quite bold, what the psalmist says to God.

The Psalmist says, all the time I would call to you saying,

מה־בַּצֶּעֶ בְּדַמִּי בְּרִדְתִּי אֶל־שִׁמְת הַיּוֹדֵךְ עֲפָר הַיִּגִּיד אֱמֻנָה:

“What profit is there in my blood, when I go down to the pit? Can dust praise You? Can it declare Your truth?”

Now this pit could be a very literal hole in the earth, a grave, with the psalm asking God, what good is there in my dying? Can I speak to you, God, if I am not alive? Heal me! Keep me alive!

Rabbi Shai Held points out an interesting bit of wordplay in the word *dami*.<sup>3</sup> *Dami* means “my blood”. But we also hear echoes of the word *domi*, “my silence” a word that we’ll encounter again at the end the psalm.

SO

מה־בַּצֶּעֶ בְּדַמִּי

Asks:

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d6Oq-WPIr-Q>

What is the purpose of my silence? How can I be in relationship with you, God, if I am silenced?

There are some emotional pits that leave us feeling like we have no words or no voice. Maybe this past year has left us feeling too numb, too alone, too angry, too stuck in the kind of *bor*, the kind of pit, that the psalm speaks of, where we feel unable to express anything to God. Maybe we're unclear if God is listening or what it would even mean for God to listen.

But the psalm ends—

שְׁמַע־יְהוָה וְחַנּוּנִי יְהוָה הִיְהִי־עֲזָר לִי

Listen, God! Listen and do something about it. Help me.

הִפְכַּתְּ מִסְפָּדִי לְמִחּוֹל לִי פִתַּחְתָּ שַׁקִּי וְתַאֲזַרְנִי שְׂמֵחָה

You turned my mourning into dancing: You undid my sackcloth, and clothed me with joy;

לְמַעַן יִזְמְרָךְ כְּבוֹד וְלֹא יִדָּם יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי לְעוֹלָם אָמֵן

So that my glory may sing praise to You, and not be silent. O Adonai my God, I will give thanks to You forever.

We ask God to listen. We call out to God and say, “We need your help.” We are not so stubborn or so numb as to think we can do it alone. Even if our mourning has not yet changed into dancing, what’s essential is “V’lo yidom.” We should not be silent.

Tomorrow we’ll read in our haftarah the story of Hannah, of a woman who prays to God and asks God for a child. Beyond being an amazing story in Tanakh, Hannah inspires incredibly creative midrashim. Hannah also becomes one of the central role models in Judaism of how to pray; as the first person in our tradition to pray silently with just her lips moving, the rabbis of the Talmud even go as far as to use Hannah’s example to set the halakhic standards that are still part of prayer today—how to pray intentionally, how to pray quietly during the Amidah, and more.<sup>4</sup>

In the Tanakh, we read:

וְהָיָא מֵרַת גִּנְשׁ וַתִּתְפַּלֵּל עַל־יְהוָה וּבְכָה תְּבַכֶּה

And she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed to Adonai, weeping intensely.

וַתֵּדַר גִּדֵּר וַתֹּאמֶר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת אֱמֶת־רָאָה תִרְאֶה | בְּעֵינַי אֲמַתְךָ וּזְכַרְתָּנִי וְלֹא־תִשְׁכַּח אֶת־אֲמַתְךָ וַנִּתְתָּה

לְאֲמַתְךָ זָרַע אֲנָשִׁים וַנִּתְתָּיו לְיְהוָה כָּל־יְמֵי חַיָּיו וּמִנְרָה לֹא־יִעְלָה עַל־רֹאשׁוֹ

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<sup>4</sup> Babylonian Talmud Brachot 31a

Hannah swore a vow and said *Adonai Tz'evaot*, God of hosts, if you will really look at my suffering, remember me and not forget me, but will give me a child, I will give him to You to serve You his entire life and no razor will ever come upon his head.<sup>5</sup>

We hear the promise she makes to God: If God grants her a child, she will put her child into service to God. And we are told that she prayed in her heart with her lips moving, but we don't get to hear the actual content of her prayer. So, the rabbis imagine what her prayer might have actually contained. There are multiple versions and each one is a compelling model of audacious prayer.

In one imagining in the Talmud, Hannah says to God:<sup>6</sup>

Master of the Universe, are You not the *Adonai Tz'evaot*, Adonai of the Hosts? Of all of the hosts and hosts of creations that You created in Your world, would it be so difficult in Your eyes to grant me one son?

The Gemara follows this prayer with a parable: To what can this be compared? It is like a king who made a feast for his servants. A poor person came and stood at the door. He said to them: Give me one piece of bread! And they ignored him. He pushed

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<sup>5</sup> 1 Samuel 1:10-11

<sup>6</sup> Babylonian Talmud Brachot 31b

and entered before the king. He said to him: My lord, the King, from this entire feast that you have prepared, would it be so difficult in your eyes to give me a single slice of bread?

It is as if Hannah barges into God's palace and she and the Ruler of the Universe stand head to head and she says, would it be so hard, God, to make one more creation? You have so many, how hard would it be to share one more?

The Gemerra then explores the verse that Hannah

וַתִּתְפַּלֵּל עַל־יְהוָה

that she prayed *AL* (ON) God, instead of the expected *EL* Adonai, to God.

”וַתִּתְפַּלֵּל עַל ה'” מְלִמֵּד שֶׁהִטִּיחָה דְבָרִים כְּלָפֵי מַעֲלָה.

This teaches that she threw her words at God, she brazenly hurled her demands upon God.

If there was any model of speaking to God as the Ruler of the Universe with chutzpah, this is it.

Our liturgy and Hannah as role model of this season help move us from places of silence to places of calling out, of thrusting our broken hearts upon God.

That is the intention I set for us this season. To really call out to God. Rosh Hashanah invites us to pray and to call out in the way we need to. We call because we need help. We call because we can't do it alone. And we call not only to receive answers, but because we have a human need to cry, to ask, to plead, to express whatever anger, disappointment, and pain is in our hearts. To call out is to be in relationship with God, whether we approach God like a trusted parent, Avinu, or an authority figure, Malkeinu, or perhaps both at the same time. Even if there are no answers, even if our call is like Hannah's, a challenge, an act of hurling our words at God, that is holy, holy work.

God can handle our chutzpadik prayer.

We are beginning two days of a lot of time for prayer. And a lot of words. For some of us, those words will be a safety net and a guide, a way of putting words to feelings and a way of tying us to tradition; for generations and generations, Jews have been saying some version of these prayers at the High Holidays. For others of us, those words will be a place to get lost, or perhaps a distraction from the words of our hearts. If that's you, know that there are many ways to call out to God.

Maybe your call will come at times like Hannah's words, in a whisper during our times for quiet prayer, but still sharp and clear. Maybe it will sound like Hannah's crying or like the blare of a shofar, without words, just sound and sentiment. It might be in a voice that grows louder when it mixes together with other voices around us. It might be in a voice that cracks or breaks or halts or mispronounces the words.

But whatever the sound of your k'ria, of your calling out to God, may it be one of sincerity and one of chutzpah.

*Eleikha Adonai Ekra.*

To you God, I called, I always called, and I **will** call.

May this be the season of chutzpah, of calling from a place of rawness, of truth, of boldness, as we review our lives, our relationships, our world, and even as we review God.

I pray<sup>7</sup>:

That our nighttime tears may be followed by daylight's song.

That we make space for mourning and also for dancing.

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<sup>7</sup> Translation inspired by Psalm 30:6 and Psalm 30:12-13

That our pain may loosen around us and we might find ourselves surrounded by joy.

That we may sing and not feel silenced

That we may always have something for which we can say “thank you” to God.

**תְּכַלֵּה שָׁנָה וְקַלְלוֹתֶיהָ**

Let the past year and its curses conclude!

**תַּחֲלֵה שָׁנָה וּבִרְכוּתֶיהָ**

Let the new year and its blessings begin!

Shana tova.