

Iyyun: Ata Notein Yad and Ata Hivdalta

We have praised and lauded God, reminded God of God's divine attributes, and glorifying Adonai as our Father, Creator, and King through congregational melody. Now, as we enter into the next section of Neilah liturgy, we turn to our own wrongdoings and plead for forgiveness, bringing the themes of the entire High Holy Day season to fruition as we near the end of Yom Kippur. We ramp up to this conclusion by once again admitting our guilt, listing our collective sins in "Ashamnu," building up to a climactic, two-part plea to God: "Ata Notein Yad" and "Ata Hivdalta."

This pair of prayers harken back to our plea to God in Un'taneh Tokef, "Ki lo tachpotz b'mot hamet." We asked God throughout the Holy Days whether there is any pleasure taken in our deaths, and now at the end of Yom Kippur, God finally responds. "Ata notein yad" and "Ata hivdalta" summarize many of the themes of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, from the debasement and declaration of our sins to the centrality and significance of t'shuvah.

"Ata notein yad" opens with a theological statement that we repent not for some material or spiritual reward, but to become better people, to complete our mission to make the world a better place. We undergo the process of t'shuvah "L'ma'an nechdal l'oshek yadeinu," for the sake of stopping violence and harmful behavior. This profound statement underlines our plea for God to forgive us, if not based on our own merits, then for the sake of the world and God's innocent creatures. The rest of the prayer goes on to demoralize humanity and describe just how inferior we are, not just to God but to God's animals as well. We might think that we are smart, wise,

kind, and brave, but God outranks us in every way. If we think for even a moment that we are better than anyone else, God can easily prove us wrong.

Although the theology of a God that personally intervenes in our lives does not resonate for me, I believe our current global crisis attest to the fact that we are not always in control of our lives. As we say, we make plans, and God laughs. “Ata notein yad” is an ode to those forces outside of our control, reminding us that we are nothing but small specks in an outstretched, infinite universe. The Alter setting that I chose brings out the sequence of questions in the text in a beautiful way, reiterating every “ma” or “meh” in a musical sequence that increases in intensity and desperation. Alter also reflects the humility of knowing we are “havel,” ending the piece on a low note, quietly, and without too much fanfare.

In contrast, “Ata hivdalta” portrays the mirror image of “Ata notein yad.” Despite our view of ourselves, God gives humanity a chance to repent and prove our worth in this world. The prayer reiterates the exact same wording from “Ata notein yad,” that the purpose of t’shuva is to cease wrongdoing and return to God to observe mitzvot. But this time, the response to this statement comes from a place of hope, rather than a place of debasement and humility. Using biblical quotes to create a dialogue between the congregation and God, we learn that God does not rejoice in our death, but yearns for our repentance. In the end, it is in our power to control our own actions, and the opportunity to do t’shuvah is available to us at any point. Moreover, God does not want us to die! Rather, God’s voice seems to come out of the page from the ether, calling for our repentance, “Shuvu! Shuvu!”. The prayer climaxes with repetitive quotes in God’s voice, crying out for us to return to God and live, building to an epic finale. This is reflected beautifully

in the Schall arrangement, which goes into a mysterious key change to portray God's voice and builds to a peak at "V'hashivu v'yichyu."

If Neilah is the conclusion of all of our services, then it not only recapitulates what we have already prayed for, but adds something as well. These prayers take us through a mini journey that parallels that larger journey of the holiday season, ending with a resounding message: God wants us to live and be our best selves, living out God's commandments. This finale leaves us with inspiration and hope for the new year, hanging on to every last minute of Yom Kippur and the chance for t'shuvah.