

Crafting a Rosh Hashanah Prayer in the Shadow of Hate, High Holidays 2017

Some notes from Liturgist Alden Solovy

The intention is to create a special reading for this year of hate and intolerance in the public sphere. It will be, at its core, a High Holiday prayer. That is, it will address hate and intolerance in context of themes of the season. For this to be effective, the poetic art and the liturgical craft must blend in the context of serious questions and challenges. Here are core questions and issues influencing its creation:

Context: Should the prayer include references to the difficult news of our day? The goal is to be unifying. As such, it will avoid direct reference to politics or specific politicians, and will exclude references to Nazis, white supremacy, Charleston, the rising number of anti-Semitic activities in the U.S. or other news events or statistics.

Background: Does the prayer provide context for itself, with explanations within the body of the prayer regarding: i) its purpose; ii) the Hebrew; or iii) some direct Torah teaching? This prayer will be written without background so that the clergy can set the context with their own introduction, making the choice as to both the framing and the Torah context of the prayer.

Timing: What if some other unexpected or shocking news takes place between now and Rosh Hashanah? There is an unfortunate possibility of additional news events taking place between the time this piece is distributed and the time it will be used. This reinforces the choice to exclude direct references to news events and related language.

Structural Goal: How and where might this be used in our t'fillot? The goal is to craft a prayer versatile enough to be used many ways; such as: i) read from the bima by clergy, ii) used as a responsive reading or iii) read in unison as a congregation. Striving for versatility constrains on the length of stanzas and the length of the prayer.

Universalist Tone: Should this prayer be written with particularistic or universal tone? Although this is a time of particular threat to Jews, it has also seen the rise of hatred directed to many vulnerable communities. Rather than being an appeal for safety and succor for Jews in this time of danger, the ultimate hope and vision of this prayer will be universal.

Service Location: Can this prayer be written so it can fit in multiple places in service, allowing maximum flexibility for use by our clergy? Another goal of this prayer is maximum flexibility for clergy, so it can be used either: i) to close the service; ii) to open the sermon; iii) or to close the sermon; or iv) other places in the service.

Hebrew: Do the Hebrew passages need to be familiar to the congregation? Should they come from the High Holiday liturgy? The Hebrew solidifies the core message and can anchor a connection between the congregation and the prayer. The intent of the Hebrew – Psalm 27 and Psalm 121 – is to capture our hope and our yearning and to reflect selections in both *Mishkan Halev* (p.108) and *Mishkan Hanefesh* (Rosh Hashanah, p. 92).

Music: Should the Hebrew passage(s) be selected for compatibility with a specific, well-known prayer/song which can be used to close the prayer and reinforce the message? Psalm 121 was also selected for its musical power. With the goal of versatility for clergy, the closing stanza – with its references to peace – provides a path to an alternative musical selection.