

Psalm 27, the Yamim Nora'im, and October 7

September 30, 2024 (High Holidays)

In July, I traveled to Israel to celebrate my grandson's bar mitzvah. Like any of us who have spent time in Israel this past year, I experienced both happiness and heartbreak, admiration and anguish. It's impossible to approach the Days of Awe without Israel being front of mind. With the first anniversary of the October 7 massacre coinciding with the Days of Awe, how ought we focus our prayers for 5785?

I've always looked to Psalm 27 to guide me through this season. This psalm, which we begin to recite on the first day of Elul, cuts right to the trepidation that the Yamim Nora'im—the intense period of introspection and repentance—evoke in each of us. As the liturgy reminds us again and again, we are at God's mercy; our prayers evoke vulnerability and, in so doing, expose our deepest fears.

This intimate psalm, written in the first person, captures anxieties common to us all, the panic that bubbles up at times. The psalmist feels paralyzed by evil doers, armies, abandonment, and spreaders of falsehood. Whether real or metaphorical, these fears overwhelm, impelling the psalmist to seek God's shelter, guidance, and deliverance. Only faith in the Divine keeps the psalmist from sinking into the abyss.

Reciting this psalm daily during this season reminds us that at our worst moments, we yearn for ways to escape our struggles and find meaning in our challenges. We long for peace and purpose. These desires are reflected in the different verbs used to describe the psalmist's request: He wants to dwell in God's House, gaze upon God's beauty, and frequent God's Temple.

As we see in Verse 4:

אַתָּה שְׁאַלְתִּי מֵאֶת ה' אָוֹתָה אֶבְקַשׁ שְׁבָתִי בְּבֵית ה' כֹּל יָמִי סִי לְחִזּוֹת בְּנוּם ה' וְלִבְקָר בְּבִנְקָלָן

One thing I ask of the LORD, only that do I seek: to dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD, to frequent God's Temple.

After October 7, Psalm 27 reads very differently to me. This year, the "I" of the author captures not individual weakness but rather the collective anguish of the Jewish people, *Am Yisra'el*. As we approach the Yamim Nora'im and October 7, our heartache feels collective and manifold. We mourn the murdered and the captured; we feel abandoned by a world that has grown more receptive of antisemitic rhetoric and behavior; we worry about the mounting consequences of a year-long war with so many victims.

We also yearn desperately for the release of all the hostages, but also for an end to the war, with the safe return of Israelis to the north and south in peace; for an end to the untold sufferings of so many innocent people on all sides; for a lasting peace that will enable Israel to thrive and Palestinians to cultivate a home with dignity; and for a global repudiation of antisemitism.

Sadly, our hearts also ache for the internal distress we are experiencing as a people. We are at a fraught moment, experiencing division among us as we prioritize certain goals and discount others and as we grow distant from those whose choices differ from our own. Even though we are beset by external adversaries, we also struggle to find common ground as a people.

As we know, the problems we face as a people are beyond our ability to remedy ourselves. So what can we realistically ask of God at this time?