

# A Plea for Genuine Prayer

By Abraham J. Twerski

Some years ago, I attended services in a large, impressive-looking synagogue in a New York suburb. But while the actual building was quite magnificent, the congregants' decorum was appalling.

During *davening*, people were conversing fairly loudly with their neighbors, with apparently no consideration for those who had, in fact, come to shul to pray. Several times the rabbi had to stop the *chazzan* in order to restore silence.

I thought to myself: *If these people were watching a television program and there was chattering in the room, would they tolerate being disturbed?* Let's assume that the talkers are simply not interested in prayer—at the very least, they should give the people who *are* interested in praying the same courtesy that they themselves would demand when watching a television program. I was told that the rabbi had raised the issue several times with his congregants, but he was simply ignored. I could not help but

think: *If a non-Jew were in attendance, wouldn't the talkers remain quiet so that he wouldn't view them as irreverent?* So, obviously, they are aware that conversing during prayer is a sign of extreme disrespect. Yet they don't seem to care. On what basis do the talkers expect their children to respect them if they show no respect for God?

Today's youth—our own children and grandchildren—are at risk of being influenced by the immorality and promiscuity that surround us. Sincere *Yiddishkeit* and a genuine connection to God are of some value in preventing such a misfortune from happening. But showing our children that we have little respect for the House of God erodes this defense.

Distressed by what I had experienced in the shul, I wrote a letter to the rabbi, empathizing with his predicament. I wrote that the talking during *davening* is a brazen *chillul Hashem* and that on future visits to the community I would try to attend a shul where God was respected and the rights of other worshippers were considered. If there were no shuls like that in the area, I concluded, I would prefer to *daven* at home and forego saying *Kedushah* with a minyan and hearing *Keriyat haTorah*, rather than be in a shul where people make a mockery out of prayer.

Subsequently, I heard that the rabbi had read my letter aloud from the

pulpit. In response, I received numerous calls from worshippers, some praising my letter, and others who were deeply offended. One worshipper remarked, "What's your problem? A shul is a social club." While most people who attend that shul are probably not brazen enough to make such a statement openly, their constant chattering during *davening* shows what they truly believe.

I recall once hearing about a distraught father who asked that a *mi sheberach* be recited for his child who was suffering from end-stage leukemia. When the chattering in his shul continued right through his *mi sheberach*, the father remarked tearfully, "Can't they care enough for my child to at least listen to the *mi sheberach* and answer 'Amen'?"

Following the devastating pogroms of 1648-1649, Rabbi Yom Tov Lipman Heller (author of *Tsafos Yom Tov*) had a dream in which it was revealed to him that the atrocities that had occurred were due to the transgression of conversing during prayer services. Rabbi Heller therefore composed a special prayer for those who refrain from talking during services.

"Why were these disasters [the pogroms of 1648-1649] laid at the door of those who spoke during services?" asked the Chafetz Chaim. "Were there not more serious sins that were committed? Weren't there people who violated

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*Shabbos* and ate *treif*: We know that the righteous may suffer due to the sins of others. Why attribute these horrible events to talking during prayer services?"

The Chafetz Chaim then answered, citing *Pirkei Avos* (4:13) "He who fulfills even a single mitzvah gains himself a single [angelic] advocate, and he who commits even a single transgression gains himself a single [angelic] accuser." The


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accusing angel born of a sin takes on the character of the sin; while eating *treif* is certainly a grave sin, it is nevertheless a "speechless sin," and the accuser the sin creates is mute. So it is with all other sins that are of a silent character—the resulting accusing angels are mute and cannot bring charges against a person. However, a sin resulting from improper speech creates an accuser that can speak, and this accuser can then bring before the Heavenly Tribunal all the other sins that a person committed. The pogroms were therefore considered a consequence of a "talking sin."

We are currently in the season of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, days in which we stand before God in judgment. Just as the person who drills a hole under his seat in

He Who blessed our forefathers, Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, Moshe and Aharon, David and Shlomo, may He bless everyone who guards his mouth and tongue not to talk during prayer. May the Holy One, Blessed is He, protect him and rescue him from every trouble and distress, from every plague and illness, and there shall come upon him all the blessings written in the Torah of Moses, our teacher, and in the Books of the Prophets and Writings. And he shall merit to see children, living and enduring, and he shall raise them to Torah, marriage and good deeds, and he shall always serve Hashem, our God, in truth and perfection, and let us say, Amen.

Mi Sheberach of Rabbi Yom Tov Lipman Heller

the boat jeopardizes everyone else, Klal Yisrael is one large family; we are each responsible for one another. In Rabbi Heller's dream, it was revealed that Klal Yisrael had lost Divine favor because of the disrespect shown by talking during prayer services. Talking during *davening* imperils Jews the world over, leaving us all vulnerable to the evil designs of our enemies. We cannot risk losing Divine favor. We cannot and should not forfeit the redeeming qualities of *tefillah* by conversing during *davening*. 



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