

Kol nidrei: Diplomatic Immunity

Category: Holidays, Yom Kippur

When the synagogue reaches Aleinu, everyone breathes a sigh of relief. How did it suddenly end up in middle of High Holiday Musaf?

Researching the PFC

Recently, I had a young visitor at my Chabad center who had just completed his studies at university. I struck up a conversation with him and asked him about his field of interest. He replied, "Research." So, I inquired further, "What exactly are you researching?" He explained that he was studying the brain.

That piqued my interest. "What about the brain are you researching?"

"The prefrontal cortex," sometimes called PFC.

In Yeshivah, they don't teach you about the prefrontal cortex so I asked if he could explain it in a way that even simple people like me could understand. He told me about a professor named Jordan Grafman who conducted research on soldiers returning from Vietnam. He discovered that many of them, after experiencing brain trauma, became more religious.

As I listened to him, I began to envision myself walking around with a small hammer. If anyone had too many questions about faith, instead of spending hours trying to convince them of the existence of a Creator, I would offer them a "gentle treatment" for their prefrontal cortex, and "heal" them of all their doubts. It would be something like a "mohel" for the brain.

When I delved a bit further into this subject, I discovered that, according to researchers, the prefrontal cortex is the last part of the brain to develop, with its development completing around the age of 25. This part of the brain enables cognitive flexibility, creative thinking, critical reasoning, and decision-making.

Now, these scientists argue that when a person suddenly becomes more religious, it's because they've experienced brain trauma, and this part of the brain has been affected. Consequently, that individual loses their critical thinking abilities and

blindly believes everything they're told. That's the theory, on one foot. But I have a different theory.

The Favorite Prayer

Many years ago, I conducted a survey at our shul, asking people what their favorite prayer was. Without missing a beat, someone began to sing, "*Vine'emar, Vehaya hashem...*" The prayer he loved most was Aleinu - which means that the service is over!

This year during the Rosh Hashanah services, I noticed that when they announced "please rise for Aleinu," some people began to rise with a smile of relief, not realizing that this was only the middle of musaf, and the final Aleinu was a long way to go...

So, what is Aleinu all about, and where does it come from? Why is it in every prayer, and how did it then end up in middle of Rosh Hashana Musaf?

Aleinu was inserted into the prayers by one of the great Amoraim, or Torah scholars of the Talmudic era, who was known simply as "Rav." His real name was Abba, and he was the leader of the Babylonian Jewish community in the third century. Rav included this prayer as part of the Rosh Hashanah liturgy, as the opening to *Malchios*, the first of the three sections of Rosh Hashanah Musaf.

The Aleinu has two sections. The first section speaks of the past, where we express gratitude to the Almighty for not making us like the nations who worship vanity and emptiness, i.e., idolatry, and instead brought us close to Him. The second section looks to the future. We pray and ask that G-d establish the world under His sovereignty; that He remove idolatry from the world, and bring us to a state where all people recognize the unique nature of the Creator of the world.

The prayer was designated for Rosh Hashanah. Why? Well, Rosh Hashanah is coronation day; its primary focus is the crowning of the Almighty as King over the universe. We ask that G-d ensure the entire world acknowledges His sovereignty. This isn't just about recognizing Him as the Creator; it's about acknowledging His role as the Master of the Universe. We ask G-d to perform miracles that will reveal His existence unequivocally.

[Some sources attribute this prayer to Joshua, suggesting that he introduced it when he led the conquest of the land of Israel. The Sefer Charedim says that Aleinu was recited during the encirclement of the walls of Jericho—Joshua recited it seven times, and that brought the downfall of its seven walls. So, was this prayer composed by Joshua or Rav? Some suggest that Joshua initially composed the prayer, but it was later edited by Rav, who structured the Rosh Hashanah prayers as we know them today.]

The Most Important Prayer

But here's the big question: How did Aleinu go from being said just once a year to becoming part of the prayers three times each day?

Some point to an infamous era of Jewish history—the Crusades:

The Crusades were a series of religious wars between Christians and Muslims in the 11th to 13th centuries, when the Christians, urged on by their religious leaders, tried to conquer Jerusalem from the “heretical” Muslims and make it a Christian city. The journey toward Jerusalem included several “detours,” to resolve the longstanding “Jewish problem” in Europe and help convert the Jews to Christianity as well. Many Jews gave up their lives rather than forsake their Judaism, and entire Jewish communities were destroyed throughout Germany, France, and elsewhere.

Many of the Jews who were sentenced to death bravely sang Aleinu as the “song of defiance.” There's a story about thirty Jews in Blois, France, in 1171—men, women, and children—who sang Aleinu as they were taken to their deaths for refusing to convert. Perhaps it was these moments (much like the popularization of Ani Maamin in our day) which popularized Aleinu, and ultimately led to their daily recitation.

The Jewish Spark

My friends, I don't think those Jews who preferred to die rather than convert experienced any brain trauma, nor did the numerous Jews throughout the ages who faced very tough choices and chose their Judaism above all else. It's not due to some neurological deficiency; it comes from a rich spiritual connection to

Judaism.

Every Jew has something inside them, a Jewish spark, that drives them to connect with God. Why do so many Jews, many who are highly educated, come to the synagogue on Yom Kippur? It's not because something is wrong with them; they haven't been hit on the head. Quite the opposite. It's because something in their Jewish identity has awakened.

No scientist can fully explain the spiritual bond between G-d and a Jewish person; it transcends our understanding.

It's like the love between parents and children, which is not something that needs to be explained; a parent loves his child for no reason, and any reason will just defile the nature of that love. Can you say "I love my child because he's cute"? If he wasn't cute, you wouldn't love him? G-d's love for every Jew transcends reason. On Yom Kippur, the Rebbe explained, G-d shows this love to the world—and that expression of love stirs up our love and longing towards G-d. That's why we all go to the synagogue, for no apparent reason.

The Witness

But one question still remains: why did they choose to say *Aleinu* specifically at the *end* of each davening?

Aleinu has something special: It begins with the letter Ayin and ends with the letter Dalet. Together, this forms the word *Eid* (אד) which means witness. This is strikingly similar to the verse of *Shema Yisrael* as it is written in the Torah, which has two enlarged letters, the "Ayin" (א) of "Shema" and the "Dalet" (ד) of "Echad." Again, "Eid" is concealed within it.

What is the significance of this word?

The Rebbe explains the *Eid*, (Witness), refers to the verse of the Prophet, "*Atem Eiday*, You are My witnesses—says G-d" (Isaiah 43:12). The Prophet is saying to every Jew in God's name, "You are a witness," you are evidence to the existence of God. Why? Because all forecasters expected the Jewish people to disappear, and every antisemite claimed that Jews had no chance of survival. The very existence of a Jew is proof of the Creator's existence. Without G-d, there would be

no Jewish people. (Likkutei Sichos v. 19 p. 195 & v. 34 p. 112. See also Hisvaaduyos 5750 v. 2 p. 483).

So, before we leave the synagogue, we recite Aleinu; we remind ourselves that we are an “Eid,” that our presence attests to the Creator’s existence. When people look at us, they see a representative of the Jewish people. You represent not only the fifteen million Jews alive today but also Jews from all generations. You represent Moses and Rabbi Akiva, Avraham and Maimonides, and more than anything, you are a testament to the Creator Himself.

This is a tremendous responsibility, but also a wonderful privilege. Every Jew is an ambassador of the Almighty on Earth. Just as an ambassador has diplomatic immunity wherever they go, so too, a Jew, wherever they go, has the highest form of immunity—from the King of Kings, G-d Himself.